The Power of Pandi: Multiplicity, Ambiguity, and Intimacy at a South Indian Temple

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic account of Pandi Koyil, a small temple located in the South Indian city of Madurai. The temple, its presiding deity Pandi Munneesvarar, and the devotees who worship there represent a diverse spectrum of narrative histories, ritual practices, and community identities. This thesis demonstrates how the multiplicity, ambiguity, and power of the deity Pandi fosters the multiple narratives, differentiated practices, and relationships of intimacy that surround him. First, this thesis presents the multiple origin stories people tell about the founding of Pandi Koyil and the mythological identity of its main deities, while also explaining the caste and religious diversity of the temple community. Next, it addresses the material practices of worship that take place at the temple, looking particularly at possession and prophesy. This thesis uses theories about dividual personhood and substantial exchange to interpret these practices as links of intimacy between Pandi and his devotees. Furthermore, it argues that possession and prophecy telling can be understood as examples of diffused authority. Lastly, this thesis focuses on the intertwined characteristics of ambiguity and potency in Pandi’s personality through addressing aspects of eroticism, danger, and practices of animal sacrifice present in his worship.
The Power of Pandi:
Multiplicity, Ambiguity, and Intimacy at a South Indian Temple

by

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Introduction

Backgrounds and Backdrops

The political climate in Madurai, Tamil Nadu was abuzz during the winter months of 2016-2017. Hardly a month past Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s shocking announcement initiating his demonetization scheme throughout the country, Madurai was still reeling from the financial plan’s chaotic effects when I arrived to begin field research in mid-December. Banks were packed with crowds of people waiting in anxiety and frustration as they scrambled to exchange recalled banknotes before the old 500 and 1,000 rupee denominations became defunct. Lines snaked out of ATM booths as people made their frequent, sometimes daily pilgrimages to attempt withdrawing whatever amount of cash they could from ATMs that were chronically understocked or empty, all while negotiating government imposed withdrawal limits. Commentary on the hardships initiated by Modi’s demonetization swirled in conversation, newspaper articles, and the international media.¹

Friends of mine in Madurai criticized the ill conceived and poorly implemented government plan to make India into a cashless society, while uncertainty about how the scheme would continue to unfold circulated throughout the city. Friends and commentators questioned whether Modi would be able to amend the problems unleashed by demonetization and its disproportionate burden on “regular people” - those without endless sources of money and close political ties. Would demonetization really quell black money and corruption as Modi’s administration claimed? Or would it instead

impose impossible hardships on those without bank accounts, laborers paid primarily in cash, small business owners, and the millions of others inconvenienced by the plan? My friends speculated that Modi dropped this unexpected financial bomb during the middle of his political tenure as Prime Minister so that he would have time for his reputation to recover from the shock and anger demonetization has inspired, while also giving him the opportunity to possibly prove the long-term benefits of his plan. Yet my friends remained skeptical and all agreed that the implementation of Modi’s vision of a cashless society had failed, despite whatever laudable causes it was supposed to support or whatever successes in might yield in the future.

And what of Modi’s other campaign, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan - the country-wide mission to “Clean India”? Madurai city was freshly painted with countless public service announcement murals encouraging citizens to clean India of garbage, poor sanitation, plastic waste, and other forms of environmental pollution - all under the watchful, paternalistic gaze of Mahatma Gandhi whose iconic circular spectacles are featured as the obviously symbolic logo of the Clean India campaign. Although most people who mentioned the Swachh Bharat project to me in Madurai were enthusiastic about the benefits of a cleaner city and a plastic-free environment, they were nevertheless doubtful of Modi’s ability to accomplish his stated goal of purification - at least without concerted governmental action to create infrastructure to support better overall sanitation. While the switch to a cashless society seems impossible according to many people I spoke with as long as a large percentage of the population lacks a bank account and access to the technology necessary for making digital transactions, the switch to a trashless society

See the official Indian government website for Swacch Bharat Abhiyan at https://swachhbharat.mygov.in.
seems similarly impossible when garbage collection is often as unreliable as the dry Tamil monsoon.

But Modi’s nationwide plans were not the only political problem festering in Madurai. Following the abrupt and widely mourned death of Tamil Nadu’s charismatic Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram on December 5, 2016, frustration, rumors, and conspiracy theories mounted throughout the state. Madurai was freshly plastered with countless posters promoting Sasikala - the endlessly controversial AIADMK party’s touted successor. Formerly rumored to be Jayalalithaa’s same-sex partner, widely disparaged as “just” the beloved late Chief Minister’s maid, and sharply critiqued for her lack of political credentials, Sasikala’s name and face frequently evoked distrust and even disgust. Recast by supports as “Chinnamma” - literally, “Little Mother” - in a nod to Jayalalithaa’s famous moniker of “Amma” - “Mother” - Sasikala’s image was printed in endless iterations across Tamil Nadu’s cities. Either alone or displayed in a photomontage next to images of Jayalalithaa herself, Sasikala’s face was ubiquitous in Madurai during my period of field research. But despite whatever visual clout Sasikala’s face garnered through repetition, many Madurai residents were provoked by what was viewed as an utter disgrace to Amma’s power and perseverance. People wondered how they could be expected to swallow this leech on Amma’s splendor, this supposedly power

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4 AIADMK stands for the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, which was Jayalalithaa’s party, as well as the party of her equally famous predecessor, former film costar, and party founder M. G. Ramachandran.
hungry political opportunist who had snatched Jayalalithaa’s money and fame in the wake of her unexpected death.

This palpable distaste for Sasikala pulsated throughout Madurai. Her pictures were everywhere defaced. Vandalis strategically tore the posters to scar the posturing Little Mother’s visage, while leaving Amma’s image intact. Multiple posters were carefully desecrated by three neat clumps of animal dung placed over Sasikala’s eyes and mouth. Defaced by feces and torn to shreds, Sasikala’s vandalized posters created a visual testament to the distrust of at least some of Madurai’s residents. A friend of mine even voiced a fermenting speculation amidst this general distaste for Chinnamma: was Jayalalithaa’s death really an accident? Sasikala had performed Jayalalithaa’s funeral rites following the late Chief Minister’s reported death by cardiac arrest. But was that really the only role Sasikala had played in the death of the great Amma? Was the gaping hole in Tamil politics torn asunder by Jayalalithaa’s demise a strategic inlet for Modi and his BJP government to trickle into the previously unreceptive southern state once held fast under Amma’s motherly authority and the loyalty she inspired?

I offer one final example to illustrate the intense political atmosphere that formed the backdrop of my field research. Toward the end of my research period in mid-January 2017, in anticipation of the upcoming Tamil harvest holiday Pongal, talk began circulating about the ongoing Jallikattu ban that followed a series of Supreme Court rulings. Jallikattu is a bullfight celebrated as part of the Pongal festivities during the first few days of the auspicious Tamil month of Tai. Animal rights activists have raised concerns that the traditional Tamil festival poses a threat to the bulls involved and is therefore a form of animal cruelty that needs to be quashed. Amidst increasing pressures
that Indian public life be governed by the principles of a modern vision of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism, situations that seem to threaten the hallowed Hindu nationalist concerns regarding cow protection have often been singled out for reform. Although the central Indian government has had an ambivalent relationship to the Jallikattu ban, over the past decade, animal rights activists have pressured the Supreme Court to corral the Jallikattu festivities into its purview of reform efforts. Despite the official prohibition on Jallikattu, furtive bullfights have been held, and this year was no exception, even though the Supreme Court of India formally cancelled the bullfight once again. Madurai is central to this controversy as the village most famous for the celebration of Jallikattu - Alanganallur - is located on the city’s outskirts. Around the 2017 Pongal holiday, protests erupted throughout Madurai and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. The protests focused on the supposedly biased ruling of the Supreme Court to ban Jallikattu - a decision that was said to favor a normative North Indian-inflected nationalist version of Hinduism that leaves little room for South Indian religious practices like the bullfights at Pongal.5

Displaying a poignant internalization of Hindu reformist norms even as protests against these norms raged, some of the Tamil people strongly opposed to the ban argued for the continued celebration of the bullfight by remaining within the logic of reform Hinduism. For example, some pro-Jallikattu protestors claimed that the festivities not only fail to harm the bulls in question, but in fact are good for the animals. Protestors taking this tack pointed out that if Jallikattu was banned, villagers who make a living breeding and rearing bulls for the celebration would be compelled to sell the animals for

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meat to non-vegetarian Christians in the neighboring state of Kerala or abroad. Ban Jallikattu, such logic reasons, and the surplus of unoccupied bulls would end up as dinner - an outcome that would be quite unpalatable to pro-vegetarian Hindu nationalists, to say the least. Jallikattu was celebrated this Pongal in Alanganallur and elsewhere despite the ban, and the protest movement which continued in Madurai and other cities throughout Tamil Nadu eventually bore fruit: the ban on Jallikattu was revoked slightly after my return to the U.S. following field research in mid-January 2017.

Despite Prime Minister Modi’s public support of Jallikattu in opposition to the Supreme Court’s position in the early months of 2017, the general opinion that seemed thick in the air during my field research in Madurai was that the central Indian government with its supposed North India bias and Hindu nationalist bent was unfairly opposed to the ancient and enduring customs of the Tamil people. Such a skeptical opinion resonates with a much older and ongoing political platform espoused by the Dravidian political parties that emphasize the antiquity and unique cultural and linguistic heritage of the South Indian, Tamil-speaking people, while simultaneously opposing the influence and power associated with Brahmanical religion, Sanskritic languages, and cultural hegemony perceived as flowing from the north of India. The ban on Jallikattu was viewed by at least some activists in Madurai as just one further example of discrimination by the Aryan, Sanskritic North toward the Dravidian, Tamil South.  

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It is not uncommon to hear people in Madurai making reference to this Aryan/Dravidian dichotomy, particularly framing such a distinction in the context of religion and caste-based oppression. While driving from the airport to my friend Rekha’s home on the first day of my research in Madurai, her friend Rajaselvan who was accompanying us in the car probed into the reasons for my current visit and the project I was in India to work on. Rajaselvan asked me pointedly, “So, after doing research at the temple, what is the conclusion you will come to?” He then proceeded to answer his own question by stating, “After researching, you will find that we don’t have a religion. Tamil people don’t have a religion.” He then went on to clarify this rather loaded statement by explaining that Tamil people were not originally “Hindu” but were assigned this label as a distinguishing categorical marker following India’s independence to separate some religious practices out from other groupings like “Christianity” and “Islam.” Rajaselvan’s sophisticated reasoning that religions are often reified through comparison to each other as a political imperative of a self-consciously pluralist state such as India also reveals the unique status that Tamil “religion” (or in this case “non-religion”) has in the perception of some Tamil people. According to such a view, what is Tamil is somehow different, not really that “Hindu” thing that it is labeled to be.

A similar isolation of Dravidian religion in counter-distinction to what is perceived as hegemonic Hinduism was offered to me by a man working in a bookshop and tourist guide agency near Madurai’s largest and most famous landmark, the Meenakshi Temple. I met Arun by chance after wandering into his shop off the street, drawn as I was by the enticing array of books on Indian religion displayed in the window.

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8 All names of friends and interlocutors have been changed to protect confidentiality unless otherwise noted.
After striking up a conversation, Arun told me that he had studied religion in college as an undergraduate student before turning to the tourism and hospitality business. I was intrigued to hear that he had studied religion, considering pursuing such a subject is almost unheard of amongst Madurai natives attending college in their home city - disciplines like religious studies being overshadowed to the point of near non-existence by the ever popular subject of engineering. After hearing about my interest in a small local temple and Tamil religion more broadly, Arun went on to describe how the *kaval deivam* (guardian deities) - a prevalent class of gods widely worshipped throughout Tamil Nadu - represent a particularly Dravidian religiosity. According to Arun, the reason the *kaval deivam* face toward the northerly direction is because they are poised to ward off the Aryan invaders encroaching from the North. Most *kaval deivam*, if they are iconographically represented, are depicted with one arm raised above their heads, large sword in hand, as they stand alert in a protective posture. Arun’s rendering of the *kaval deivam* as Dravidian warriors protecting villages in the Tamil country from an Aryan onslaught explicitly demonstrates the type of Tamil cultural pride and opposition to what is deemed a North Indian religious hegemony present in both Rajaselvan’s comments on my research and the motivations of the protestors of the Jallikattu ban.⁹

I offer this sprawling commentary on some of the most intense aspects of the socio-political landscape in Tamil Nadu at the time of my field research as a means of fleshing out the very present, ever shifting, material and ideological realities of the specific historical moment in which my inquiry into one aspect of Tamil religion took

⁹ Such a distinction between Aryan and Dravidian religion seems to have a classed aspect to it with mainly English speaking, highly educated people drawing this binary. In contrast, I heard none of the people at Pandi Koyil, the temple where I conducted my research, making any such distinctions.
place. More specifically, my research focuses on Pandi Koyil\textsuperscript{10} - a temple that is particularly subject to a certain reputation within both the larger Madurai community in which it is situated, and amongst the foreign students and tourists who sometimes visit there. This reputation casts Pandi Koyil as a place of sensationalized, “backwards” religiosity due to its association with the often disparaged and exoticized practices of spirit possession and animal sacrifice. My first encounter with the temple was part of a scheduled college trip with the study abroad program at which I was a student in 2009. The field-trip organizers prefaced our visit to the temple by warning students about the potentially “disturbing” things that one might stumble across there.

Pandi Koyil’s reputation as a place of strange religious practice is by no means held only by foreigners in Madurai. Many Madurai residents who do not frequent Pandi Koyil, especially those from high caste backgrounds, similarly view this temple with a certain degree of disparagement. They often categorize Pandi Koyil as a “folk” temple for “uneducated” people. Not unlike reformist efforts to excise the Jallikattu bullfight for its supposed cruelty to animals, the practices of possession and sacrifice that take place at Pandi Koyil are often spoken of in Madurai as embarrassing remnants from the past or aspects of a religion that does not fit within a modern vision of what Hinduism “should” be. Reminiscent of Rajaselvan’s isolation of Tamil practices from the category of “Hinduism” and Arun’s distinction between North and South, Aryan and Dravidian, Pandi Koyil and the practices prevalent there are often cast as different, outside, lesser.

\textsuperscript{10} The full, formal name of Pandi Koyil is Arulmigu Pandi Muneesvarar Thirukoyil, which translates as “The Holy Temple of the Grace Filled Pandi Muneesvarar.” This temple is generally referred to by the shortened title “Pandi Koyil,” and I will follow this convention throughout my paper. Koyil, sometimes kovil, is the Tamil word for temple.
But what is termed “folk” religion by both foreigners and Indians alike, is in no way an ahistorical, unchanging whole practiced by “illiterate” country bumpkins in an idyllic, village setting somehow cut off from the dynamic social forces surrounding it. Pandi Koyil, situated as it is within the socio-political nexus sketched above, cannot be separated from the discourses of power - the shifting and contested politics of federal and state governments - that percolated in the larger Madurai community during my period of field research. This is true in part because Pandi Koyil itself was similarly subject to a number of shifting and contested discourses of power as temple-goers formulated divergent opinions about the truth or falsehood of specific instances of possession, and while Pandi’s authoritative voice was dispersed amongst his diverse constituency of prophecy tellers. Furthermore, the all too typical rendering of Pandi Koyil as a location of old fashioned, “exotic” practices of the “uneducated folk” mirrors the type of prejudices the Jallikattu protestors were fighting against, as well as the types of regionalist biases Rajaselvan and Arun’s comments make reference to. A dissatisfaction with such prejudices similarly informs the opposition that many Madurai residents feel to policies of all types - from the economic to the environmental - originating from what they often deem to be a North India-biased central government.

The complex and contested political vista full of accusations and controversies that I have sketched above, suggests the multiple voices and diverse efforts toward meaning-making that are currently shaping the wider context of Madurai as a city, emplaced as it is within still wider concentric circles of state and nation. These concerns are significant, not only for the work they do locating Madurai within its contemporary political geography, but because they form a gateway for observing an entirely different
set of diverse religious understandings and practices taking place at one location within the city of Madurai where my field research was focused. Pandi Koyil - the small but vastly popular temple to a local deity named Pandi Muneesvarar - is just one amongst a great number of temples in Madurai, yet it is situated within a constellation of multiple narratives, diverse ritual practices, and manifold conceptual processes. It is with Pandi Koyil that the remainder of this thesis is concerned.

**Pandi Koyil in Place**

Madurai is an ancient city located in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. A city of central importance throughout multiple historical time periods and a host of powerful dynasties, Madurai’s historic status is perhaps most richly apparent in the splendid architecture of the Arulmigu Meenakshi Amman Sundareesvarar Thirukoyil11 - commonly referred to simply as “the Meenakshi Temple.” The Meenakshi Temple is a massive temple complex that attests to Madurai’s regal past and is by far the most prominent landmark and tourist attraction of the city. The majority of the Meenakshi Temple’s construction occurred under the royal patronage of the Nayaka kings in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, although some parts of the temple and the worship of Meenakshi are far older, and the temple has been connected with different royal dynasties throughout its history.12 The temple contains two main shrines: one for the goddess Meenakshi whose name translates as “Fish Eyed,” referring to the graceful fish-like shape of her elongated eyes; and the second for the goddess’s consort Sundareesvarar, a form of the god Shiva whose name means “Beautiful Lord.”

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11 “The Holy Temple of the Grace Filled Meenakshi Amman and Sundareesvarar.” This is the full, formal title of Madurai’s main temple.
Meenakshi and Sundareesvarar are widely considered to be the eternally incumbent divine queen and king of Madurai.

Meenakshi and her temple are deeply rooted in the location of Madurai, and no description of the religious landscape of the city can afford to ignore her pervasive influence and physical centrality to Madurai religiosity. Meenakshi’s mythology relates her genealogical relationship to Madurai royalty through chronicling her birth within the family of an ancient king and queen - Malayadhwaja Pandiyan and his wife Kanchanamalai. The story relates that the barren royal couple had performed a fire sacrifice in order to produce a child and heir. According to legend, the goddess Meenakshi appeared in the sacrificial flames as the king and queen’s longed for child, and was raised by them as a daughter. Meenakshi was trained in the martial arts and ruled not only her own city of Madurai, but also eventually conquered the world. Meenakshi’s military prowess and world conquering took a romantic turn when she met Sundareesvarar in battle and fell in love with him. Meenakshi and Sundareesvarar later married and ascended the throne of Madurai in succession of Malayadhwaja Pandiyan. Together, the god and goddess pair jointly ruled the city. Meenakshi and Sundareesvarar remain the divine rulers of Madurai and their temple palace is located in the heart of the old city. The spatial configuration of Madurai fans out in concentric rings of four main streets beginning at the central point of the temple. This architectural design with the temple at the center of the city reinforces the centrality of the goddess to her urban environment.13

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13 Ibid., 1-2.
While the Meenakshi Temple is undoubtedly the most famous and prominent temple in the area, it is by no means the only one of great importance. Madurai is widely nicknamed the “Temple City” in reference to its profuse religious landscape. Prominent Shaivite and Vaishnavite temples dot the city and its surrounding towns, as well as countless smaller temples and neighborhood shrines. Furthermore, Madurai has a long history of Jainism, and while contemporary Jains living in the city are largely immigrants from other parts of India (primarily Rajasthan and Gujarat), the archeological record attests to a once thriving Jain community in the Madurai area. Caves and hillocks scattered across the villages clustered around the city hold archeological treasures of exquisite Jain carvings, although such sites are no longer active places of Jain worship but instead destinations for scholars, historians, tourists, and curious day-trippers.

Amidst this thriving city of temples and religious history, Pandi Koyil holds a unique status. A temple of relatively recent origins, Pandi Koyil was likely established not much more than one hundred years ago.\textsuperscript{14} Pandi Koyil has witnessed a boom in popularity over the past couple of decades, and the temple is reported to have grown from humble origins as a thatch-roofed hut to the stone and concrete building surrounded by a thriving marketplace that it is today. Every person I spoke to in Madurai knows about

\textsuperscript{14} I do not have an exact founding date for Pandi Koyil, although priests and worshippers at the temple regularly related that Pandi Koyil was established “five generations ago.” Greater clarification on this point revealed that it is the fourth generation of priests who are currently adult workers at the temple, and I would presume that the fifth generation refers to the children of the currently active priests. If a generation is calculated to be between twenty to twenty-five years, and the fifth generation of the priests’ family are still primarily children, it follows that Pandi Koyil was likely founded approximately eighty to one hundred and twenty-five years ago. This would put the founding of Pandi Koyil approximately as early as 1892 and as late as 1937, but further research would be needed to substantiate these dates. Some online sources, including the unofficial Pandi Koyil Facebook page, state that the community who founded Pandi Koyil moved to the Madurai area “two hundred years ago,” and that the founding mother of the temple and her husband were “an old couple” at that point. See Facebook, “Madurai Sri Pandi Muneeswarar,” posted June 30, 2012, accessed February 16, 2017, http://www.facebook.com/Pandimunieswarar/.
Pandi Koyil, whether they have actually been inside it or not, and it is fair to say that this particular temple evokes a plethora of different opinions, emotions, attitudes, and assumptions throughout the Madurai region. Much of this thesis will work toward teasing out the multiple narratives that converge at the location of Pandi Koyil and in the figure of Pandi Muneesvarar. Despite the divergent understandings and rich multi-vocality that Pandi Koyil provokes, one predominant theme surfaced again and again: the intimate connection between the powerful deity Pandi and those who worship him.

This thesis demonstrates how the power of the deity Pandi fosters the multiple narratives, differentiated practices, and relationships of intimacy that surround him. The source of Pandi’s power, retellings of his history, and explanations of his personality are interpreted in a number of divergent ways by the different people linked to his temple. Pandi’s origins and his characteristics are not always agreed upon, and the practices that take place at his temple, such as possession and prophecy telling, inspire diverse opinions about what is true and what is false - all factors that contribute to a diffusion of ritual authority. Nevertheless, amidst this multi-vocality, Pandi’s pulsating potency and his intimacy with his devotees remains the dominant theme. But Pandi’s power is so strong that its effects cannot be interpreted as merely beneficial. Pandi’s power has both positive and negative valences as it contains both the ability to protect and the potential for danger. I argue that Pandi’s power can be interpreted as ambiguous due to its inclusion of disparate, seemingly opposed qualities such as protection and danger, affection and trouble, intimacy and ferocity. While the word ambiguous is my own, most of the people I spoke with at the temple commented on both of these aspects of Pandi’s personality - both his promise of protection over his jurisdiction, as well as his penchant for causing
problems through possessing his closest devotees. Possession is an experience that was sometimes lauded and sometimes feared, but it was typically seen as a marker of intense intimacy between deity and devotee. In this thesis, I argue that possession - which is both blessing and affliction - can be interpreted alongside the other intimate substantial exchanges of the worship context, as a form of relationship building between Pandi and his devotees.

In the first chapter, I address how the multiple, often contradictory explanations of Pandi as a deity and Pandi Koyil as a place are held in creative tension with one another by focusing on the multiple origin stories circulating around the temple. These differing yet coexisting histories and mythologies that surround the founding of the temple and the provenance of the deities who reside there both overlap and diverge. Taken together, these multiple narratives about Pandi Koyil told by various people both inside and outside of the diverse community of priests, staff, and devotees at the temple, suggest the ambiguity of Pandi as a divine figure. In addition to the divergent origin stories about Pandi Koyil, the constituency of worshippers at the temple is similarly diverse, including a number of different castes and a visible presence of Muslim devotees. Faced with all of these different stories and perspectives, this chapter begins to explore what the multiple sources of knowledge about one place (that is actually many places) and one deity (whose ambiguous character may seem difficult to pin down) can reveal about religious practices in a multi-caste, multi-religious setting.

The second chapter goes on to highlight the most prevalent types of material religious practice that take place at Pandi Koyil, interpreting these practices using theories of dividual personhood and substantial exchange. The most common types of
practice that occur at Pandi Koyil underscore not only the connective relationship bonds forged between the deity and those who worship him, but also point toward the highly contested, ambiguous nature of the god himself and the ways this ambiguity translates into a diffusion of ritual authority. This chapter will focus primarily on spirit possession and prophecy telling. Pandi regularly possesses people within his temple complex who often speak prophecies from the perspective of the deity - a situation that gives rise to a number of coexisting authoritative voices. Not only do Pandi’s possessed devotees act as his mouthpiece, doling out prophecies, advice, and commands to the gathered inquirers, but the continuous presence of possession within the temple provokes contestations over what is “real” and what is “fake.” Authoritative opinions proliferate regarding which possessed persons are genuinely Pandi, and which are mere charlatans.

The third chapter zooms in on the potency and ambiguity of Pandi himself by working through descriptions of his personal qualities and various accounts of his powerful intervention in the lives of those who worship him. Sexuality and forcefulness, even ferociousness, are key characteristics of Pandi. But so are care and familial intimacy as Pandi exists in multiple relationships with both the humans and the other gods around him. This chapter will also address how animal sacrifice - one of the prominent material practices that takes place with great frequency at Pandi Koyil - highlights Pandi’s ambiguous nature and potent distributive role within his community of devotees and fellow deities. Through exploring Pandi’s fruitful ambiguity, this chapter inquires into how the differing understandings of Pandi contribute to his popularity and bolster his efficacious power. I argue that Pandi’s complex character - which evokes such a diversity of worship and interpretive efforts - undergirds his temple’s ability to support a thriving,
multifaceted community and local economy, all while Pandi sits as a presence of power and cynosure of reverence in Madurai city. The specificities of Pandi’s complexity and diversity offer one standpoint from which to view the larger religious landscape that makes up Madurai, Tamil Nadu, and India more broadly, as the practices and stories present at Pandi Koyil certainly have correlates elsewhere in South Asia.

A Note on Method

All of the data presented in this paper was collected during a period of ethnographic field research between December 20, 2016 through January 18, 2017. Prior to these four weeks of field research, I spent approximately twenty months living in Madurai, spanning multiple visits between 2009-2016. The first time I visited Pandi Koyil was during my first period of time living in Madurai as a study abroad student in 2009. I returned to Pandi Koyil on multiple occasions throughout the time I spent in Madurai before returning to begin research. During my period of field research, I utilized the help of a dear friend of mine, B. Hemalatha - “Hema”\textsuperscript{15} for short - who acted as my field research assistant, including help with Tamil language translation. Although I am a student of Tamil language and have intermediate proficiency, Hema’s translation assistance was indispensable, as were her thoughtful insights and unending encouragement. I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to her, and the work that I present here has emerged out of our friendship and research relationship.

During my period of field research, I went to Pandi Koyil on an almost daily basis. I usually, although not always, was accompanied by Hema. The research took the form of participant observation and informal interviews that consisted of conversations

\textsuperscript{15} Hema has given me permission to use her real name.
with people we met in the temple. I did not use a tape recorder during any of these conversations, so I have reconstructed all dialogue from memory based on extremely detailed field notes that I typed once at home every evening following the day’s research. What follows is my most faithful attempt to do justice to such conversations in which Pandi’s power and the dynamism of his temple community were shared with me.
Chapter 1: Diverse Origins and the Stories People Tell

Scene and Setting

On the northern side of the River Vaigai, across the now dry riverbed from the hallowed Meenakshi Temple and the thriving city center of Madurai, Pandi Koyil lays off a main road. The temple can be accessed by winding through several alleyways of shops where it is set amidst a semi-rural, semi-suburban landscape. The temple is relatively small, especially when compared to the Meenakshi Temple’s sprawling footprint, yet Pandi Koyil is usually alive with activity. Encircled by small businesses catering to the needs of devotees, Pandi Koyil is the central attraction on the relatively open road connecting several highways and main thoroughfares.

As the presiding deity of this location, Pandi Muneesvarar overlooks a specified jurisdiction stretching between two of the city’s main medical centers - Apollo Hospital and Meenakshi Mission Hospital. When observed on a map, Pandi Koyil forms the easternmost point of a triangle traced between the temple and the two hospitals. The area within this triangle spans a couple of miles and is largely comprised of Vandiyur Lake (or what is left of the lake considering much of the land that was once covered by water is now dry, overrun with weeds, and populated by grazing cattle). This expanse is largely flat and if you stand on the grassy embankment of the Vandiyur Lake bed, near to the road juncture where Apollo Hospital sits at the Melamadai Signal, it is possible to see the red and white colors of the distant Meenakshi Mission Hospital, as well as the brown building of the Ilandhaikulam IT Park located just slightly down the road from the temple. From this perspective looking out across the Vandiyur Lake bed, it is not possible to see Pandi Koyil, as the temple building is set off the main road and is rather small with
a low roof devoid of the soaring, ornate *gopuram* towers so characteristic of Dravidian temple architecture.

But although a person standing on the lake’s mounded embankment looking out across this distance may fail to see Pandi’s temple, Pandi is able to see them, as his jurisdiction, his *kann parvai* - literally, “eye vision” - is that swath of land on which his eyesight falls, an area bounded in by the two hospitals and dedicated to Pandi’s protective power. Located in the Melamadai area, near to the triangle point formed by Apollo Hospital, the furthest reach of the land within Pandi’s purview is marked by a small, outdoor shrine to the *ellaicchami* (border god) known as Kazhungadi Pandi Muneesvarar. To the best of my knowledge, this infrequently visited shrine, hardly noticeable as it is tucked away down an incline off the road near a constructed waterway, is the only temple to the deity Pandi Muneesvarar other than his main temple of Pandi Koyil. The small subsidiary shrine to Kazhungadi Pandi marks the furthest limit of Pandi’s jurisdiction and guards the outermost boundary of his *kann parvai*.

Kazhungadi Pandi takes the form of a roughly hewn stone pillar hung with flower garlands and placed upright in the middle of an open-air platform decorated with the red and white stripes typical of temples in Tamil Nadu. The stone slab is primarily aniconic other than facial features including a mustache painted on the rock surface with sandal paste. The open-air temple includes several prominent photographs displaying images of the main icon of Pandi Muneesvarar who is located at the other end of Pandi’s jurisdiction within his main temple. Kazhungadi Pandi is known for drinking *kallu*, palm wine (also known as toddy), and his temple is located *adi*, down from and underneath, the
kazhani, farm area that once surrounded what is now a busy road juncture. This shrine is near to the homes and burial ground of Pandi Koyil’s priesthood and is the location where, according to one elderly woman in the priests’ family, devotees gather to fulfill particularly intense and important vows to Pandi. For example, if devotees are troubled by evil spirits or black magic and are praying for Pandi’s intercession with these dark forces, they may go to the Kazhungadi Pandi shrine to sacrifice goats or chickens at midnight.

Kazhungadi Pandi is one deity within the complex of gods who relate to the worship of Pandi Muneesvarar. While Kazhungadi Pandi is considered a form of Pandi Muneesvarar himself who acts as the ellaicchami (border god) of Pandi’s jurisdiction, the main temple of Pandi Koyil is a site for other deities as well. The inner sanctum at Pandi Koyil houses the image of Pandi Muneesvarar while other deities reside in and around his temple. Two rather infrequently visited shrines - one to a guardian deity named Mantiram Katta Maha Muneesvarar and one to Vinayagar - are located in the marketplace that has mushroomed up around the pathways leading from the main road toward Pandi Koyil. A woman tending to the Mantiram Katta Maha Muneesvarar shrine told me that one should worship this guardian deity before proceeding into Pandi Koyil, but it seems this practice is not regularly followed, and I hardly ever saw anyone worshipping at the marketplace.

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16 I have some confusion about the etymology of the word “Kazhungadi” prefixed to this Pandi’s name. When I asked a small group of elderly folks sitting on the shrine’s platform about the name of this deity, one old man explained that the name refers to the fact that this Pandi is known for drinking palm wine, called kal in written Tamil, but pronounced “kallu” in spoken Tamil. This sounds similar to, but does not contain the exact same letters as, the syllables “kazhu” in the name “Kazhungadi.” A friend of a friend who is a retired Tamil teacher described the etymology to me with the above given explanation that this temple is set “down,” adi, from the “farm,” kazhant. The letters in the first half of the word “Kazhungadi” seem like a mixture of the word given by the Tamil professor for farm and the old man at the shrine’s pronunciation of the deity’s favored palm wine.

17 Most commonly used name in Tamil for the elephant-headed god often referred to elsewhere as Ganesh.
Vinayagar shrine. There is an additional Vinayagar shrine inside the walls of Pandi Koyil proper, placed near the entrance as soon as devotees step foot over the main threshold, entering into the temple. This Vinayagar seems to receive a far greater amount of attention then his counterpart out in the marketplace. These previously mentioned deities, although they surround Pandi’s main temple, are not as deeply intertwined with the multiple histories and living practices of Pandi Koyil as several others whom I will introduce after first describing the temple complex layout.

*Inside Pandi Koyil*

One reaches Pandi Koyil after first wending through a small marketplace off the main road where shopkeepers vend the *puja* items and offerings especially enjoyed by Pandi. Catering to the flows of visitors that daily come through these lanes to visit Pandi, many shops in the marketplace that don’t supply *puja* items instead sell all manner of desirable objects, from children’s toys and hair clips, to plastic kitchenware and mirrors. The entrance to Pandi Koyil is marked by an open side rather than a doorway proper, adorned with a fairly simple design displaying an image of the main deity enshrined within - Pandi Muneesvarar seated in a cross-legged position. The main structure of the temple complex includes the inner sanctum area where Pandi resides and a large *mandapam* (hall) where devotees gather in queues delineated by metal railings to accommodate the often swelling crowds. In this same hall, there is plenty of space for the bustling activity that takes place within the temple’s walls, including possession and the telling of prophecies, offering food and other items to Pandi, family lunches spread out by devotees on the floor, chatting, and napping. Stray dogs sometimes roam around in this area, surreptitiously picking at the food left on banana leaf plates on the floor as
offerings for Pandi. The main part of the temple also includes a few small office rooms and several subsidiary mandapams that are designated for particular functions like ear piercing, head tonsuring, feasting, and cooking the rice dishes that families of devotees prepare as offerings of gratitude for blessings they have received from Pandi. Lining one wall toward the back of the temple near the cooking area, is a small row of shops selling puja items and beverages. These shops part to open a pathway out to a side yard where animals are sacrificed. The animal carcasses are also cleaned and partially chopped into cuts of meat in this area, although the meat offerings are not cooked on the temple premises. Non-vegetarian food items prepared from the animal sacrifices offered at Pandi Koyil are cooked in a designated area out past the front marketplace, across the main road, and down a sloping incline.

In Chapter 3, I will return to the practices of animal sacrifice in order to discuss the ambiguity they contain and the ways these practices link Pandi to his devotees, priests, and the other deities that hold prominent positions in his temple complex. But for now, I complete the temple tour by explaining the spatial positioning of these aforementioned other deities. Continuing toward the back of Pandi Koyil, the covered pathway leads outside of the main temple building, past more shops selling colorful images of deities and jewelry, bathrooms, a professional photographer’s booth, and a small site where a playground for children is under construction. Slightly past this area and sheltered beneath a pavilion with open sides is the shrine to Andicchami. Of the two most important deities that reside in the Pandi Koyil area other than Pandi Muneesvarar
himself, Andicchami is the one of greater clout and authoritative status,18 yet his shrine is the most infrequently visited out of the three. Andicchami’s form consists of a raised block platform in the middle of the mandapam. Steps leading up to the top of the block culminate at a stone image consisting of three short walls forming an unfinished “box” on top of the platform. The wall forming the longest side of this structure at the top of the stairs displays the face of Andicchami. Traced onto the flat stone background with yellow turmeric paste, Andicchami’s eyes, eyebrows, and curling mustache are often only faintly recognizable, and it took me weeks of visiting this shrine to notice the facial features at all. A trident is planted in the dirt pathway in front of Andicchami’s shrine. This pathway leads back to the final shrine of the Pandi Koyil complex. The shops here grow more sparse and are supplemented by brush, trees, and roaming goats and chickens. Several beggars with fingers atrophied from leprosy line the pathway, as do fortunetellers thumping drums and ready to read the future using prophetic parrots and cowrie shells.

The last stop at the end of this pathway is a clearing amongst several large sacred trees (and some not sacred trees) where the shrine to Samaiyan Karuppasamy is located. Samaiyan has a more active and articulated role as part of the Pandi Koyil temple complex than does Andicchami, and a great deal of activity takes place in and around his shrine. Much possession and prophecy telling takes place here, and there are almost always groups of gathered people, friends and families enjoying picnic lunches and snacks after their temple visit. Food vendors hawk peanuts, fruits, and chips, children laugh and play, and the atmosphere feels particularly festive on the most auspicious days

18 I base this assumption on the familial relationship between Pandi, Andicchami, and Samaiyan Karuppasamy that will be outlined below wherein Andicchami is considered the elder brother of Samaiyan, suggesting that Andicchami has a higher status than the younger Samaiyan.
of the week when temple attendance peaks. Samaiyan’s shrine is larger and more developed than Andicchami’s, and it includes an image of the deity displayed on the top of the roof, showing the headless form of the warrior god within. Samaiyan’s icon is made from black stone and is cut into three pieces that lay scattered across the floor of the inner sanctum. Samaiyan’s dismembered form makes a number of interesting appearances in the multiple stories that describe Pandi Koyil as a place and the deities who reside there - stories that I will address in the following sections. But first I will briefly comment on the relationship between Pandi Muneesvarar and the two important gods - Andicchami and Samaiyan Karuppasamy - that make up the Pandi Koyil complex.

Divine Brotherhoods

Regulars at the temple including priests, members of the priests’ families, and other temple employees offered two main explanations for the relationship between Pandi and the subsidiary deities located around his temple. Some described Samaiyan Karuppasamy and Andicchami as Pandi’s kaval deivam - the fierce guardian deities that often accompany more important or higher status gods. Kaval deivam protect the main deity inside a temple’s inner sanctum, standing as his guards and sentinels in front of the temple’s entrance. The spatial presumption based on a rendering of kaval deivam as guardians standing outside the front of a temple does not immediately map onto the scene at Pandi Koyil. Almost all devotees enter the temple complex from the end nearest to Pandi Muneesvarar’s shrine in the inner sanctum, while the Andicchami shrine and finally the Samaiyan shrine are seemingly located out back. But all three deities face the same direction within their shrines so that Samaiyan appears to be the first in line, with Andicchami standing behind his back, and then Pandi seated further behind Andicchami.
So Samaiyan and Andicchami’s backs face Pandi as all three gaze out toward the east onto what is now a busy highway located up a steep incline from the small grove where Samaiyan’s shrine sits. Some agile devotees do enter the Pandi Koyil temple complex from the direction that is usually considered the back, but in order to do so, they must wend their way carefully down a steep hill that abruptly descends from the highway above.

The second and more prevalent explanation I heard regarding the relationship between Pandi, Andicchami, and Samaiyan is that they are three brothers with Pandi being the eldest and therefore senior-most sibling. A group of women who work in various capacities as sweepers, shopkeepers, and general temple employees articulated to Hema and me that Pandi was the *anna* (elder brother), Andicchami was the *nadu tambi* (middle brother), and finally Samaiyan, the *kadai tambi* (last/end younger brother). As the oldest in this brotherhood trifecta, Pandi is primarily responsible for all that happens in his temple and it is his job to distribute the offerings that devotees bring to the younger brothers under his care - a point that I will return to when discussing the complexities of animal sacrifice and vegetarian versus non-vegetarian status in Chapter 3.

But Pandi’s family relations are not confined to those he shares with Andicchami and Samaiyan Karuppasamy on the campus of his own temple complex. Pandi is also regularly linked to another deity located in a portion of the city quite far from Pandi Koyil. This other deity is Maha Muneesvarar whose shrine is located on the outer walls of the Meenakshi Temple in central Madurai. Maha Muneesvarar is often cited as the
guardian deity of the North Tower of the Meenakshi Temple. Pandi Muneesvarar, like Maha Muneesvarar at the Meenakshi Temple, is also associated with the northern direction and was said by some to be the guardian of the north side of Madurai city.

Multiple people that I spoke with, both at Pandi Koyil and around the Meenakshi Temple, commented on the relationship between the two Muneesvarar deities - Pandi and Maha - as that between brothers. But there was no simple agreement on who was the eldest. While some people stated that Maha Muneesvarar was Pandi’s elder brother (thus ascribing a higher status and greater role of “familial” responsibility and power to the Muneesvarar at the Meenakshi Temple), others placed Pandi at the top of the family hierarchy. Contrary to my initial suspicion that devotees worshipping at Pandi Koyil would claim higher status for Pandi while those at the shrine at the Meenakshi Temple’s North Tower would see Maha Muneesvarar as the eldest brother, accounts of the fraternal relationship between the two deities were inconclusive and unpredictable.

My first encounters with the idea that Pandi and Maha Muneesvarar are somehow linked through a hierarchical relationship occurred early on in my research during visits with a friend of mine who owns a small business very near to the Meenakshi Temple North Tower. Pushpakkala is a fervent devotee and spends a great deal of her time and

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19 There are three shrines to guardian deities on the outer walls of the Meenakshi Temple. These include the above mentioned Maha Muneesvarar shrine on the northern wall, and two shrines on the eastern wall, one to Karuppasamy and one to Madurai Veeran. It is notable that all three of these shrines are located on the outermost limit of the Meenakshi Temple, facing outward. These shrines are not contained within the premises of the Meenakshi Temple, but instead sit on its periphery, as both protective guardians and as deities with a significantly lower status than the gods and goddesses worshipped inside the temple walls. These three shrines have a non-Brahman priesthood in contrast to the Brahman priests who officiate inside the walls of the Meenakshi Temple. See Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess*, xxiii. Also of note is the inclusion of both a “Muneesvarar” deity and a “Karuppasamy” deity in this list of shrines at the Meenakshi Temple - both “types” or “classes” of deity exist at Pandi Koyil as well, with Pandi being the “Muneesvarar” and Samaiyan the “Karuppasamy.”
energy worshipping and speaking emotionally about various deities, and regularly performing vows to local gods and goddesses in order to petition them for help and blessings. I have known for years that Pushpakkala has a particularly intimate relationship with Maha Muneesvarar as she prayed to him for the safe pregnancy and delivery of her three children, and because the most recent iteration of her family business is now located in such close proximity to his shrine. Her family currently lives in an apartment above their shop, so her residence is now also within almost the direct eyesight of Maha Muneesvarar. Pushpakkala was intensely overjoyed to hear about my proposed research at Pandi Koyil. She has also been devoted to Pandi for years, praying to him many times for the success of her business and other intimate family matters. Pushpakkala’s eyes filled with tears over and over as she spoke about Pandi and the way that she maintained faith in his ability to help her out of steep financial problems and a current legal battle she is waging against the corrupt landlords in whose building her shop was once located.

Pushpakkala also told me that Maha Muneesvarar was the “boss” or “head” of Pandi. On another visit, when she reiterated this point, her husband Vikram jumped into the conversation to contest what she was saying. Vikram commented that he thought it was Pandi who was the boss of Maha Muneesvarar, not the other way around. They went back and forth for a short while, discussing with one another regarding the status differential between these two deities, before coming to a non-conclusion that one or the

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20 I have accompanied Pushpakkala on two occasions during the summers of 2015 and 2016 at paal kudam (milk pot) processions held in honor of the goddess Bhadrakaliyamman located in a shrine in the Pudumandapam marketplace adjacent to the Meenakshi Temple’s East Tower.

21 Pushpakkala speaks fairly good English and our conversations are almost entirely conducted in simple English.
other of the two deities was indeed “boss,” but with neither of them offering a firm commitment regarding which god was of higher status. The relationship between Pandi and Maha Muneesvarar is significant yet ambiguous. Similarly, I heard from members of the priests’ family at Pandi Koyil that Pandi and Maha Muneesvarar are brothers, although different answers were offered as to who was the eldest. Even amongst members of Pandi’s most intimate community of followers, there is no unanimous position about his status relative to the Muneesvarar in the center of town. An elderly woman named Kaliyamma who is a member of the Pandi Koyil priests’ family and who often officiates at the Samaiyan and Andicchami shrines explained that Maha Muneesvarar is Pandi’s older brother - an explanation shared with me by multiple others at Pandi Koyil. But on one occasion, a middle aged man in a role of authority at Pandi Koyil suggested the opposite position, claiming that Pandi was in fact the “head god” of all the Muneesvarar deities.

But not everyone put importance in the claim that there was a relationship of status between Pandi and Maha Muneesvarar. When I asked a priest at the North Tower shrine about any such links, he brushed off my question. This priest for Maha Muneesvarar eventually conceded that yes, there are many stories about such things and some people do say that the deity at the shrine where he officiates is the elder brother of

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22 Post-menopausal women often act as pucaris (ritual performing priests) at the Samaiyan Karuppasamy and Andicchami shrines in the Pandi Koyil complex, and Kaliyamma frequently performed these roles during my research period. It seems as if women are either not allowed to or else do not customarily perform the role of pucari in the Pandi Muneesvarar shrine in the inner sanctum at Pandi Koyil. All of the pucaris working in Pandi’s inner sanctum during my period of research were men. On many occasions though, an elderly woman from the priests’ family named Dhanalakshmi would sit on the ledge near the stairs up into Pandi’s shrine, stationed much closer to the deity than non-priests. Dhanalakshmi would assist the priests as they performed Pandi’s worship and would also sometimes administer to devotees, doling out sacred ash as Pandi’s grace.

23 He used the English words “head god” although he was speaking in Tamil.
Pandi, but that such things really don’t matter much and one should pray to this god or whichever god regardless of any of these stories. He emphasized the necessity of worshipping Maha Muneesvarar when at his shrine without thinking or worrying too much about this type of story.24

The fluctuating claims of different practitioners regarding the familial status of the Muneesvarar brothers is just one example of the shifting, flexible stories that are told in relation to Pandi Koyil and the deities associated with this temple. I now turn to the crux of this issue by exploring the multiple narratives linked to the origin of Pandi Koyil and the identity of its chief deity. Like the coexisting and fluctuating opinions about the fraternal relationship between Pandi and Maha Muneesvarar, the diverse foundational stories regarding Pandi Koyil do not always map neatly onto specific people or groups with predetermined perspectives. Instead, the prolific multi-vocality surrounding Pandi Koyil is far more complex, revealing multiple claims to authoritative knowledge and divergent yet overlapping opinions on Pandi’s character, the source of power that

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24 It is possible that the priest at the Maha Muneesvarar shrine was dismissive of my question because he was busy and didn’t want to take the time to explain the stories, or perhaps he didn’t know much or care about this topic. But it is interesting to note that, while members of the priests’ family at Pandi Koyil and many of the devotees there would often draw a correlation between Pandi and Maha Muneesvarar, a priest at the latter’s shrine was disinclined to do so. Further research would be needed to authenticate whether the connection between these two deities is more commonly expressed by people with a closer relationship to Pandi Koyil than the Maha Muneesvarar shrine. If so, it is possible that this lack of interest on the part of the priest at the Maha Muneesvarar shrine could be an indicator of a status imbalance between the two temples, in which Pandi Koyil is considered the temple of “lesser” importance compared to the North Tower Muneesvarar, so that any extant connection between the two would be more important and necessary to bolster the power of Pandi than it is for Maha Muneesvarar who doesn’t “need” such a connection to give him clout (as he seems to derive at least some of his power and great popularity from his central position in Madurai city, connected to the inarguably great Meenakshi Temple). This interpretation would support the more commonly made claim that Maha Muneesvarar is the elder brother of Pandi (and therefore higher in the familial status hierarchy). A similar phenomenon is described in C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 97-98. Here, Fuller articulates the connection between “bigger” and “lesser” deities in writing about the relationship between the Meenakshi Temple and the nearby smaller temple to the local goddess Chellatamman. Fuller claims that while the ritual connection between the two temples marks the peak of the yearly calendar and is of central importance to the priests at Chellatamman’s temple, the Meenakshi Temple priests hardly make note of this “unimportant” connection.
animates his temple, and the history undergirding his worship. The multiple versions of the Pandi Koyil mythology are in no way mutually exclusive - different versions told by different people share overlapping elements, most notably regarding the founding mother of the temple. But other elements of some origin stories are downright dismissed or hotly contested by different actors. Let me begin by relating one of the most commonly told yet most commonly refuted stories about Pandi’s identity.

**Origin Story #1: Pandi’s Ancient Epic Provenance**

Some of the first stories I heard while conducting field research at Pandi Koyil linked Pandi Muneesvarar to what is probably the most famous example of ancient Tamil epic literature, the *Cilappatikaram* (“The Tale of an Anklet”) written by Ilanko Atikal in the 5th century C.E. This work is widely regarded as one of the greatest epic poems of India in a language other than Sanskrit, and has been described as “the quintessential Tamil poem” that “speaks for all Tamils as no other work of Tamil literature does: it presents them with an expansive vision of the Tamil imperium … No other work has endeared itself more to the Tamils than the unhappy tale of Kovalan and Kannaki.”

A large portion of the climactic drama of the epic takes place in and around Madurai where a married couple have decided to migrate, hoping to sell one of the wife Kannaki’s anklets after the husband Kovalan has squandered all of their money on a courtesan. While in Madurai, Kovalan is unfairly framed and accused of stealing the queen’s anklet. The Pandiyan king of Madurai, Netunceliyan, hastily orders Kovalan to

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26 Ibid., 1-2.
27 My retelling of the Kannaki story is adapted from the summary in Parthasarathy’s introduction to his translation of the *Cilappatikaram*. Ibid., 2-5.
be executed, despite the lack of a trial. When Kannaki comes to find out about the king’s deadly misjudgment of her husband, she demands an audience with the ruler. Kannaki is able to prove Kovalan’s innocence by matching the anklet in question with her own, demonstrating that Kovalan had not been in possession of the queen’s stolen anklet. The iconic ending of this tragic scene is described by R. Parthasarthy, the poem’s contemporary translator, in the following way: “Kannaki proves Kovalan’s innocence; the king acknowledges his guilt and dies; the queen follows him. In a rage, Kannaki walks out of the palace. She curses Maturai [Madurai], wrenches her left breast off her body, and hurls it over the city, which instantly goes up in flames.” The final portion of the poem goes on to relate the apotheosis of Kannaki into the goddess Pattini. As Madurai’s presence is distinctly marked in the Cilappatikaram, the importance of the story has become cemented in the sacred geography of the city and the mythic-historical consciousness of the people who live there, despite the rather disastrous end Madurai comes to in the tale. Pandi Koyil is one example of a temple located within this sacred geography that is considered by some to form a bridge between the contemporary landscape of Madurai and its ancient iteration in the epic literature.

For example, early on during my field research, my friend Pushpakkala’s husband Vikram told me that Pandi Koyil was somehow related to this ancient Tamil epic. He mentioned a rather ill-defined comment about how Pandi Muneesvarar is the king of Madurai mentioned in the Kannaki story. Pushpakkala and Vikram also emphasized that Pandi is a protector of the city of Madurai. Later that same day while I was at Pandi

28 Ibid., 4-5.
29 For a comprehensive study of the goddess Pattini and her place in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, see Gananath Obeyesekere, The Cult of the Goddess Pattini (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
Koyil, a woman named Selvi working in a small *puja* items shop inside the temple complex offered to tell me the history of the temple. Selvi invited Hema and I to pull up stools next to her inside her shop while she deftly strung a garland of jasmine flowers to sell. Without my asking her any questions about what I had earlier heard from Vikram, Selvi launched into a lengthy explanation of Pandi Koyil’s mythological history and ritual structure. In addition to explaining her own place in the Pandi Koyil community (her mother owned several shops in the marketplace around the temple which Selvi inherited from her, and her younger sister is married to one of the Pandi Koyil priests), she also explained how the temple came to exist by focusing on the events leading to its founding.

Selvi explained that Pandi Koyil was founded five generations ago by a woman named Valliyammai after Pandi appeared to her in a dream. Pandi told Valliyammai that she should dig in the fields near where she lived and there she would find his statue. After searching according to Pandi’s dream instructions, a statue was indeed unearthed from the fields. A small temple was erected around this statue and the priesthood has passed to the descendants of Valliyammai. When I asked Selvi if there were any Pandi temples before Valliyammai had the dream catalyzing the establishment of the current temple, she responded by vouching for Pandi’s great antiquity. She explained that Pandi Munnesvarar is actually a Pandiyan king 30 - in fact the very same king who had angered Kannaki by pronouncing the wrongful judgement on her husband Kovalan. Selvi related that after Kannaki had burned down Madurai in her rage, the Pandiyan king was repentant for his

30 It is interesting to note that the goddess Meenakshi is also considered a member of the royal Pandiyan dynasty as she was born to a Pandiyan king and queen (although not the same king mentioned in the *Cilappatikaram*).
hasty false judgment that had caused Kovalan’s death. In order to repent for his sin, the Pandiyan king vowed to sit in a meditative posture and answer the wishes of all those devotees who come to pray to him for help. It was in this seated, meditating posture that Valliyammai discovered the Pandiyan king, and he remains seated in this way, continuing to answer prayers as he had vowed from his location in the temple that Valliyammai founded. Selvi also claimed that the original city of Madurai, the one extant at the time of these ancient events, was actually located in the area where Pandi Koyil now stands. With this statement, Selvi positioned Pandi Koyil as the ancient, original center of Madurai - a notable claim as in the contemporary period, the city’s center is generally agreed to be the Meenakshi Temple.

Selvi’s story about Pandi’s identity being that of the Pandiyan king of the Cilappatikaram ties the relatively recent temple structure of Pandi Koyil to an ancient and noble past. By finding the statue of Pandi in the fields according to the king-cum-deity’s own instructions, Valliyammai was able to resurrect the “original” Madurai, the very city that was once built atop her own family’s fields. Valliyammai’s discovery of the ascetic Pandi, seated in his penitent posture of meditation, activated the ancient king’s vow to fulfill the desires of all those people who would come to him in prayer. Pandi Koyil is thus linked, through this specific origin story, to an ongoing drama of atonement - Pandi Muneesvarar as once king of Madurai will continue to protect his city that had been destroyed in the vengeful flames of Kannaki’s anger, by doling out boons as part of his austerities of expiation. In highlighting the ongoing atonement of Pandi, Selvi’s story

31 The Cilappatikaram pre-dates the Meenakshi Temple and there is no mention in the epic poem of the goddess Meenakshi by name. There is a patron goddess of the city of Madurai in the Cilappatikaram, but she cannot be assumed to be Meenakshi.
extrapolates from and modifies the textual version of the *Cilappatikaram* in which the king “Netunceliyan atones for his failure to administer justice and dies of shock.”

So while the Pandiyan king Netuniceliyan’s death in the *Cilappatikaram* text expiates his wrongful misjudgment, Selvi’s appropriation of the epic tradition extends the king’s life by attributing Pandi Muneesvarar’s animating power and boon-giving potency to his ongoing ascetic atonement for his sins against Kovalan and Kannaki.

The connection between Pandi Koyil and the *Cilappatikaram* was echoed by other members of the temple community as well and it is the public account of the origin story posted on the temple’s (unofficial) Facebook page. In a Facebook post dated June 30, 2012, the Pandi Koyil page administrator wrote the following explanation of the temple:

Pandi kovil was located in Madurai, the main lord of this temple "pandi muniswarar" he was the savior (Kaaval theivam) of Madurai. The lord pandi was actually an ancient ruler of Madurai who related with the Tamil epic "Silapathikaram". People worship the lord for their wellness. Let see the story of the pandi kovil, Two hundred years ago a group of people immigrated to Madurai from near karur (a small town in India ) and they tented on a place which is today's pandi kovil. An old couple named valliammal and periasamy was also in the group, in the night valliammal had a dream. In that dream, a long beared saint appeared and said that he was the ancient ruler Pandiya Neduncheliyan who gave misjudgment to kovalan. For that i was born again a human, i always did thavam (a kind of meditation or yoga) and prayed the lord Shiva. The lord accepts my prayers and I surrendered his feet and this place once my palace. Dig here, my idol is there in eight feet depth and built a temple for me. I will save you and your group from all your problems, then he disappeared. Valliammal awakened and told about her dream to everyone, they dig the place and found the idol of pandi muniswar and built a temple there and worshiped him. Their successors are still taking care of the temple.

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33 I do not know who is in charge of maintaining the Pandi Koyil Facebook page. The page does not seem to have a very active online presence, although there are infrequent posts, people upload photos and videos, and some also leave comments.
34 Facebook, “Madurai Sri Pandi Muneesvarar,” posted June 30, 2012, accessed February 16, 2017, http://www.facebook.com/Pandimunieswarar/. The multiple spelling and grammatical errors are in the original post. This exact same description of Pandi Koyil, including all idiosyncratic syntax, is reproduced
The above excerpt from the Pandi Koyil Facebook page very closely mirrors the story Selvi told me in the temple.

One of the most interesting features of this particular origin story is the running theme of powerful women - from Kannaki and her furious rage that destroyed an entire city, to the creative strength of the temple’s founding mother Valliyammai whose feminine power picks up where Kannaki left off. Valliyammai’s powerful presence is notable in Pandi Koyil to this day. A photograph of Valliyammai as an old woman hangs near the ceiling of the temple, facing directly in toward Pandi’s inner sanctum. This position allows Valliyammai to be constantly in Pandi’s direct eyesight where she is also able to continuously take darshan from him.35 Valliyammai’s image holds a prominent place of importance within the temple she founded and she is widely respected by people working in the temple today. Selvi commented on the important position of Valliyammai’s portrait in relation to Pandi and she also mentioned that occasionally the founding mother’s spirit will possess people out near the Samaiyan Karuppasamy shrine in the back of the temple complex. The unique strength of Valliyammai was also fondly remembered by an elderly woman in the priests’ family named Dhanalakshmi who explained a feature of the founding mother’s portrait to me: a large horned bull stands

35 Many temples in Tamil Nadu include stone images of the main deity’s animal “mount” positioned in front of the inner sanctum so that these great devotees may constantly gaze upon the god or goddess that they serve. There is no animal mount associated with Pandi, so there is no animal statue gazing in on the inner sanctum. The photograph of Valliyammai, hung next to a similarly sized photograph of one of her sons, is positioned in a way that is reminiscent of how animal mounts (such as Shiva’s bull Nandi, or Murugan’s peacock) are placed outside the inner sanctum looking in toward the deity inside. Of note is the fact that there is a bull in the photograph of Valliyammai. Some people in Madurai associate Pandi with Shiva (although this was never specifically mentioned to me by devotees or priests at Pandi Koyil). As Shiva’s mount is the bull Nandi, it is interesting to note that an image of a bull does indeed look in on Pandi in his inner sanctum.
next to Valliyammai in the photograph. According to Dhanalakshmi, the animal pictured in the portrait was bred as a Jallikattu bull - strong and ferocious in order to participate with vigor in the popular Pongal bullfight festival. Although men are the only participants in the Jallikattu celebration, Valliyammai was the only person - man or woman - who was able to tame and control this particular bull. The bull had such a great fondness for Valliyammai that it died of sorrow three days after she passed away.

The connection between Pandi Koyil and the Cilappatikaram is just one of the many origin stories that are told about the temple and the identity of its main deity. Next, I will look at a second origin story - one that places Pandi in a much later historical time period than that suggested by the first story.

*Origin Story #2: Pandi as Colonial Resistor*

A popular alternative story describing the origin of Pandi Koyil and the identities of the temple’s deities shifts the focus from Pandi as epic king turned ascetic renouncer, and explains him instead as a local hero operating in a more recent era - that of British colonialism. Tales about Pandi’s role as a local Tamil protector fighting against foreign domination are reminiscent of stories that describe *kaval deivam* as guardians against Aryan invaders (like that told to me by Arun), except that the British rather than North Indians are cast as the enemy. This type of story about the origins of Pandi Koyil had a much looser structure than the one related in the previous section linking Pandi to the Cilappatikaram king. While conducting field research at Pandi Koyil, I heard multiple references to Pandi and the other deities present at his temple (particularly Samaiyan Karuppasamy) as war heroes, but the descriptions of these stories evinced a much fuzzier narrative and proved rather diversified when told by different people. In some versions of
this type of origin story, Pandi emerges as less of a deified war hero, and instead acts as a divine inspiration encouraging resistance against colonial rule.

An elderly woman named Kaliyamma told me a number of related stories about Valliyammmai and the founding of Pandi Koyil. Kaliyamma is a member of the priests’ family and she often acts as the *pucari* at the Samaiyan and Andicchami shrines. Kaliyamma explained that one day, Valliyammmai was bathing in a river when she saw a huge box floating in the water. As this box passed by her, she heard voices coming from it telling her to open it up and worship what she would find inside.\(^{36}\) Previously, Valliyammmai had also experienced dreams telling her the same information - that she would find a box containing a statue which she should worship as her deity. When Valliyammmai opened the box she had discovered in the river, the large stone statue of Pandi was inside. The image of Pandi was too large to fit inside of Valliyammmai’s home, so she installed it in a small thatch-roofed temple in a nearby field. Kaliyamma went on to describe how Valliyammmai had become embroiled in a lawsuit with the British\(^ {37}\) who were governing in the area at the time. The lawsuit concerned the contents of the box: according to Kaliyamma the British claimed that they were the rightful owners of whatever had been found inside of this valuable box of mysterious origins, while

\(^{36}\) This unusual element added to the Valliyammmai story about a large box containing a deity may have parallels in the worship of other local deities in Tamil Nadu. In 2013, I travelled with my friend Pushpakkala to her husband Vikram’s native village in Dindigul district, a few hours north of Madurai, in order to worship her family’s *kula deivam* (family deity) on the occasion of Shiva Ratri. The practice of worshipping *kula deivam* at the Shiva Ratri holiday is extremely widespread and I have heard some people say that this practice is a distinct feature of Tamil religion. During the worship of Pushpakkala’s *kula deivam* - a village goddess - the priests transferred the power of the goddess from inside of her small shrine into a large black box that was carried in a strictly men-only procession to the river.

\(^{37}\) The word that Kaliyamma used in this context to refer to the British was *vellikaran*, which literally translates as “white man,” and is the Tamil term regularly used to describe all white foreigners. Other people who referenced British colonial rule at Pandi Koyil also used the same word, *vellikaran*, to describe the English.
Valliyammai argued that as the one who discovered the box, she had a rightful claim to it. Kaliyamma emphasized that Valliyammai was resolute in fighting the British over ownership of the box and the Pandi statue it contained, taking her legal battle all the way to the courts in far away Madras.\(^{38}\)

Valliyammai was very poor and hardly had the financial means to travel to Madras, but she was exceedingly clever in finding a way to do so. She took the few coins that she had and hid them inside parcels of food before boarding the train. When asked by the conductor to pay for her fare, Valliyammai would display her meager food supply (with her coins surreptitiously hidden beneath the rice), saying that she had no money for the ticket and all she had with her was just this meal. Manipulating the conductor into allowing her free passage in this way, Valliyammai was able to make it to Madras while smuggling a bit of her own money with her.\(^{39}\) All of this resolve paid off as Valliyammai eventually won the lawsuit against the British and was legally permitted to retain the contents of the box.

Kaliyamma also explained the history of Samaiyan Karuppasamy\(^{40}\) whose shrine she was officiating at the time of her storytelling. Kaliyamma placed Samaiyan’s story

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\(^{38}\) Now Chennai.

\(^{39}\) Another similar story I heard regarding Pandi’s financial assistance to Valliyammai was told by Dhanalakshmi. She explained how whenever Valliyammai was in need of money, she would pray to Pandi by the alamaram (banyan) tree in the back of the temple complex, now located near the Samaiyan Karuppasamy shrine. Here, Valliyammai would ask Pandi for help if she hadn’t made any money that day. Miraculously, Pandi would answer her prayers as the leaves falling from the alamaram tree would be transformed into coins as they hit the ground.

\(^{40}\) Samaiyan Karuppasamy seems to be a local iteration, specific to Pandi Koyil, of the more widely worshipped deity named Karuppasamy. Karuppasamy is a popular kaval deivam worshipped throughout Tamil Nadu who is often associated with the god Ayyanar. The main temple to Karuppasamy is located within the temple complex of Alagar Koyil - the most important Vaishnavite temple in the Madurai region. Although I am not certain, it seems possible that a local human war hero from the Pandi Koyil area was posthumously deified into Samaiyan Karuppasamy, perhaps becoming linked to the more general deity Karuppasamy through this apotheosis. I am not sure if other Karuppasamy shrines are similarly linked to local heroes, but if so, this practice might be compared to the way specific human women who have been
during the time of British colonization. She explained that there was a battle for control of the area surrounding Madurai as the British wanted to overtake the city. Samaiyan was a brave warrior who fought in the war against this colonial encroachment. Samaiyan was an extremely tall man, like a giant, and he fought with valor and great strength, but he was eventually killed in battle after being shot by British cannons. The cannonball blast split his body into three pieces, and so he is now worshipped in this dismembered form at his shrine in the back of the Pandi Koyil temple complex. Kaliyamma also related that the Andicchami shrine was established after a vel (spear)\(^1\) was unearthed from the ground in the location where he is now worshipped. When Hema and I asked Kaliyamma if there was any relationship between Pandi Koyil and the events of the \textit{Cilappatikaram}, she denied any such connection.

Kaliyamma’s stories were not the only ones I heard about the role the Pandi Koyil deities played in fighting the British. A middle-aged woman named Shivani who grew up regularly coming to Pandi Koyil with her family and who is now employed as a sweeper in the temple told me a similar story. Shivani explained how during the period of colonial rule, the British were fighting against the people living in the area around Madurai. During a battle between these two opposing sides, the British cut Samaiyan’s body into three pieces. Seeing this violence against his younger brother, Pandi became extremely

\(^1\) The vel is an emblem especially associated with the extremely popular Tamil deity Murugan. At least at the present time, there is no vel in or around the Andicchami shrine, but there is a sulam (trident) planted in the ground immediately in front of the shrine. Kaliyamma’s story about the vel being dug from the ground was the only reference I heard during my field research about Andicchami’s origin. Andicchami, although he is the middle brother and therefore would seem to have a higher status than Samaiyan Karuppasamy, has the least defined character and origin story of the three divine brothers at Pandi Koyil.
angry and fought valiantly against the British as a protector of the surrounding area and
the people living there.

Kaliyamma and Shivani’s stories that position Pandi and Samaiyan Karuppasamy
as resisting British colonial rule highlight their bravery as kaval deivam, guardian deities
who fight to protect their jurisdiction. While the origin story about Pandi Koyil that
associates the temple with the Cilappatikaram told above emphasizes the deity’s ancient
provenance, the type of story that Kaliyamma and Shivani related locate Pandi’s power in
a more recent era. Both sets of stories - whether Pandi is seen as a former Pandiyan king
of Madurai or as an agitator against the British - are told by Pandi’s own devotees and
evidence the intimate care he has for those who he protects. I now turn to the third main
origin story told about Pandi Koyil in Madurai - one that is very prevalent but not
amongst Pandi’s own devotees. The following section looks at how Pandi Koyil is
viewed by local “outsiders” who tell a very different story about how the temple came to
be.

*Origin Story #3: Pandi as a Repurposed Jain Figure*

I initially heard about Pandi Koyil during my first trip to Madurai as a study
abroad student in 2009. A retired professor, well known throughout Madurai for his work
on religious art history and preserving Jain heritage sites in the region, explained to my
classmates and me that a local Hindu temple contained an icon that was likely a
repurposed Jain or Buddhist statue.42 The professor was referencing Pandi Koyil and his
description was the beginning of many I would come to hear from members of Madurai’s

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42 The phenomenon of “repurposed” Jain religious art and architecture is not unique to Pandi Koyil. For an
example of Jain temples and statues being “repurposed” by Hindus in Rajasthan, see Ann Grodzins Gold,
174-177.
elite, academic community. The idea that the deity at Pandi Koyil wasn’t “really” Pandi was widely circulated amongst highly educated people in the city. Throughout the intervening years between my first visit to Madurai and my period of field research, I have occasionally heard professors of various subjects and students that have master’s degrees or other high levels of education mention (often in almost hushed but excited tones) that Pandi is “actually” Jain or Buddhist. Arun, the religion major turned tour guide whom I met in a Madurai bookshop was eager to hear about the conclusions of my research at Pandi Koyil and whether I would be able to determine if Pandi was “actually a Buddha.”

There appears to be some slippage between the designations “Jain” and “Buddhist” when it comes to opinions about the art historical background of Pandi’s statue. I have heard different people refer to Pandi’s statue at times as being “originally” Buddhist and at other times, “originally” Jain. Despite this partial conflation between Jainism and Buddhism, during my period of field research, Pandi’s “real” identity was most often pegged as Jain, and it was less frequent that he was associated with Buddhism.

Madurai’s history is deeply intertwined with Jainism - a religion that flourished in the region for centuries, especially from 470 C.E. until the sixth century C.E. - although there is not any significant Tamil Jain community currently residing in Madurai to the best of my knowledge. The landscape of the region bears the mark of its Jain history: the relatively flat land around Madurai is dotted by a number of large stone hillocks that contain caves, carvings, and other archeological remnants of the thriving Jain monastic community that once populated the area. Many of these former Jain caves have given

43 Parthasarathy, The Tale of an Anklet, 337.  
way to Hinduism and in the contemporary time period, these locations are more typically associated with the active temples that have been built near the hillocks than with the Jain sites present there. For example, the extremely popular Murugan temple at Thiruparankundram right outside the main city of Madurai is built right up against the side of a large stone hill. The inner sanctum of the Murugan temple and the deities enshrined there are carved directly into the wall of a cave within the hillock. On the far side of this hill are Jain caves once used by monks as a refuge during the rainy season. Another well known Jain site around Madurai is Samana Malai (literally, “Jain Hill”) in the nearby village Kizhakuyilkudi which now includes an Ayyanar Temple at the base of the hillock. There are many other such examples around Madurai of former Jain sites now more commonly visited for the Hindu temples they stand near.

Madurai’s rich Jain history and the multiple, nearly forgotten caves and carvings that attest to this history, are evoked when academics in the city mention Pandi Koyil. The statue in Pandi Koyil, as mentioned previously, shows a man’s body seated in a cross-legged, meditative posture. The underlying stone face of the statue is obscured by the metal features that have been placed over it - giving Pandi eyes, eyebrows, a mustache, and a round chin. According to some professors in Madurai, these metal features hide the statue’s “true” face underneath, but the posture of the body supposedly

45 This temple is formally known as the Subramaniya Swami Koyil and is one of the arupadaividu - the six holy abodes of Murugan located in Tamil Nadu.
46 The Jain caves at Thiruparankundram were later adorned with carvings of deities more often associated with Hinduism, including Shiva Nataraja, Ardhanarisvara, and Murugan, but the caves themselves and several ornamental motifs are attributed to the Jains. These caves are now mostly kept locked and are typically only visible through academic tours. The hillock at Thiruparankundram has many layers of diverse religious history as there is also one of the area’s most important dargahs (Sufi saint shrines) located on the hill.
reveals Pandi’s art historical origins as a Jain deity, *tirthankara*, or monk. It is no secret amongst Pandi Koyil devotees that Pandi is seated in a meditative posture - as mentioned previously, this is a major factor of the story Selvi told about Pandi being the repentant Pandiyan king from the *Cilappatikaram*. But two professors from a local university who I spoke with about Pandi Koyil during my field research were extremely dismissive of any connections between the temple and the ancient Tamil epic. They scoffed off this possibility as absurd, mentioning that there were only a few extant locations in Madurai that can be directly associated with the events of the *Cilappatikaram*. Instead, they claimed that Pandi Koyil is in fact a repurposed Jain temple - that the statue now worshipped as Pandi was once worshipped as a Jain figure.

Quite notable about this scholarly opinion is the professors’ ascription of the “folk tale” about Pandi’s links to the *Cilappatikaram* as “false” in part because there is no scriptural reference to his temple in the text of the epic itself. But if we stop to remember the story that Selvi explained to me, it becomes clear that Selvi was not claiming that Pandi Koyil as a temple structure was extant at the time of the *Cilappatikaram* events. Significantly, Selvi was claiming that the Pandi statue is the body of the king from the *Cilappatikaram* who had been lying (presumably dormant) under the ground until Valliyammai unearthed him, constructed a temple to house him, and instituted worship of him. The professors I spoke with dismissed Selvi’s version of the story, offering their own authoritative judgment that the statue of Pandi had been converted from its original Jain identity and that Pandi Koyil was likely built atop of what was once a Jain temple or

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47 Literally, “ford maker,” the term *tirthankara* refers to the twenty-four main figures of Jainism who are considered fully enlightened masters that have expounded Jain philosophy throughout the ages. I have not heard any person specifically mention which Jain figure they think Pandi originally was, although images at Jain sites throughout Madurai show carvings of at least the *tirthankaras* Mahavira and Parshvanatha.
sacred site. For these professors, what was unearthed from the ground on which Pandi Koyil now stands was the statue of a Jain seated in meditation, not King Netunceliiyan.

One professor even exasperatedly conjectured that the priests officiating at Pandi Koyil are well aware that the statue they masquerade as Pandi is actually a Jain sculpture, but that the cunning priests knowingly deceive the devotees who flock to this temple in order to keep their lucrative religious business and the thriving economy that has come to center around Pandi alive and well. This professor expressed his opinion about the potentially conspiratorial character of Pandi Koyil’s priests in part to support his frustration that no archeological investigation was currently allowed to take place in the temple’s vicinity. If Pandi Koyil were to be officially recognized as a Jain heritage site, the temple administration and priests would have to capitulate to historians and archeologists digging up the surrounding grounds and potentially subjecting the statue to a profane analysis.

I do not know if any of the Pandi Koyil priests are aware that their temple is viewed with suspicion by local academics, although I do not think it is impossible that they have heard some scholars consider the statue to be Jain or even Buddhist in origin. I never heard anyone at Pandi Koyil itself, whether priest, temple staff member, or devotee, make any reference to Pandi’s potentially Jain provenance or resemblance. Neither did I hear anyone specifically describe Pandi Koyil as “Hindu,” but there was certainly no mention of Jainism that I was aware of.

Academics who attribute a Jain history to Pandi point to the stone image itself - particularly the statue’s bodily configuration - as the primary evidence to support their claims. There is a semantic aspect of this Jain connection well worth noting. The Tamil
word for Jainism is Samanam, a term derived from the phrases samanam pottu amartal or samanam pottu utkarutal, which mean literally “sitting in a cross-legged position.” These phrases are the colloquial way to describe sitting on the floor in a cross-legged position and this is the way most people seat themselves in Madurai in all types of settings while they eat, talk with friends, or relax. But this cross-legged position and the terms for it also refer to the more formal bodily posture assumed by meditating monks. Because Jains are especially associated with this posture of meditation, the word most regularly used in Tamil to describe practitioners of Jainism is Samanarkal - a person who is seated in a cross-legged position. Considering this etymology, it is practically unavoidable that a word linked with Jainism will be mentioned when describing Pandi’s bodily posture. But semantics aside, the professors who attribute a Jain status to Pandi’s statue interpret his seated posture as proof that he is “actually” Jain - not just a cross-legged figure seated on the floor, but a Jain monk assuming a religiously specific posture for conducting meditative exercises.

I was able to observe Pandi’s unadorned statue during an elaborate abishekam ritual conducted at the temple on amavasai (New Moon Day) during the Tamil month of Margazhi (mid-December to mid-January) which fell on Wednesday, December 28, 2016. A Muslim\textsuperscript{48} family sponsored the lengthy and costly ritual that is centered on the bathing of the deity’s statue with a number of substances including milk, coconut water, honey, curds, flowers, sacred ash, and a long list of other items. During the abishekam, the grilled door separating the inner sanctum from the rest of the temple’s interior was shut and the majority of devotees who had gathered to watch the auspicious ritual

\textsuperscript{48} A large number of Muslims worship at Pandi Koyil - a point I will address at greater length below.
occasion observed from the far side of the closed gate. The sponsoring family clustered on the near side of the grill, inside of the inner sanctum and very close to the shrine where Pandi’s statue resides.

The priests performing the *abishekam* graciously allowed Hema and me to stand inside of the inner sanctum with the sponsoring family, and I was positioned as close to the altar as is possible for non-priests. From this close vantage point, I was able to observe Pandi’s form at great length. During an *abishekam* ritual, it is common for the deity to be completely unclothed and unadorned. While Pandi usually wears a number of elaborate garments including a turban, cloths around his waist, legs, and shoulders, thick garlands of flowers, and decorations of sandal paste smeared directly onto the statue, during the *abishekam* there was nothing at all on Pandi’s statue other than his silver facial features. The priests poured each substance over the statue in succession with a cleansing wash of water rinsing the stone clear after each round.

The statue is carved from black stone and shows a man’s body seated in a cross-legged position with his two hands stacked atop one another and cradled in his lap. He appears to be seated on a pedestal with what seems to be the backrest of a chair or throne behind him. A thin cloth carved into the stone is draped over the figure’s left shoulder, covering half of his chest and extending down over his thin waist. The figure’s earlobes are distended (a further trait some professors noted as evidence of Pandi’s Jain or

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49 This chair-like backdrop is said by some, including Dhanalakshmi, to be Pandi’s hair matted into thick dreadlocks, and not a backrest at all. I will discuss Pandi’s hair further in Chapter 3.

50 Carvings of Jain *tirthankaras* are likely to be depicted completely nude or wearing only a loin cloth. The presence of a carved upper garment partially covering the chest, such as can be seen on Pandi, would seem unusual for a Jain statue but more likely for a Buddhist one. For more on Jain iconography, see Julia A. B. Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India: The Development of a Distinct Language in Space and Ritual* (Berlin: G+H Verlag, 2009), especially Chapter 3, “Religious Images and Sacred Objects Associated with the Jaina Temple,” 63-126.
When I saw Pandi completely unadorned during the abishekam, I was indeed struck by the iconographic similarity between his statue and images of tirthankaras that I have seen at some of the Jain sites around Madurai, including Samana Malai located in a nearby village. At least upon seeing this bare form, I was convinced that there may likely be an art historical connection between Jainism (or perhaps Buddhism) and the deity now worshipped as Pandi.

When I spoke with Hema after the abishekam, I was extremely interested to hear what she had to say about the form of Pandi’s statue that we had both been able to view so closely. Hema’s response absolutely fascinated me. While I had been struck by how similar Pandi’s statue looked to Jain and Buddhist iconography, Hema’s reaction to seeing Pandi unclothed was to be convinced that he was indeed the Pandiyan king Netunceliyan from the Cilappatikaram who had pronounced a false judgement on Kovalan. Initially, Hema was completely surprised hearing Selvi’s story that connected Pandi to the Cilappatikaram. She had first approached Selvi’s interpretation with disbelief, saying she had never heard anything of the sort previously. But after we heard similar stories linking Pandi to the ancient Tamil epic many times while conducting research at the temple, Hema became more used to the idea that this origin story was extremely prevalent. After the abishekam, as Hema put it to me, “Now I am totally confirmed and believe the story that Pandi is the Pandiyan king from the Cilappatikaram.” For Hema, the proof was there in his posture.

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51 Many iconographic images of deities and people in Tamil Nadu show stretched earlobes, sometimes with and sometimes without jewelry inserted into the long holes. This feature does not seem to typically be associated with one religion over another and many deities normally categorized as Hindu display this kind of adornment. Furthermore, it was once a common practice of some Tamil communities for baby girls to have their earlobes slowly stretched so that heavy gold ornaments called thandatti or pambadam could be worn in the holes. Many elderly women in Madurai still wear this type of jewelry or have permanently stretched earlobes from once having worn it.
At this point, the diverse yet overlapping origin stories about Pandi Koyil and the identity of the deities worshipped there have come around full circle, back to the tale about Pandi Muneesvarar’s link to the *Cilappatikaram*. Neither the people at Pandi Koyil who told about their deity’s former identity as King Netunceliyan, nor the academics who saw only a Jain figure in the statue of Pandi, mentioned the fascinating bridge between these two sharply divergent opinions: the *Cilappatikaram* is attributed to a Jain author. Ilanko Atikal, the epic poem’s composer, is traditionally said to be a prince who renounced the chance to rule the South Indian Ceral kingdom in order to join a Jain monastery. The suffix “Atikal” attached to the poet’s name is a Jain honorific referring to “a Jaina ascetic or mendicant … who combines monastic life and outside religious activity.” The poem’s English translator R. Parthasarathy comments, “that the … author [of the *Cilappatikaram*] was perhaps a Jaina there is little doubt, for Jaina ideas crisscross the poem like a golden thread. Kavunti Atikal, a Jaina nun and Kovalan’s spiritual guide through the forests separating the Cola and Pantiya [Pandiya] kingdoms, is an eloquent and persuasive apologist for Jainism. The plot of the poem, again, is firmly tethered to the Jaina doctrine of karma.” Parthasarathy also points out that the epic poem’s main characters Kannaki and Kovalan were likely Jains. Perhaps the various stories currently told about Pandi’s identity, although originating from very different social positions, may have more themes in common than appears at first sight.

In addition to the three types of origin myths that I discussed above, other less commonly told stories also circulate around the temple, including that Pandi is the son of

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53 Ibid., 335.
54 Ibid., 7.
55 Ibid., 335.
Madurai’s main goddess Meenakshi, and that Meenakshi designated Pandi the guardian of the North direction of her city. Although all of these stories and explanations highlight different aspects of the temple and its presiding deity, and although a rich multitude of voices no doubt contributes to the mythos surrounding the place, there are prevalent threads that run between the multiple origin stories, not the least of which is Pandi’s protective role within his jurisdiction. But who is it that Pandi protects? What voices make up the diverse chorus that tells of Pandi’s provenance and his power? The next section begins to answer these questions.

*Many Castes, Many Religions*

The rumors about Pandi’s potential origins as a Jain or Buddhist figure offer one example of the layers of religious diversity enfolded in the stories people tell about Pandi Koyil. The many different voices that relate mythologies of Pandi Koyil similarly suggest that this temple and the deities worshipped inside it foster multiple perspectives. A great deal of social diversity is present within Pandi Koyil, from the non-Brahman priesthood to the striking number of Muslims who come to worship and make offerings there. This section will look at two major aspects of social diversity present at the temple - caste and religion - in order to further illustrate the multifaceted communities that contribute to the complexity of Pandi’s character.

Pandi Koyil’s main ritual officiants consist of a priesthood of ten “brothers” - male relatives of the same generation who are descendants of Valliyammai, the founding mother of the temple. These male family members are known as *pangali* (shareholders) who share responsibilities at the temple on a rotating basis. Unlike many of the larger temples in Madurai and elsewhere, the priesthood at Pandi Koyil is non-Brahman, and at
least one person (a professor from a local university) told me that Brahmans “never” go to Pandi Koyil. Many popular Tamil deities including Ayyanar, Karuppasamy, and many others are cared for by priests of various non-Brahman caste backgrounds. The family of priests at Pandi Koyil belong to the Thevar community. Caste identity is an extremely sensitive topic in Madurai, as it is elsewhere in India, and most people I spoke with never mentioned their own castes, nor would it have been appropriate for me to directly ask them. But many people would comment on other people’s castes, identifying other groups based on their caste community names and sometimes the characteristics associated with those other groups. So while none of the priests or members of the priests’ family at Pandi Koyil directly told me that they belonged to the Thevar community, all other people that I spoke with in Madurai about the priesthood at Pandi Koyil unfailingly agreed that Pandi’s priests were Thevar.

In addition to having a Thevar priesthood, Pandi Koyil is widely associated with Thevar people throughout the city - so much so that my close friend Rekha who had never herself visited Pandi Koyil despite the fact that she was born and brought up in Madurai and frequently visits temples, consistently told me that Pandi Koyil is “a

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56 I am not certain with what frequency Brahmans do or do not worship at Pandi Koyil other than hearing this professor’s statement and other general comments made by members of the wider Madurai community who tend to associate Pandi Koyil with non-Brahman religiosity.
57 Because the priests themselves did not confirm to me that they consider themselves Thevar, I must leave open the possibility that they belong to some other caste community. But because the overwhelming agreement of other people not part of the priests’ family was that Pandi Koyil’s priesthood consists only of Thevars, I am using the caste designations offered by “outsiders” of the priesthood for my interpretation. Even if, after further research, the priests themselves told me that they were from some other caste community other than Thevar, it would still be worth noting that all people who commented to me on the caste identity of the Pandi Koyil priests were certain they are Thevar.
58 I was very interested in the fact that Rekha admitted to never having gone to Pandi Koyil, even though she visits temples in Madurai on an almost weekly basis. Although she never directly mentioned that Pandi Koyil was a temple of a certain type that was inappropriate for her (or people from her community) to visit, I got the sense that this was the main reason she had never been there. Rekha’s family is from a community of Telugu cloth merchants originally from Andhra Pradesh who have been settled for many generations in
Thevar temple.” The Thevar community has a very visible and vocal presence in Madurai (as it does in many other areas of Tamil Nadu). The Thevar caste can also be referred to as Mukkulathor, which literally means “a group of three castes,” referring to the three initially distinct castes that have congealed together into one contemporary caste community referred to by the umbrella term “Thevar.” Diane P. Mines explains the political implications behind the joining together of the three Mukkulathor castes into one larger Thevar community. Mines writes,

> Because politicians want their constituencies - the members of their political parties - to expand in order to increase their probability of winning elections, many of these caste groups have started to combine with others to create a kind of supercaste identity. For example, in South India, Thevars today constitute part of such a supercaste. The name, Thevar, is now often applied to what in previous times and contexts were considered to be several different castes, which would not intermarry or even share food because of the perceived qualitative and hierarchical differences between them. In recent years Thevars have joined forces to support the popular, and often ruling, All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), a popular Tamilnadu party, often in opposition to Tamilnadu’s Dalits (Untouchables) who support other parties.

Mines also comments on the colonial designation of people who now comprise the Thevar community as outlaws, “criminal castes,” whose members “were considered to be predisposed to criminality and so in need of rigorous surveillance.” This criminal stigma against Thevar people initiated by the British survives to this day.

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Madurai. Her husband is a Telugu Brahman and since her marriage, she associates more with Brahmans than any other caste community, although she has quite a few extremely close Thevar friends.

59 The three castes that comprise the larger unit “Thevar” are variously listed as Thevar, Kallar, and Maravar, or Agamudayar, Kallar, and Maravar, with the former list naming one of the original castes “Thevar” in addition to that name being used as the umbrella term for all three castes, while the latter list substitutes the name “Agamudayar” for the smaller caste sometimes termed “Thevar.” Throughout this paper, according to the most common contemporary usage, I use the term “Thevar” to refer to all three smaller castes together as the joined Mukkulathor community.

60 The AIADMK is the political party to which Jayalalithaa belonged.


62 Ibid., 40-41.
Thevar people in Madurai describe Thevar community people as “rough,” “fierce,” “ferocious,” and “violent.”

Despite the negative associations that cling to Thevars (and in some cases, because of them), this community has risen to a level of high socio-political and economic influence throughout Tamil Nadu. As Mines explores in her ethnography about caste and religion in a village south of Madurai, Thevars are often the dominant caste group in terms of political and social power in many villages in Southern Tamil Nadu, often capitalizing on their reputation as fearsome in order to garner greater local power.\(^6\)

The caste communities that most frequently bear the brunt of Thevar dominance are among the lowest ranking Scheduled Castes (S.C.).\(^6\)

While Pandi Koyil is most regularly associated with the Thevar community, the second most frequently mentioned caste groups paired with the temple are S.C. communities. The government-designated label “Scheduled Caste” is the official term used to refer to castes previously called “Untouchable,” members of which sometimes describe themselves as “Dalit,” using terminology associated with activism against caste oppression.\(^6\) Most people that I spoke with in Tamil Nadu used the term “S.C.” both to describe themselves or to describe others, so I will generally stick with that usage. While the priests at Pandi Koyil and a large constituency of regular temple-goers were designated as Thevars, many people commented to me that the temple is well known for the huge number of S.C. people who make up the temple’s community of devotees and

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\(^6\) See Chapter 6, “Untouchability,” in Mines, *Caste in India*, 57-65, for an explanation of the shades of difference between these terms.
staff. In addition to priests, Pandi Koyil employs a number of other people who are tasked with various jobs, from sweeping, to collecting broken coconuts offered by devotees to sell for oil, to butchers who slaughter and prepare the meat from the animals sacrificed at the temple. This group of people whose livelihoods are just as intimately tied to the daily workings of Pandi Koyil as are the priests’ were mostly from S.C. communities.

Dr. Elangovan, an English professor from a local university, Dalit activist, and self-described “Leftist Atheist,” commented on the caste dynamics at Pandi Koyil during an interview with me. Dr. Elangovan is originally from Madurai and has an interest, not only in caste politics, but also in what he termed “clan deities” (kula deivam), the worship of which he considers to be an indispensable aspect of the non-institutional, non-Brahmanical Tamil religion that was subsumed under the label of “Hinduism.” During our interview, Dr. Elangovan particularly noted the presence of both Thevar and S.C., Dalit people at Pandi Koyil. He commented on the distinction between Thevar people as “upper caste” and the oppressed Dalits, both of whom worship together, but not always without tension, at Pandi Koyil. The following is a paraphrased quote from my interview with Dr. Elangovan:

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66 Like my experience learning about the caste of the Pandi Koyil priesthood, none of the non-priest staff members at Pandi Koyil explicitly mentioned their caste names to me, despite the fact that I got to know several of them quite well. I am basing my assumption that these people are S.C. on the unanimous commentary of other people describing the castes of these staff members, as well as on the tasks that they performed, many of which (like killing animals for sacrifice, preparing meat, and sweeping) are correlated with S.C. communities.

67 Dr. Elangovan gave me permission to use his real name.

68 Dr. Elangovan, as a political activist, regularly used the term “Dalit,” both to self-identify and when speaking of others.

69 I did not tape record this interview which was conducted entirely in English, but I had my laptop with me and typed Dr. Elangovan’s responses while he spoke, attempting to copy them as close to word-for-word as I was able.
The caste system works in the worshipping of Pandi Muni. There are two types of people who worship Pandi in different places. Thevars, the three castes, they worship Pandi. They are upper caste people. And the people who are considered lower class people, Dalit people, they also have a relationship with Pandi … Priests at Pandi Koyil are basically a dominant caste, mostly they are Thevar. Both Thevar and Dalit women become possessed. Mostly Dalit women. Different castes now are worshipping Pandi … Brahmans never visit these deities, that is the problem. They [Brahmans] never allow us [Dalits] to come into the sanctum sanctorum of the so-called big temples. Periyar and Ambedkar have shown us how to eradicate all of these social evils … Apart from the Brahman community, all other castes in Tamil Nadu have their own family deity. But we [non-Brahmans, more specifically Dalits] are allowed to visit our family deity once in a year because of this institutionalized religion which is basically Aryan. We have begun to worship the gods that are imported from the Aryans. We are compelled to say that they are the real gods, but we are not allowed into the sanctum sanctorum, the caste rules are there. But you can easily enter into the Pandi Muni temple. All other castes have their own family deities, but the institutionalization of religion have made them worship only the grand gods of Aryan cultures. We are allowed to worship our own gods only once in a year on Shiva Ratri. We are alienated from our gods in an organized way … Pandi is a subaltern god.

Several aspects of Dr. Elangovan’s commentary on caste at Pandi Koyil particularly stand out. First, he points to the division between Thevar priests and Dalit temple-goers in the constituency of devotees at Pandi Koyil. Second, he suggests that Pandi, as “a subaltern god,” is an original deity of the non-Aryan, Dalit Tamil people. In doing so, he contrasts this Dravidian religion with the Brahmanical Aryan religion of “the so-called big temples.” This interpretation of religion draws heavily on the philosophy of E. V. Ramasamy, better know as Periyar, the founder of the anti-Brahman, pro-Dravidian Self-Respect Movement.  

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71 Many popular Dravidian political parties, including Jayalalithaa’s AIADMK, can trace their origins to Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement.
The types of distinctions Dr. Elangovan made between Dravidian versus Aryan religion were not explicitly mentioned by any of the people, either Thevar or S.C., whom I spoke with at Pandi Koyil, and it is possible that his articulate philosophical explanation is closely linked with his position as a highly educated professor and political activist. But, as Dr. Elangovan aptly pointed out, caste distinctions were evident at Pandi Koyil, even if the concept of caste was primarily evoked as part of an explanation of Pandi’s egalitarian grace. For example, Dhanalakshmi who is part of the Pandi Koyil priests’ family explained to me that Pandi, as a deity, does not discriminate based on caste. This sentiment echoed Dr. Elangovan’s point that people of all caste backgrounds “can easily enter into the Pandi Muni temple.”

During a conversation one day with Dhanalakshmi, the gray-haired woman sat on the ledge leading up to Pandi’s shrine inside the inner sanctum of the temple, periodically attending to approaching devotees by handing out the god’s vibuthi (sacred ash) in order to bestow his grace, while the younger male priests in her family formally attended to the rituals behind her. Dhanalakshmi’s husband is a direct descendant of Valliyammai - he is the grandson of the temple’s founding mother. On this occasion, Dhanalakshmi expounded to Hema and me on the particularities of how Pandi comes to possess some of his most intimate devotees. She explained the importance of being “clean,” emphasizing that Pandi will only possess people who maintain a very high level of ritual, biomoral purity. Dhanalakshmi told us that Pandi puts restrictions on his closest devotees, the ones

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72 I employ the term “biomoral” in the sense outlined by Diane P. Mines. Mines explains that biomoral is “a term widely used by scholars of Hinduism to depict the complex, dual nature of actions, events, and persons. It indicates that biological realities and moral codes are understood to be inextricably entangled; persons’ actions (meritorious or sinful, for example) affect their biological nature (sins stick to the body and change it), and likewise their biological natures (as defined by caste, birth, the gunas, and so on) affect their actions.” Mines, Caste in India, 85.
he chooses to possess, compelling them to keep themselves pure by avoiding “unclean” things and places. For example, according to Dhanalakshmi, people who get possessed by Pandi shouldn’t eat food from a house in which there has been a recent death, or if one of the household members have recently attained puberty, or if anyone in the household is currently menstruating. This list of factors that cause uncleanliness according to Dhanalakshmi reflect a common set of “impurities” often cited as necessitating a greater level of caution for persons attempting to maintain high levels of purity, and concomitantly, an increased need for purifying measures to be taken if such impure situations are encountered. I am not certain whether or not people who get possessed by Pandi actually follow such regulations, or if they are even aware that these injunctions exist, but Dhanalakshmi went on at great length about how Pandi compels those he possesses to follow such restrictions. She also commented that failure to do so would result in physical problems for the non-compliant devotees - they would fall sick or get some disease.

While strict adherence to regulations regarding purity and impurity are often associated with caste distinctions, particularly high caste concerns about coming in contact with low caste “pollutants,” Dhanalakshmi was equally adamant about Pandi’s non-discriminatory stance toward caste. In the same breath during which Dhanalakshmi underscored the importance of purity for Pandi’s devotees, she also spoke about how Pandi will possess people from any caste, that he does not discriminate against those he possesses.

73 The term “attaining puberty” typically refers to the rituals surrounding a young woman’s menarche, a time of great celebration in many Tamil homes, but paradoxically also a time of increased impurity and intensified taboos for the girl and her family members.

74 Such a view on the pure/impure binary and its relevance to caste is particularly associated with the classic work of the anthropologist Louis Dumont. See for example, Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).
chooses as his own based on caste, or even on their religious background. Dhanalakshmi explained that Pandi often appears to Muslims, requiring that they worship him or make animal sacrifices to him. She stated that even people of the Kuravar caste get possessed by Pandi. The Kuravar caste is often described as a very low ranking, “tribal” or “gypsy” community from the hills of Tamil Nadu who often make money by selling beads near temples and by tattooing. Dhanalakshmi’s commentary on the Kuravar caste was particularly telling as she noted that “even though people from this community never wash,” Pandi will nevertheless possess them. This statement is especially significant juxtaposed in the conversation with Dhanalakshmi’s vociferous explanations about the high level of “cleanliness” necessary for those people who Pandi possesses. In her reference to the Kuravar caste - a caste she mentioned with some distaste over their “unclean,” “unbathed” habits - Dhanalakshmi made evident that Pandi’s liberality toward caste trumped his cleanliness concerns. Pandi’s ambiguous character is evident in Dhanalakshmi’s statements - on the one hand, he is a fastidious god who demands intense levels of purity from those he possesses, yet on the other hand, he will freely possess people of very “unclean” caste communities who “don’t bathe.”

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75 I am not sure of the current official status of the Kuravar community, but I have heard that they are either considered or are petitioning to be considered a Scheduled Tribe (S.T.).


77 I was not able to speak to any people that self-identify as Kuravar (at least that I was aware of), so I am unable to comment on the way they view themselves, their relationship to Pandi, and his proclivity to possess members of their community. Nevertheless, Dhanalakshmi’s opinions about the Kuravar caste reflect a more widespread opinion that I heard from other non-Kuravar people in Tamil Nadu that this community are “tribal gypsies” who “do not bathe much.”
Dhanalakshmi’s example that Pandi possesses “even” members of the Kuravar caste was intended to demonstrate the deity’s non-discriminatory approach to caste. Her commentary also made reference to the second aspect of social diversity prevalent at Pandi Koyil: religious background. Throughout my period of research, I saw many Muslims at Pandi Koyil, praying to Pandi, bringing him offerings, and sponsoring rituals to glorify him. Muslim temple-goers were often recognizable by their clothing. The majority of Muslims that I noticed at Pandi Koyil were women, many of whom were wearing the long black gowns commonly worn by the younger generation of Tamil Muslims, or loosely wrapped head scarves.78 Other Muslim women were recognizable only by the absence of a pottu on their foreheads. The pottu, an auspicious mark generally made with kumkumam (a red colored powder) or a red or black colored sticker on the forehead is worn by all Hindu women in Madurai, usually whether they are married or not.79 Muslim and Christian women in Madurai can often be distinguished by their bare foreheads, even if the rest of their clothing closely resembles Hindu styles in other respects.80

78 The older generation of Muslim women in Madurai tend to wear saris like other Tamil women of various religious backgrounds, but they add a long white cloth draped around their body and head on top of their saris. With the increased connection to Islam in the Arabian Peninsula facilitated through business connections and migration, a greater number of younger generation Muslim women are adopting Arabic-inspired fashions, including black abayas (long, loose fitting gowns).
79 The North Indian bindi corresponds with the South Indian pottu, but in North India, the forehead marking is particularly associated with marriage and it is not common for unmarried girls to wear kumkumam. In contrast, in Madurai, almost all Hindu women of all ages and marital statuses wear pottu daily, and a very large proportion of men also wear kumkumam on their foreheads every day, or particularly after they have worshipped at a temple and received the red powder as a blessing from the temple’s goddesses.
80 This is particularly the case for Protestant Christian women in Madurai. Some Catholic women will wear pottu, even though the marking is generally associated with Hindus. Some Protestant Christians are adamantly opposed to the pottu. An American student doing research on Protestant Christians in Madurai once told me that a Protestant woman she interviewed claimed that wearing pottu “erases God’s plan for you.”
I spoke with a number of Muslim women at Pandi Koyil, including the family who had sponsored the above mentioned abishekam. At first, I assumed the abishekam-sponsoring family was Hindu, as they had paid for a huge and very elaborate ritual directly honoring Pandi through the bathing and dressing of his statue with costly items. This family was dressed in clothing typical for Hindus in Madurai, with all of the women wearing saris. During a pause in the abishekam, Hema and I approached the sponsoring family to ask them about why they were hosting this ritual. One young woman in the group responded that a son in their family was currently living in Connecticut in the United States and on his behalf the family had prayed to Pandi, seeking blessings. This son had recently received a promotion at his IT job and so his family back in his hometown of Madurai had sponsored the abishekam at Pandi Koyil to thank Pandi for his divine blessings. While speaking with these women, Hema pointed out to me that they were mostly not wearing pottu,81 and she suggested that we directly ask them why. They answered by telling us that they were not wearing pottu because they are Muslims.

While this Muslim family was drawn to Pandi Koyil to worship Pandi after he had bestowed a blessing on their son in the U.S., another Muslim woman I spoke with was compelled to visit the temple by Pandi’s more ferocious side. Habiba was perhaps in her 50s, and Hema and I struck up a conversation with her on one of my first days of research at Pandi Koyil after noticing her Muslim dress (a long black robe with a white shawl loosely covering her head). I was curious to learn why a visibly Muslim woman would be worshipping at Pandi Koyil. Habiba was extremely candid and launched into a detailed

81 I mention that they were “mostly” not wearing pottu because a few women in the group did have pottu on their foreheads. I’m not sure if the pottu-wearing women were non-Muslim family members or not family members at all.
story about her fraught relationship with Pandi. She explained that even though she is Muslim, she came to worship Pandi after traveling a few hours by bus from the Didigul area because Pandi had appeared to her in a dream the previous night. In this dream, Pandi had threatened that he would kill both of Habiba’s daughters-in-law and cause other people to blame their deaths on her unless she stepped foot in his temple. Habiba awoke from this dream, understandably shaken, and was unable to fall back asleep. Restless, she got up from bed, read the Quran, and prayed to Allah, but she remained very upset and still couldn’t sleep. She explained that to resolve this problem she decided to follow Pandi’s instructions and come all the way to his temple to satisfy his request.

Habiba told us that although she was born and raised a Muslim, she did have some previous connection with Pandi Koyil when, during her college days, she had a very close friend who used to come to the temple regularly. Habiba accompanied her friend to Pandi Koyil on a couple of occasions and witnessed her friend get possessed by Pandi while she was there. While possessed, Habiba’s friend rolled on the ground in the temple and was unable to walk. This experience apparently made a deep impression on Habiba, but after she became, as she put it, “more serious” about Islam later in life, she stopped coming to Pandi Koyil. The dream she had the night before I met her was what urged her to return to Pandi’s temple after many years.

When I spoke with my friend Rekha later on about the high number of Muslims I noticed worshipping at Pandi Koyil, her response was that they were all from formerly Hindu families who had only recently converted to Islam and that they were “confused.” Although it may be the case that some of the Muslims who visit Pandi Koyil are indeed recent converts to Islam, the newness of their conversion need not necessarily imply that
they are “confused” or somehow less committed to their new religious identity. At least in Habiba’s case, not only had she been Muslim her whole life, but her response to her dream in which Pandi implored her to visit his temple evidences a genuine effort to find resolution to this problem within a framework of Muslim practices, including reading the Quran and praying to Allah. But in addition to these practices, Habiba also chose to follow Pandi’s dream injunctions because of the dire consequences he threatened.

Clearly, the people who worship Pandi and frequent his temple come from a variety of caste and religious communities. The multiplicity of stories regarding Pandi’s origin complement the striking diversity evident in the social makeup of his devotees, although there is no neat overlaying of certain narratives with specific communities. The following chapter expands on this theme of multi-vocality by looking more in depth at the practices surrounding possession that take place at Pandi Koyil in which Pandi’s authoritative voice is dispersed among a variety of differently positioned persons.
Chapter 2: Possession, Relationship, and Authority

Deity Possession in Context

On any day of the week, during any time that Pandi Koyil is open, a visitor to the temple is likely to see or hear a woman become possessed by Pandi. Even on the quietest days when the temple is mostly empty except for the priests and other staff members, the calmness will be periodically ruptured by a high-pitched shriek, a peal of maniacal laughter, the rapid, panting breath of hyperventilation. On Tuesdays, Fridays, and Sundays, when the number of devotees visiting the temple swells to a huge crowd, the amount and intensity of possessions dramatically increase, as does the activity that congeals around individual possessed persons. Because of the frequency of instances of possession at Pandi Koyil, the temple is particularly associated with this phenomenon throughout Madurai, and it is one of the factors that initially peaked my curiosity during my first visit in 2009.

Possession is a relatively common aspect of religion in Tamil Nadu (and elsewhere in India), where it is often associated with certain deities and not others. Some gods and goddesses are known for possessing their devotees, and Pandi is one such deity. Another deity quite famous in the Madurai area for her proclivity for possessing humans is Bhadrakaliyamman whose popular temple in Madapuram right across the border from Madurai in Shivaganga District is the location of a crowded and very active weekly afternoon puja well known for its high rates of possession. Every Friday when the sun is

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82 Fridays are especially auspicious at Pandi Koyil (as they are at other temples in Tamil Nadu), and typically the greatest amount of activity takes place at the temple on this day of the week. Tuesdays are also generally considered auspicious in Tamil Nadu, so temple attendance is similarly high. Although Sundays are not particularly considered auspicious, as many people in Madurai are off work on this day of the week, they have time to visit temples and often do so in great numbers.
at its hottest, the Madapuram Bhadrakaliyamman temple is thronged by devotees, many of whom become possessed by the fierce goddess in a swelling, communal mixture of bloodcurdling screams and freely flowing tears accompanied by loud drumming as the temple’s non-Brahman priests officiate the *puja*. I have only visited the Madapuram Bhadrakaliyamman temple on Fridays so I am unable to comment on whether possession takes place there on other days of the week, but the style of possession that is common at Pandi Koyil seems more frequent and less regularized than at Madapuram. While at Madapuram possessions take place almost on cue when the drumming begins at the Friday afternoon *puja*, possessions seem to occur at more spontaneous moments at Pandi Koyil and are scattered throughout the day, both on Fridays and all other days of the week.\(^83\)

In addition to Pandi Koyil and the Madapuram Bhadrakaliyamman temple, I have also seen possession occur in the Madurai region at several *paal kudam* (milk pot) festival processions, at an Ayyanar temple, and in front of the Maha Muneesvarar shrine located on the northern outer wall of the Meenakshi Temple.\(^84\) It is significant that possession does not occur inside of Madurai’s most prominent temple, but only outside its boundary at a shrine whose incumbent deity looks out away from the interior of the Meenakshi Temple. Maha Muneesvarar, like Pandi Muneesvarar and Bhadrakaliyamman,

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\(^83\) One exception to this observation about the less regulated timing of possessions at Pandi Koyil compared to Madapuram was during the New Moon Day *abishekam* mentioned in Chapter 1. This special ritual was punctuated by loud drumming and ringing bells played by an electrical percussion machine that the priests activated via switch as each substance of the *abishekam* was poured over Pandi’s statue. The switch was turned off after the substance was poured and while the statue was being cleansed intermittently with water. During the entirety of the *abishekam*, but particularly while the drum machine was playing, many people watching in the crowd became possessed. This formal ritual accompanied by high levels of possession amongst watching devotees was reminiscent of the Friday *puja* possessions at the Madapuram Bhadrakaliyamman temple.

\(^84\) Possession is also associated with other deities popular in Madurai, such as Mariyamman and Murugan, although I have not personally witnessed possessions related to these deities.
is a deity who is likely to possess his devotees, at least some of the time or during special occasions. This is in sharp contrast to deities like Meenakshi, located inside Madurai’s main temple, and other deities associated with upper caste religiosity. Most people that I spoke with in Madurai consider possession a ritual activity that takes place exclusively at temples and festivals dedicated to deities whose officiating priesthoods are non-Brahman. Possession, along with other practices such as animal sacrifice and the presence of alcohol, non-vegetarian food items, and tobacco products as offerings, often mark deities as on the boundaries or totally outside of the orthodox Brahmanical religious fold.85

Dr. Elangovan spoke about the association of possession with lower caste communities during my interview with him. Commenting specifically on Pandi and other similar deities, Dr. Elangovan stated,

These small deities don’t come under the institutional religion of big Hinduism. These are the gods of the common people. They can go very near to the god. They can give things directly to the god, without the intervention of the priest. They can wash the god, bring their shawls and things to the god. The physical proximity and the mental proximity becomes very close between the woman and the male deity … When they are possessed, they are not in their usual mood, they are in a frenzied mood, and that gives them some kind of freedom to utter god’s words. Usually women who are in the lower social strata alone are the kind that have possession. Upper caste women don’t have this possessed way of worshipping Pandi. Because they are cultured and educated and they have their own way of giving. Only people who belong to the lower caste, they believe that god comes into them and that god can express himself or herself through them … Both Thevar and Dalit women become possessed. Mostly Dalit women … It is in their

85 While deities associated with such practices are often linked with lower caste communities and are not cared for by Brahman priests, there are numerous instances wherein shrines to this type of deity are physically incorporated into very important Brahmanical temples. In Chapter 1, I referenced the non-Brahmanical shrines to Maha Muneesvarar, Karuppanasamy, and Madurai Veeran that are embedded into the outermost wall of the Meenakshi Temple where these three kaval deivam act as guardians on the periphery. Another example in the Madurai region is the famous Karuppanasamy shrine located at the important Vaishnavite temple Alagar Koyil. For an early discussion of non-Brahmanical, “folk” deities in Tamil Nadu, see Louis Dumont, “A Structural Definition of a Folk Deity of Tamil Nad: Aiyanar the Lord,” Contributions to Indian Sociology 3 (1959): 75-87. For a more contemporary discussion of this type of deity in Tamil Nadu, see Eliza F. Kent, Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
culture, in their blood that makes them possessed. But the high caste, refined, divine women, they won’t be possessed because it is not in their culture.

Dr. Elangovan’s comments on possession at Pandi Koyil are exemplary of the ways many highly educated, English speaking people in Madurai discuss possession. In such an understanding, possession is a marker of low caste religious practice and is associated only with certain deities that are often viewed as somehow outside of the “mainstream,” upper caste Hindu pantheon.

Dr. Elangovan’s statement also draws attention to the idea that possession is a means of worshipping Pandi - a practice similar to other forms of making offerings. When Dr. Elangovan states that upper caste women do not get possessed, in part because “they have their own way of giving,” he not only underscores the caste stratified character of possession as a religious practice, but he also equates the possession experience to the act of giving, of making offerings as part of the worship of a deity. This aspect of Dr. Elangovan’s assessment matched well with what I encountered at Pandi Koyil, where possession was one amongst a number of material religious practices that connected devotees to Pandi through intimate exchanges of multiple substances, emotions, requests, and blessings, flowing between deity and worshipper. Such a context of the intimate relationship building that arises out of these types of exchange is crucial to the way I understand possession as it takes place at Pandi Koyil.86

People come to Pandi Koyil for a variety of reasons, but one common intention is to engage with Pandi through a reciprocal relationship of supplication and response. Devotees come to the temple in order to seek Pandi’s powerful intervention in their lives,

86 It is important to note here that while exchanges between Pandi and his devotees formed the conditions in which possession occurred, not all exchanges necessarily led to possession.
asking for blessings in general or beseeching Pandi to grant some specific request.

Pandi’s reputation is well established throughout Madurai as a powerful, efficacious deity, famous for his miraculous intercession and generosity in granting boons. Pandi’s jurisdiction, located between two of the city’s largest hospitals, makes his temple a prime location for those seeking physical healing, and it not uncommon to see devotees with crutches, slings, and neck braces worshipping in his temple complex. Pandi is known for curing multiple physical maladies and his speciality is often stated to be the reversal of incorrigible infertility, so a great number of devotees seek out his temple with the goal of pregnancy in mind. One Pandi Koyil priest explained to Hema and I that Pandi’s philosophy (tattuvam) can be summarized in the following maxim: Unmai peecanum, nondi nadakkanum, maladikku pillai pirakkanum - “The dumb will speak, the lame will walk, and the barren will give birth to a child.” Devotees seek these and other blessings through initiating an intimate relationship of exchange with Pandi - by bringing him offerings, making vows, asking for his help, and then returning to worship him in gratitude after he fulfills their requests.87 One of the most common patterns of interaction between devotees and deity at Pandi Koyil is in relation to vow making wherein people initially come to the temple to make their request to Pandi and promise to give him something in return if he fulfills their wishes.

The practice of making vows and Dr. Elangovan’s previously stated point that deities like Pandi are easily approachable without the institutional restrictions of more

87 It is not always the devotee who initiates a relationship of exchange with Pandi, however. Many people at the temple told me that they were there to worship Pandi because he had compelled them to do so by appearing to them in a dream and/or threatening them. Habiba, a Muslim woman mentioned in Chapter 1, is one example of a person who was forced to visit Pandi in his temple against her own wishes due to the deity’s forceful compulsion, rather than through her own desire to seek out Pandi’s blessings through making a vow.
formalized religious settings, are patterns characteristic of bhakti - religious devotion. While bhakti movements are prevalent throughout Indian religions in various regions, bhakti has its origins in South India, with many historians locating its roots in early Tamil love poetry. The mutual exchanges and emotional intimacy between deity and devotee characteristic of bhakti religiosity forms the context of ritual vows such as those taken at Pandi Koyil. The unmediated, intimate character of ritual vows has been emphasized by many scholars of South Asia. For example, Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman state, “as unmediated acts freely embraced and self-monitored by the laity, vows generally do not require or involve the participation of official ritual specialists either in their declaration or their execution. Nor do ritual specialists generally supervise or contribute to the efficacy of South Asian vows.”

Although Raj and Harman’s generalizations about ritual vows in South Asia mostly did hold true in what I observed at Pandi Koyil, and although formal ritual specialists such as professional priests were not primary agents in the making and execution of vows at the temple, I caution against assuming that such a “revers[al of] the structural hierarchy and traditional power relations” necessarily implies a lack of authority. Instead, I propose that vow taking at Pandi Koyil might be better understood as occurring within a complex of diffused authority. This diffusion of authority is inextricably linked to possession, a point I will take up in greater detail later. But before

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90 Ibid., 4.
addressing this, I will lay out a framework for approaching possession as it takes place at Pandi Koyil.

Theoretical Perspectives and Possession as Relationship

Throughout anthropological and religious studies scholarship, possession has remained a popular topic. Many different theories of possession have been offered by various scholars whose works span an immense range of cultural, religious, and geographic settings and time periods. Theories of possession as resistance to dominant power structures have been put forth in classic works by anthropologists such as Janice Boddy92 and Aihwa Ong.93 Diane P. Mines, whose ethnographic work is centered on religion in Tamil Nadu, similarly interprets possession as a means of resistance to caste-based oppression.94 In addition to these anthropologists, Dr. Elangovan also made reference to possession at Pandi Koyil as a type of resistance. During my interview with him, he offered the following assessment:

In a patriarchal society, there is a vacuum that is created where women cannot speak or express themselves. In this cultural space, women are compelled to have more male deities … because women have this ideological idea of chastity, they can only have their husband, so god becomes a replacement lover.95 That relationship with the male deity becomes more important. That is the psychological aspect … She can have a free contact with a male deity as a close lover or other thing. By filling that social silence or cultural silence, she can break that cultural silence by going very near to the male god. She can break that silence with male deities. Most of the Hindu women that go to these temples [like Pandi Koyil] and worship these male gods feel that they are free in the mode of worshipping the male deities. It is not an organized way of worshipping god, they can do it in any way. That kind of freedom is very necessary for a woman who is in patriarchal society. She is like a caged bird in her home, but she feels very free

95 In Chapter 3, I will address the type of erotic attraction between deity and devotee that Dr. Elangovan references here.
at the temple. That is the sociological reason … I consider that kind of possession of women is a neurological problem, I don’t find it as a religious aspect of things. They are made to believe that god has come upon them. It is a kind of unconscious retaliation of the way that they live. They think that when they are possessed they can say anything … That is one way of getting a higher position of being a possessed woman, because god gives her a kind of voice. So she becomes a superior woman among her own women. It’s only for a temporary time.96

Dr. Elangovan interprets the intimacy between devotees and deity, and particularly possession, as means for women living in an oppressive patriarchal society to express a level of freedom through receiving “a kind of voice” from Pandi that allows them to gain a higher social status not typically available to them. This reading of possession resonates in some ways with Boddy’s and Ong’s work. All three scholars highlight resistance as a primary aspect of possession as women utilize the possession experience to express opinions and behaviors not typically permissible for them.

Although Dr. Elangovan was not the only person I spoke with in Madurai who read possession in this way, and although some people at Pandi Koyil at times indicated that individual women were using possession to gain money and power, the theoretical lens of possession as resistance has its limitations and does not best describe what I observed at Pandi Koyil. Alternatively, my interpretation of possession follows from Saba Mahmood’s critique of the heavy-handed focus on resistance within liberal scholarship which assumes that all human subjects autonomously desire to seek freedom through the resistance of hegemonic norms.97 As Mahmood claims, such a focus on

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96 For a psychoanalytic interpretation of women’s experiences of possession similar to Dr. Elangovan’s, see Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), especially pp. 75-76, where possession is analyzed as a manifestation of a hysteric personality disorder.

resistance often obscures alternative modes of agency “that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion.”98 In order to avoid placing the undue weight on autonomous agency that theories of possession as resistance imply, I propose instead that possession at Pandi Koyil can be better understood as a type of relationship building that occurs between the deity and his possessed devotee. This relationship building is grounded in the mutual givings and receivings of the worship context in which possession occurs. In order to show how this might be so, I turn to some of the classical theories of “dividual personhood” in South Asia.

*Dividual Personhood and Substantial Exchange*

The concept of dividual personhood, as developed by anthropologists such as McKim Marriott and Ronald B. Inden,99 is of particular relevance to the cultural setting of Pandi Koyil and the types of exchanges and interactions between Pandi and his devotees that take place there. These scholars’ theories reveal an understanding of personhood that is better suited to interpreting possession at Pandi Koyil than one predicated on notions of possession as a form of resistance. In his classic theory, Marriott argues that Hindu transactions are built on a “biological substantialism”100 that mediates interactions between persons who are affected bodily by such relations. Marriott claimed that these systems of transaction and exchange arise from a specific conceptualization of personhood - what he labeled “dividual” personhood. Marriott states, “persons - single

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98 Ibid., 9.
actors - are not thought in South Asia to be ‘individual,’ that is, indivisible, bounded units, as they are in much of Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought by South Asians to be ‘dividual’ or divisible.” Of key importance within Marriott’s theory of dividual personhood are the varieties of mutually constituting substantial exchanges that occur between actors. He explains these bodily exchanges as follows:

To exist, dividual persons absorb heterogeneous material influences. They must also give out from themselves particles of their own coded substances - essences, residues, or other active influences - that may then reproduce in others something of the nature of the persons in whom they have originated. Persons engage in transfers of bodily substance-codes through parentage, through marriage … and through services and other kinds of interpersonal contacts. They transfer coded food substances by way of trade, payments, alms, feasts, or other prestations. Persons also cannot help exchanging certain other coded influences that are thought of as subtler, but still substantial and powerful forms, such as perceived words, ideas, appearances, and so forth. Dividual persons, who must exchange in such ways, are therefore always composites of the substance-codes that they take in.

In Marriott’s later work with Ronald B. Inden, they further emphasize the ways transactions between dividual persons are capable of transforming the actors involved as qualities and dispositions are transferred via the exchange of bodily substances - a process these scholars deem central to the formation of caste differentiation. What I wish to highlight here is the highly relational character of the dividual personhood model, wherein interactions between persons are what form and shape those same persons as qualities are transferred through the substances that travel from body to body. The relative unboundedness of human persons in such a conceptualization leaves them

101 Ibid., 111.
102 Ibid., 111.
103 Marriott and Inden, “Toward an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems.”
permeable and open to influence from external sources, such as the infiltration of deities or spirits.  

Theories of dividual personhood, like those delineated above, point to the importance of substance exchange in the formation of relationships between human actors. The anthropologist Sarah Lamb also draws attention to the significance of substance exchange to the building of relationships in the Indian village in West Bengal where she conducted ethnographic field research. Lamb explains that activities such as bodily touching, sitting on the same surface, and the cooking and eating of food were all activities deemed capable of transmitting qualities between persons by her Bengali research informants. She goes on to highlight the ability of such exchanges to forge relationships of intimacy between loved ones. Describing the formation of relationships, Lamb explains that a “pervasive dimension of the open and unbound nature of persons … had to do with seeking, cultivating, and intensifying mixings with kin, loved ones, friends, neighbors, things, and places.” This observation of Lamb’s responds to previous scholarship - particularly the work of Dumont - which focused on the avoidance of pollution through the strict surveillance of exchanges between persons of different castes. While Lamb concedes that concepts of caste asymmetry were at times present in the types of interactions she describes, she underscores the positive, relationship building capabilities that were often actively sought after by those engaging in such exchanges.

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104 For a similar application of the dividual personhood model to an understanding of possession in India, see Ann Grodzins Gold, “Spirit possession perceived and performed in rural Rajasthan,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 22 (1988): 40-41.


106 Ibid., 35.
The anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel’s ethnographic work in Tamil Nadu similarly points to the ways the exchange of fluid substances between relatively unbounded, permeable bodies leads to the formulation of interpersonal relationships, such as those between sexual partners and family members.\footnote{Daniel, \textit{Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).} Daniel’s work specifically addresses what he refers to as “the fluidity of enclosures in Tamil conceptual thought,”\footnote{Ibid., 9.} claiming that concepts of fluid boundaries are integral to Tamil cultural notions of personhood. Daniel extends his discussion on permeable boundaries past the category of human actors alone. Within Tamil epistemological frameworks that deal with the boundaries between people and things, Daniel identifies a variety of different fluid boundaries, including “the boundaries of a village, the walls of a house, the skin of a person,”\footnote{Ibid., 9.} and the territorial soils of various regions. Daniel investigates how substances are deemed to flow between humans and non-human entities included houses and village soil, and how these different locations affect the bodily substance of persons who are born in them or who reside there.

As suggested by Daniel, renderings of bodies and persons as relatively fluid and the potential of substantial exchange to affect bodies and forge relationships of intimacy need not apply only to interactions between human actors. It is also possible to view the transactions of substantial exchanges of the possession experience as in line with the concept of dividual personhood raised by scholars like Marriott, Inden, Lamb, and Daniel. Within this context of understanding transactions between persons, the multiple
exchanges of worship and possession can be seen as capable of transforming bodies, forming persons, and creating relationships between devotees and the deities they worship. Although anthropologists such as James Laidlaw\textsuperscript{110} stress the importance of ideologies of non-reciprocal gift exchange in India, the type of giving and receiving common to the worship of Pandi Muneesvarar is best understood using Marcel Mauss’\textsuperscript{111} classic theory of gift exchange as an activity that compels reciprocity and facilities the ongoing formulation of relationships between givers and receivers. The fluid boundaries between givers and receivers within Tamil understandings of the body necessitate that such transactions will be impactful and relationship forming. The following section looks in greater detail at the specific types of reciprocal exchanges most common at Pandi Koyil. As Shivani, a sweeper at Pandi Koyil once explained, Pandi is the type of god who asks for things: he asks for his devotees to give something to him or do something for him if he agrees to fulfill their prayers. Both giving and receiving are clearly integral to the relationships between Pandi and his devotees. 

\textit{Substantial Exchange at Pandi Koyil}

On days of great activity at Pandi Koyil, the air of the temple is redolent of heady tobacco smoke and pungent lime juice excreted from some of the most common offerings devotees bring to Pandi. As is typical at most temples in Madurai (and elsewhere in India), devotees often arrive in the inner sanctum with their hands full of items to present before the deity. At Pandi Koyil, people purchase many items to offer in the marketplace surrounding the temple’s main entrance, or at small shops within the temple’s walls.

Devotees often carry plastic baskets laden with flower garlands, coconuts, incense, and bananas. They also carry plastic bottles filled with milk or rosewater to hand the priests who splash the liquids onto Pandi’s statue. Pandi is especially known for his love of sweet smelling things and is therefore frequently offered sandal paste, musk oils, and fragrant jasmine flowers. Pandi is said to love all types of fruit and vegetable offerings and particularly enjoys sugary foods like the cakkarai pongal - sweet rice and lentil pudding - ubiquitous at his temple.

While Pandi is known for loving sweets, one of the most common food offerings devotees bring to him are in fact sour: limes. There are several ritual weapons planted in the main, large hall of the temple, outside of but facing in toward Pandi’s shrine. These weapons include tall aruval (long swords with a curved blade used for cutting coconuts and often wielded by kaval deivam) and several sulam (tridents). The points of these weapons are always capped with limes as devotees thread the small fruits onto the sulam prongs and aruval tips, citrus juice dripping down and coating the floor as more and more limes are pierced onto the metal bars. I’ve heard it said that all weapons must have a victim, and so to appease the bloodthirsty aruval and sulam, limes are offered as substitute sacrifices, cooling the weapons’ bloodlust and assuring that they don’t seek any human victims to wound. The area where Pandi’s weapons are displayed is one of the

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112 Not only does Pandi like sweet smelling things, but he himself is also said to smell sweet. Dhanalakshmi, an elderly lady in the priests’ family, explained that sometimes it is possible to sense Pandi’s presence at locations other than his temple if one catches a scent of sandal paste or rosewater. These sweet smelling fragrances indicate that Pandi has been there, even if he can’t be seen.

113 The citrus fruit offered to Pandi is called elumicchai pazham and is a small, spherical fruit with a yellowish green rind that tastes like a mix between a lemon and a lime. Sometimes the English word “lime” is used to translate the Tamil word for this fruit, and sometimes “lemon.” Elumicchai pazham are considered potent remedies for warding off tirushti - the evil eye - and can often be seen submerged in a glass of water or dangling above doorways for this purpose. This fruit is also frequently considered “cooling” and is commonly offered to deities that are considered “hot” or fierce, such as Pandi and ferocious goddesses like Kali and Mariyamman.
most active places within the temple complex as the site where a great number of devotees make their offerings to Pandi. While many offerings are presented before Pandi’s statue within the inner sanctum, crowds of people also throng the *aruval* area on busy days where they gaze toward the main shrine, pray, light small clay lamps, smash coconuts, and leave other items for Pandi as part of their worship.

Pandi also has a special affinity for *saruttu* - small cigars. Devotees can purchase *saruttu* in the marketplace in front of the temple. A flat stone at the foot of the *aruval* and *sulam* serves as a surface where devotees pile the cigars they bring for Pandi atop a lapping camphor flame. Pungent tobacco smoke thickens the air as the *saruttu* slowly burn down to ash. Some devotees stoop to collect the black ash from this stone, smearing the cigar residue on their foreheads as a marker of Pandi’s grace. On some occasions, particularly on Fridays, possessed devotees will smoke the *saruttu* offered to Pandi - the deity enjoying his much beloved tobacco through the medium of his devotees’ bodies. The use of tobacco is fairly uncommon and generally looked down upon in the wider cultural setting of Madurai, particularly for women. Because of this, Pandi’s taste for cigars and his possessed devotees’ occasional practice to partake in smoking mark this aspect of the material practices at Pandi Koyil as rather transgressive. People worshipping Pandi will also sometimes bring glass bottles of alcohol as offerings, and although it is fairly uncommon, I did see some alcohol poured out on the ground near the *aruval* area as well as one possessed woman drinking while dancing in the temple.

The *aruval* area where devotees leave smoldering cigars, limes, and burning lamps, abuts a small *mandapam* festooned with bits of fabric knotted around its pillars and crossbeams. This is where married couples who are having difficulty conceiving
solidify vows to Pandi in order to procure the much desired blessing of a child. Couples can purchase wooden replicas of cradles called *tottil* (sometimes containing small clay babies or tiny images of the god Krishna) that they hang from the *mandapam* in hopes of receiving a child in return from Pandi. More common than the toy wooden cradles are makeshift ones crafted from a strip of cloth torn from the border of the wife’s *pallu* - the length of fabric on the end of a woman’s sari that typically hangs down the back or is tucked in at the waist. After cutting the cloth from the woman’s *pallu*, the couple wraps it around a lime to fill the “cradle” with a “child,” ties it to some part of the *mandapam*, and proceeds to rock the lime, miming the action they hope to soon perform on a real baby.114

As mentioned previously, Pandi loves sweets, and one of the most common offerings devotees bring him is *cakkarai pongal*. This sweet rice preparation is made within the temple itself in two sheds specifically designated for this purpose. Four rows of small niches for making wood fire stoves line the cooking sheds at the back of the temple’s main hall. Devotees who have made a vow to offer Pandi *pongal* if he grants their prayers bring vessels and ingredients from their homes to the temple in order to cook this dish. The cooking of *pongal* in temples as an offering to deities is one of the primary features of religion as it is practiced in Tamil Nadu,115 and along with head

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114 Offerings of cradles and strips of cloth as a magical fertility aid are extremely common in Madurai (and elsewhere), and are by no means limited to Pandi Koyil. Most often, this type of offering is tied onto sacred trees within or near temples to deities of all types - both at Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical temples. Similar offerings consisting of bangles tied to trees with strips of cloth are left by unmarried women who are praying for husbands. In addition to the posts at the *mandapam* near the arval area inside the main part of the Pandi Koyil temple complex, a sacred tree with a large amount of cloth and wooden cradle fertility offerings is located at the Samaiyan Karuppasamy shrine in the back.

115 Cooking *pongal* at home and offering it to Surya, the sun god, is the main ritual of the most important holiday in the Tamil calendar - Tai Pongal - a harvest festival celebrated at the beginning of the Tamil month Tai. During the Tai Pongal holiday and at other times when *pongal* is cooked in temples, when the pot’s contents boil over the vessel’s lip, women make a characteristic ululating noise known as *kulavai idutal*. This moment of boiling over is considered particularly auspicious. Ululation marks not only this auspicious moment in relation to the cooking of *pongal*, but is also particularly associated with possession.
tonsuring and the worship of the family’s *kula deivam* on the holiday of Shiva Ratri, was often identified by people I spoke with in Madurai as one of the essential elements of Tamil religion. Devotees who prepare *pongal* will often distribute it to others who are congregated at the temple and eager to eat the delicious sweet, or they may leave a serving on a banana leaf plate on the ground in front of the inner sanctum. In addition to the *pongal* cooking sheds, the temple complex contains designated *mandapams* for head shaving and ear piercing - two more typical offerings that devotees vow to perform for Pandi if he satisfies their prayer requests. Other, more costly offerings, including sponsoring elaborate rituals like an *abishekam*, paying for a feast distributed free of cost to temple-goers, and the gifting of large brass bells, are also options for devotees who wish to supplicate or thank Pandi for his blessings.116

One middle-aged woman encountered at Pandi Koyil particularly embodied the attitude of supplication with which many devotees come to this temple. On a relatively quiet Monday afternoon, the woman who had apparently come to the temple alone sat on the ground near the *aruval* and *sulam* where she faced toward Pandi’s inner sanctum and wept silently. As she cried, she wrapped the *pallu* of her sari across her body so that the loose end rested on her lap. Holding a corner of the fabric in each hand, the woman spread her *pallu* into an open “bowl” across her thighs. She then stood up and proceeded to circumambulate the small *mandapam* in front of which Pandi’s weapons are displayed, holding her *pallu* in both hands all the while. This gesture is known as *madippicchai*

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116 Animal sacrifice is another extremely common type of offering prevalent at Pandi Koyil which I will address in greater detail in Chapter 3.
ketpadu, which literally translates as “lap beg asking,” referring to the woman begging for something to be put into her lap where her outstretched pallu could collect the food or money donation. Friends of mine in Madurai later informed me that this gesture may be performed as part of a vow that a woman might undertake in order to get some desired end where she goes from door to door, begging for rice or coins to fill her “lap” - the cloth begging bowl of her sari pallu. A friend shared an example of the kind of vow a woman might take involving madipicchail ketpadu wherein she may promise a beloved deity that she will go on a pilgrimage to their temple, funding the trip by first going around begging, vowing to only use the money she is able to collect in her lap to pay for the travel expenses. Alternatively, she may perform such a vow in order to get a good husband or to bear children. Because this gesture implies an attitude of supplication and a desire to receive something to fill her lap, performing such a motion in a temple in front of the shrine positions the woman as a beggar before the deity, imploring Pandi to please be generous with her.

And based on the increasingly popular reputation of Pandi Muneesvarar in Madurai, he is indeed known for being generous with his devotees. Pandi reciprocates in a number of ways to the vows and supplications of those who come to his temple. The most obvious way that Pandi is said to respond to his devotees is through fulfilling their prayerful requests, distributing blessings, and offering protection. I heard innumerable

117 Although no one I spoke with about this gesture explicitly linked it to fertility (despite the fact that some listed receiving a child as one of the possible outcomes a woman performing this gesture might desire), there does seem to be a connection between the desire to “fill the lap” and fertility. In addition to meaning “lap,” the Tamil word madi also translates as “womb,” and is also the word used to refer to an animal’s teats. For an example of a similar practice, called “pouch-filling,” performed by women in rural North India for the explicit purpose of fertility, see Ann Grodzins Gold, Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 150-154.

118 During my period of field research, I also observed other women performing the madippicchail ketpadu gesture at another temple in Tamil Nadu - the Swaminatha Swami Murugan temple in Swamimalai.
stories about Pandi’s potent intervention in the affairs of his devotees and the countless ways that he enhanced their lives. Many people spoke of how Pandi had helped them or their family members secure jobs, find suitable marriage partners, conceive children, and heal from motor vehicle accidents. One young woman named Kumari with whom I became quite close went on at great length about the prolific blessings Pandi had showered on her. Kumari is in her early 20s and works in a small stand selling puja items and snacks inside Pandi Koyil located near the sacrificial yard. All of Kumari’s close family members, including her husband, younger sister, younger sister’s husband, and both parents, work in various capacities linked to the temple, mostly employed in shops located within the temple complex.

Kumari expressed her deep faith in Pandi and his efficacious power as she spoke about the many ways he has demonstrated his favor and protection to her and her family. Kumari related a story about how when she was younger, she worked selling flowers in a shop at Pandi Koyil. During that time, she took a particular liking to a young man who also worked in the same marketplace. She fell in love with him and prayed to Pandi to get the man she fancied as her husband. Kumari proudly related how she had a love marriage\(^\text{119}\) at the age of 15 to the man she chose, a favorable outcome that she attributed

\(^{119}\) Arranged marriage remains the norm in Madurai, although there is an increasing amount of love marriages, or combination love/arranged marriages that take place there. A love marriage typically refers to one in which the husband and wife decide that they want to marry one another without their parents initially making the choice (whether or not the family later approves). A combination love/arranged marriage is what some people call a marriage wherein the couple has an interest in one another first, but then they refer to their parents in order to see if the marriage would be a good match based on caste, class, astrological compatibility, and other factors. Although Kumari and most of the other people I spoke with at Pandi Koyil who are employed at the temple would not be considered middle class, love marriages are becoming more common particularly within the burgeoning middle class in Madurai and elsewhere. For more on marriage practices and their relationship to class in Madurai, see Chapter 7, “Marriage: Drama, Display, and the Reproduction of Class,” in Sara Dickey, *Living Class in Urban India* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 144-177.
fully to Pandi’s blessing. After her marriage to her chosen partner, Kumari then prayed to Pandi to first give birth to a son - an outcome that Pandi bestowed on her. After the birth of her son, Kumari again turned to Pandi to pray for a daughter, and this too happened exactly as she asked. Kumari expressed that whatever she wants and prays for, Pandi gives it to her. In order to show her thanks to Pandi for his blessing her with two children, Kumari allowed the deity to choose her son and daughter’s names by presenting slips of paper with several choices before Pandi and waiting to see which slip came up on top. Both of Kumari’s children have compound names that include the word “Pandi.”

Kumari explained that she somehow always makes enough money in her shop to support herself, even if there are not many people at the temple buying things - another blessing she attributes to Pandi’s favor. Kumari spoke about how Pandi always takes care of her and her family financially, even when it seems unlikely that they will make money. As the foundation of her family and the source of her livelihood, Pandi and his temple are deeply intertwined with Kumari’s material and social wellbeing. Kumari emphasized the special care and protection that Pandi gave her family in contrast to all other deities. She told a story about how once she and her husband went with their children to visit the temple of their *kula deivam* (their family’s “clan deity” who is not Pandi Muneesvarar). They were traveling by motorcycle and while going over a speed bump, the bike was thrown out of control. Kumari’s baby daughter fell from the motorcycle and was “dashed on the ground.” Seeing this, Kumari fearfully thought that her child would surely die. But

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120 Many people I spoke with at Pandi Koyil and also in Madurai more widely have names that include the word “Pandi,” whether they are women or men. This is a very common way for parents to honor Pandi for helping them conceive and to show their devotion to him. I have heard that some younger generation girls whose names include the word “Pandi” sometimes complain about having such “old fashioned” names, wishing instead that they had more fashionable, pretty names.
due to Pandi’s miraculous intervention, her daughter - who was temporarily unconscious and badly cut - eventually healed completely. While telling this story, tears welled up in Kumari’s eyes as the painful memories came back to her. Kumari’s gratitude to Pandi was palpable as she pointed out the complete failure of her own family’s kula deivam to protect them, even when they were on their way to worship this deity. In contrast, Kumari emphasized that although she often leaves her two children completely unattended at Pandi Koyil as they run about playing while she tends to her shop, they never get even so much as a scratch or a bruise as they roam about within Pandi’s protective eyesight.

In addition to the types of blessings and miracles that I have listed above, there are several other ways that Pandi engages in intimate, relationship building, substantial exchanges with his devotees. One way is through the medium of food. As mentioned earlier, Pandi Koyil temple-goers often bring food offerings like pongal, fruits, sweets, and milk for Pandi. But Pandi also feeds his devotees. Every day of the week without fail, there is a free feast for the first fifty people who line up at the dining hall within the main temple building at Pandi Koyil. This lunchtime meal distribution is known as annadanam which literally translates as “food/rice donation,” and is at least an occasional feature of many temples throughout Madurai and elsewhere. The daily annadanam at Pandi Koyil is funded through a number of means, including the money that is collected in the temple hundial (cash donation receptacle), and by private donors who have promised to sponsor a feast as part of a vow or to commemorate a special date like a marriage.

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121 I am not certain with what frequency free annadanam feasts are held at other temples in the city, but it is usually a feature of holidays, festivals, or other special events (like marriages, anniversaries, and so on).
122 Money that is collected in the hundial is used toward general temple expenses and upkeep, while the money placed on the arati plate (which holds a small dish for burning camphor and piles of sacred ash for distribution to devotees) used in the worship of Pandi in the inner sanctum belongs to the priests who are currently on shift.
birthday, or death anniversary. The *annadanam* is prepared by cooks who are specially hired for this purpose, while other temple staff members including sweepers and security guards also help out with the food preparation and clean-up. Many of the Pandi Koyil staff partake in the *annadanam* on a regular basis, although I noticed that temple staff members ate separately after the general temple-going population finished.\textsuperscript{123}

Dhanalakshmi once told Hema and me that no one who comes to Pandi Koyil should go away hungry and for this reason devotees generously share the food offerings they bring for Pandi with other people, even those who are strangers to them. Similarly, it is for this reason that the *annadanam* is regularly hosted at Pandi Koyil - to feed the hungry devotees.

One further substance that flows from deity to devotee holds a particularly prominent place in the material practices prevalent at Pandi Koyil. This substance is Pandi’s *vibuthi*\textsuperscript{124} - sacred ash. *Vibuthi* is a mass produced powdery ash that is widely distributed in temples throughout India as a form of *prasadam* (the deity’s “grace”). *Vibuthi* is also often smeared on the body in various places - markings which sometimes denote religious or caste affiliation.\textsuperscript{125} In Madurai and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, *vibuthi*...
as a substance tends to be associated with certain deities rather than others. The deity most widely associated with the white, powdery ash is the pan-Indian god Shiva, although many other deities also give out ash at their temples.

*Vibuthi* is often paired with another powdered substance regularly distributed at temples - *kumkumam*. In contrast to *vibuthi*, *kumkumam* is a vivid red color and it is traditionally prepared from turmeric and lime. Most of the people I spoke with about these two substances associated *kumkumam* with auspiciousness, goddesses, and women. In Madurai, the Meenakshi Temple is particularly famous for its production of *kumkumam* and pilgrims to the the city from other parts of India often make a special point to purchase Meenakshi *kumkumam* during their visit. In many Tamil temples like the Meenakshi Temple that contain two distinct shrines for consort male and female deities, *kumkumam* is almost exclusively handed out by priests attending to the goddess. If the temple is Shaivite, the priests at the male god’s shrine typically distribute *vibuthi*.126 While there are indeed some goddesses who give out *vibuthi* in the Madurai area (most notably, Kali, like at the Madapuram Bhadrakaliyamman temple), when directly asked, people I spoke with in Madurai always associated *vibuthi* with male gods and/or masculinity.127 Kaliyamma, an elderly woman in the priests’ family explicitly

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126 At Tamil Vaishnavite temples, while *kumkumam* is always handed out at the goddess shrines (usually known as Thaayar, “Mother,” shrines), the priests at the male god Vishnu’s shrine dole out *tulasi* (sacred basil) and/or *tulasi* infused water - not *vibuthi*.

127 My friend and research assistant Hema offered me her own personal interpretation of the difference between *kumkumam* and *vibuthi* and its gendered associations. According to Hema, *kumkumam* represents blood and can be linked to women’s menstrual cycles, thereby symbolizing fertility. In regards to *vibuthi*, Hema offered an interpretation that, because it is made from ashes, it is a reminder from god that things will not always be as they are, that eventually you will die and turn to ashes. Following from this interpretation, Hema said that while women tend to be more concerned with issues of fertility and children, linking them primarily to *kumkumam*, men are in greater need of a reminder of their own mortality, linking them instead more closely with *vibuthi*. In practice, (Hindu) men and women in Madurai often wear both *kumkumam* and *vibuthi* on their foreheads.
stated about Pandi, “He is a male god who keeps [wears] a mustache, therefore he gives *vibuthi* only.”

Pandi’s *vibuthi* has a number of important characteristics. As a substance flowing from Pandi to his devotees, it has the ability to effect real changes in the lives and bodies of the people it comes into contact with. The Pandi Koyil priests distribute *vibuthi* to the devotees who filter through the inner sanctum, either by placing a handful into their cupped palms, or less regularly, by directly applying a smear of it onto their foreheads. Devotees at Pandi Koyil (and at other temples) eagerly await the distribution of *vibuthi* which they often take home with them after folding the powder into neat paper packets. Some people ingest a pinch of the ash, or rub the excess on various parts of their bodies. A friend of mine once instructed me to refrain from wasting any *vibuthi* given to me at various temples, informing me that I should rub my hand containing leftover *vibuthi* residue onto the bare skin of my stomach beneath my sari. The contact that a deity’s *vibuthi* has with the bodies of their devotees creates a channel through which blessings are able to flow. Kaliyamma once explained that when people come to a temple, they cannot leave without getting something (a statement reminiscent of Dhanalakshmi’s regarding hungry devotees and food mentioned above). Because of this need for temple-goers to receive something, Pandi gives out *vibuthi* as *prasadam*. Kaliyamma also stated that Pandi’s *vibuthi* carries within it and then transfers the god’s *arul* - grace - to the devotees.

128 This is a translation of the Tamil phrase, “*Ivaru aambalai kadavul micai vaichirukkaarula atanala ivaru vibuthi tan koduppaaru.*”
129 Both the words *prasadam* (from Sanskrit) and *arul* (Tamil) literally mean “grace.”
At Pandi Koyil, Pandi’s *vibuthi* is lauded as having potent healing properties and is used to effect cures for illness and injury. After badly cutting my wrist in a motorcycle accident toward the end of my period of field research, many people at Pandi Koyil instructed me to regularly apply Pandi’s *vibuthi* onto my arm to aid in a speedy recovery, and the older woman Kaliyamma who was officiating that day at the Andicchami shrine generously rubbed ash all over my bandaged forearm. The magical properties\textsuperscript{130} of Pandi’s *vibuthi* to effect healing were at times referred to by the Tamil word *magimai* which translates literally as “power, glory.” Pandi’s *vibuthi* also has potent properties as an antidote against *pey* (ghosts) and *kaattu karuppu* (literally, “black wind,” euphemistically, evil spirits) - and multiple devotees at the temple told me that they apply it to their foreheads every night before sleep to ward off such malignant influences.

The power of Pandi’s *vibuthi* that is capable of protecting people from the infiltration of *pey* and driving evil spirits out of a person’s body also has an adjacent yet somewhat paradoxical effect: the application of *vibuthi* is the primary means by which devotees who are possessed by Pandi exit a state of possession. No matter how lengthy, ferocious, or active a possession by Pandi may be, as soon as a priest in the inner sanctum at Pandi Koyil smears *vibuthi* on the possessed person’s forehead, Pandi is said to exit their body. The touch of *vibuthi* stills the violently jerking motions of the possession experience, often leaving the person reeling and visibly dazed as their bodies cool down, calm down, and deescalate from the rigors of possession. Sometimes women in the most

\textsuperscript{130} *Vibuthi* - although not that which is specifically distributed by Pandi - may have alternative magical potencies as well and the word *vibuthi* can be used as a euphemism for black magic. For example, I once heard a possessed woman at Pandi Koyil offering a prophecy to another woman who had come to inquire about family problems. The possessed woman told the inquiring devotee that someone from the inquirer’s husband’s family had dropped *vibuthi* in her home which was the source of the problems. In this case, *vibuthi* “having fallen” in the devotee’s home was an indicator of an evil charm wreaking havoc in her life.
intense throes of possession would refuse to let the priests touch them with *vibuthi*, shying away from their ash covered fingers in order to prolong the possession. So while, on the one hand, Pandi’s *vibuthi* signals a bond between deity and devotee, acting as a conduit for Pandi’s healing power, his sacred ash is also the catalyst for a stark break in the proximate intimacy of the possession experience, the touch of which causes Pandi to exit the bodies of those he has entered.

This is not the only connection that Pandi’s *vibuthi* has to possession. Although *vibuthi* is typically regarded as a means of ending possession after it is applied onto the forehead of a possessed person by one of his priests, not all physical contact with *vibuthi* seems to work in this way. A large number of people whom Pandi possesses offer prophecies to other devotees and inquirers. These possessed persons, speaking from the perspective of Pandi himself, often hold onto packets of *vibuthi*, using it to anoint the foreheads of those coming to ask the god questions, or sprinkle it over those to whom they are offering council. In such cases, the touching of *vibuthi* in and of itself does not draw Pandi out of the bodies of the possessed, but instead acts as a means for Pandi within their bodies to transmit his blessings to other, non-possessed devotees who have come to inquire from him.

I have now detailed a number of ways that the intimate bonds between Pandi and his devotees are forged. Relationships of intimacy arise out of the multiple substances, prayers, and blessings that flow back and forth between deity and devotee in reciprocal substantial exchanges between dividual selves. As I suggested earlier, possession can also be understood as one such substantial exchange that forms a particularly intense link in the chain of relation between Pandi and his closest devotees. During possession, Pandi
enters within certain people, altering them in deep, embodied ways. This interaction is made possible because of the relatively unbounded, permeable quality of the human person and its subsequent susceptibility to substantial change based on its mixings with others. In the following sections, I will look at the phenomenon of possession at Pandi Koyil more closely, showing the way it creates intimacy between deity and devotee, how it effects changes in the bodies of the possessed, and eventually turning to a discussion of the contested aspects of possession and the way it creates a multiplicity of authoritative voices.

**Possession at Pandi Koyil**

As a regular feature of the religious practice that takes place at Pandi Koyil, possession is not only a daily occurrence in the temple, but it is also deeply intertwined with people’s perceptions of Pandi and the reasons that they seek him out (or choose to avoid him).\(^{131}\) Pandi is a deity who, while he is often characterized as ferocious, directly engages with and responds to his devotees. A level of intimacy and efficacious communication is ascribed to Pandi’s relations with his devotees - a feature of his temple which was almost always mentioned to me when speaking to members of the wider

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\(^{131}\) According to the people I spoke with, most of the possessions that take place at Pandi Koyil are caused by Pandi himself, as he is a jealous god who typically doesn’t tolerate the presence of other powerful entities in his temple or allow them to possess his devotees (a point I will return to in Chapter 3). But there are instances wherein people at Pandi Koyil are said to be possessed by other entities, particularly ghosts and evil spirits, and Pandi is known for his ability to help heal such troublesome possessions. On several occasions, I did see people who were said to be possessed by malevolent spirits, including one young woman who, when questioned, revealed that the ghost of her recently deceased close friend was possessing her. In addition to ghosts and evil spirits, I also heard people at the temple reference instances when other deities and important ancestral figures would possess people at Pandi Koyil. These other beings included Samaiyan Karuppasamy (the deity in the back of the temple complex) and Valliyammai Patti (the founding “grandmother” of the temple). I am not aware of having seen anyone be possessed by Valliyammai Patti, but on a couple of occasions, women who were staff members at the temple pointed out a few women that they thought might be possessed by Samaiyan Karuppasamy. Because most of the possessions I saw at Pandi Koyil were said to be caused by Pandi himself, I will focus on this type of possession throughout this thesis.
Madurai community about my research. Countless people, including regular Pandi Koyil temple-goers and others, commented to me that Pandi’s power is readily available to those who worship him, that the people who frequent his temple have fervent devotion to him, and that he is famous for answering prayers. As described in the preceding section, the exchanges of substances, prayers, vows, and blessings that flow between Pandi and his devotees form the backbone of this intimacy. But such exchanges are common at many temples within Madurai and elsewhere in India and therefore do not necessarily set the intimacy Pandi achieves with his devotees apart. Instead, it is Pandi’s habit of possessing his devotees at such a high rate and with such great frequency that serves to underscore the closeness of his relationships forged through substantial exchanges.132

But Pandi does not possess all of his devotees - far from it. Many people that I spoke with at Pandi Koyil directly stated or else implied that Pandi is extremely selective in choosing the people that he will possess. There is certainly a gender bias in Pandi’s choices, with the vast majority of people who become possessed by him being women. In Chapter 3, I will address in closer detail the erotic dimensions of possession and Pandi’s gendered preferences, but for now it will suffice to say that women (of ages ranging from teenage to quite elderly) form the great bulk of possession cases at Pandi Koyil. Men do sometimes get possessed by Pandi, and the possessed men I saw at the temple often exhibited particularly pronounced symptoms of possession and were sometimes considered by other temple-goers to be even more fearsome than their women.

132 Based on my experience in Madurai but without concerted research into this topic, it seems that most of the other instances of possession by deities that happen in the Madurai area are generally linked with special occasions and festivals rather than as a daily occurrence. As mentioned previously, the Madapuram Bhadrakaliyamman temple poses somewhat of an exception to this observation with at least weekly pujas at which possession is prevalent, but to the best of my knowledge, Pandi Koyil is the main temple (and perhaps the only temple) in Madurai where possession occurs at such a high and non-regularized rate.
counterparts. But possessions of men took place much less frequently - primarily only on the busiest days such as Friday.

Many people at Pandi Koyil stressed the great intimacy that possession creates between Pandi and the devotees he chooses to come to. For example, Selvi - the woman who works in a small puja items shop within the temple complex who explained one of Pandi’s origin stories to me - emphasized how possession was a marker of devotional status. Selvi is related to the priests’ family as her younger sister is married to one of the temple priests, and a number of her close relatives work in shops in and around Pandi Koyil. Selvi spoke about how her entire family, every single member whether a man or a woman, gets possessed by Pandi. She explained that possession was a matter of how close a person is with Pandi, that he chooses whom to possess based on their level of intimacy with him. Selvi also firmly ascribed the agency of this choice to Pandi when she told Hema and I that the powerful deity might choose to possess a person whether or not the person was aware of it. Indeed, many people who have been possessed by Pandi at one point or who regularly become possessed by Pandi do not recollect their possession experiences and only come to know that they have been possessed by Pandi afterwards when their family members tell them what has happened. This is a pattern common in other ethnographic accounts of possession in various regions. But during my field research, I found that many people did in fact remember their possession experiences and were able to talk about them fluently and willingly. Interestingly, people at the temple

133 While some people claimed not to remember being possessed and other people spoke freely about their own experiences of possession, yet others were shy to speak of possession at all, answering somewhat reluctantly that yes they get possessed by Pandi, before then changing the subject. Below, I address in greater detail the stigmatization of possession which is one of the main reasons I assume some people were reluctant to admit that they sometimes get possessed.
almost always emphasized that it was Pandi who made the decision to possess someone and that once he made such a choice, there was little or nothing the devotee could do about it.134

One extremely interesting exception to this rule was the story told to me by Shivani - a middle aged woman employed as a sweeper at Pandi Koyil. Shivani was a wealth of information about Pandi Koyil as she had been regularly coming there since she was a little girl when the temple still had a thatched roof, and her current employment saw her at the temple pretty much seven days a week. Shivani described her level of intimacy with Pandi as something that exceeded the deity’s agency to possess her. Shivani articulated a closeness with Pandi that gave her the ability to refuse to be possessed by him. Shivani’s story also reveals the flip side of possession by Pandi - while on the one hand it indicates closeness and a certain status as Pandi’s own chosen ones, on the other hand, possession is often highly stigmatized and feared, even within the Pandi Koyil temple community itself.

When Hema and I first asked Shivani about whether she gets possessed by Pandi, she initially said yes, then replied no. To explain this seemingly contradictory answer, she launched into a story. After the birth of her eldest child - a daughter who is now in her 20s - Shivani came with the new born baby to Pandi Koyil for the first time following her delivery. As Shivani held her baby daughter in her arms, she felt herself starting to become possessed by Pandi. Other people surrounding her at the temple were urging Shivani on, encouraging her to get possessed and attempting to further induce the

134 This was not the case for everyone though. One woman who is a Pandi Koyil staff member once boasted to me that she regularly gets possessed by Pandi and is capable of controlling the possession. She said that she could induce possession whenever she wanted to. This woman’s family worked preparing the meat from chickens offered in sacrifice at the temple.
possession in her. They goaded her, asking, “Do you want to dance?” referring to one of the most common verbal terms for possession. Unable to resist, Shivani did become possessed at that time, but it was the only time Pandi ever possessed her. After this first and only possession experience, Shivani made a firm decision that she did not want to get possessed by Pandi, so she prayed fervently to him that he would agree to refrain from possessing her again in the future. Shivani felt so intimately attached to Pandi and was afraid that if she were to continue to get possessed by him, her family might bar her access to the temple due to the social stigma often associated with possession. Shivani feared that if Pandi were to possess her again, rather than bringing them closer, it would sever them apart if she was no longer allowed to see him in his temple on a regular basis.

In addition to the potential threat of being forbidden to visit Pandi Koyil if she became possessed again and her family disapproved, Shivani also expressed that she chose not to allow Pandi to possess her because she felt the responsibility of her young family and newborn daughter. She worried that being possessed by Pandi would interfere with her ability to lead a happy married life. It was a common trope echoed by many at Pandi Koyil and elsewhere that women and young girls who become possessed are somewhat of a liability for their families. If they are unmarried, it could prove exceptionally difficult to find a husband for them, and if they start to become possessed after marriage, it could potentially cause problems with their husbands as Pandi was deemed exceedingly jealous and likely to actively interfere with his chosen devotees’ ability to lead a happy married life.135 The underlying concern for Shivani was that being possessed by Pandi might cause a rift in her relationships - both with Pandi himself if she

135 In Chapter 3, I return to the notion of Pandi as a jealous deity and the way this aspect of his character affects his sexuality and people’s perception of who he possesses and how.
was restricted by a worried family from coming to Pandi Koyil, and with her husband. As Shivani was paradoxically encouraged by those around her to fully enter into a possessed state on the occasion after her daughter’s birth, yet worried that her family would disapprove of further possessions, she was required to creatively reinterpret possession - which is usually considered a marker of the god’s intense intimacy with certain devotees - as the very factor that could sever the close ties she cherished between herself and Pandi.

Shivani explained that Pandi answered her prayers and ceased possessing her entirely after that first experience. Instead, Pandi devised an alternative way to ensure Shivani’s closeness to him other than through possession - he secured a job for her in the temple where she now works every day as a sweeper, collecting the broken coconuts that devotees smash in the temple as offerings to Pandi to sell for oil. Shivani reminisced about how as a little girl, she used to enjoy coming to Pandi Koyil, taking *darshan* from Pandi, and eating the delicious *cakkarai pongal* and fresh coconut offered to him. Later as an adult, Pandi agreed to not interfere with Shivani’s ability to take his *darshan* in a state free from possession while providing her an opportunity to see him daily, as he also arranged for her to subsist off the money derived from her work in the temple.

Shivani’s story offers an alternative perspective on the intimate relationship building potential of possession while also beginning to reveal some of the complexities of possession and its contested status at Pandi Koyil. While Shivani’s story does exhibit alternative ways that certain devotees can create extremely close relationships with Pandi outside of the possession experience, it also hints at the fact that possession is indeed a type of intimacy that is so close as to be almost dangerous - capable of breaking apart
happy marriages and necessitating intervention by scandalized family members.

Although possession is typically valued as a bestowal of the god’s *arul* (grace) on his chosen devotees, it is by no means an unproblematic intimacy.

Articulating a similar point, the anthropologist Lucinda Ramberg beautifully demonstrates the central role of “trouble” in the intimate relationships between the South Indian goddess Yellamma and her closest devotees, *devadasis* - the women who have been given to the goddess in marriage and who subsequently act as her ritual specialists.136 In Ramberg’s account, although *devadasis’* intimacy with Yellamma is marked on their bodies and in their lives in ways other than through possession, the goddess is perceived as present within her *devadasis* in a manner similar to how possessed devotees at Pandi Koyil are viewed by others as manifestations of Pandi. Ramberg demonstrates how the dedication of girls to the goddess Yellamma is an act intended to resolve some trouble brought on by the goddess, but this act is often the beginning of yet further troubles, particularly for gender and kinship. Dedication to Yellamma troubles relationships, even as it ties the *devadasi* to the goddess in the most intimate relationship of all.

The following section addresses the bodily effects of possession, many of which contribute to its troubling nature and the reason it is often feared and stigmatized, even for people within the communities for which it paradoxically holds the greatest importance.

*Possession in and on the Body*

The closeness of the possession experience, like other exchanges that occur between dividual persons, has the capability of producing embodied effects and marked changes in typical, socially sanctioned bodily comportment. I begin this discussion of the bodily symptoms of possession by first addressing the multiple terms used for this phenomenon in the Tamil language, most of which highlight the physicality, movement, and proximity to the deity inherent in the possession experience.\(^{137}\) One of the most common terms for possession in Tamil is *saamiyaattam* - literally “god dance,” with possessed people described as “dancing,” or labelled “god dancers.” At Pandi Koyil, possession sometimes takes the form of rhythmic steps that resemble a dance to music, although more often than not, the motions of people possessed by Pandi appear rather sporadic and do not follow patterned dance movements. Referring to possession as a dance especially highlights how the experience plays out on and through the bodies of the possessed. Another euphemistic term for possession in Tamil similarly draws attention to its physical exertions. The phrase *malai eridicchu* - “the mountain has been climbed” - refers to a possession having come over a person, peaked at its highest level of intensity, and then subsided.

Other Tamil terms for possession suggest the imminence of the deity who is present in the possession. *Saami vantatu* - “god came,” and *arul vantatu* - “grace came,” both refer to a possession having occurred. The deity and the deity’s grace have come; come upon the devotee and into their bodies, transforming them temporarily into the deity during the duration of the possession. One Muslim woman I spoke with at Pandi Koyil used a particularly beautiful expression to describe to me that she gets possessed by

\(^{137}\) For an ethnographic account of possession in India that looks particularly at linguistic terms used to identify possession experiences, see Wadley, “The Spirit ‘Rides’ or the Spirit ‘Comes.’”
Pandi, saying “Pandi en udambila irukkiraar” - “Pandi is there inside of my body.” My friend Pushpakkala similarly referred to possession by the English phrase, “Pandi will come into their hearts.” One further common term used by the people I spoke with at Pandi Koyil to refer to possession was *pidikkiratu*. This extremely common word refers to “liking” something and is the typical verb used to describe to others that you “like” a certain item. But this verb has other, related meanings as well, including “to grab” and “to catch.” When a person likes something, it is because that thing grabs their attention, it catches them. Possession was referred to by saying that the deity grabbed or caught the devotee, a statement that also implies that the possessed person “likes” the deity who in turn has chosen to “catch” the devotee. The use of this verb both suggests an intimacy of affection between the deity and the possessed devotee, while it simultaneously places the agency on the deity’s ability to grab and catch.

The religious studies scholar Mary Keller takes similar note of the types of verbs used to describe possession in her development of a theory of possession that pays

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138 A similar but negatively valenced term, *adikkiratu* - hitting, striking - is used to refer to a possession caused by an evil spirit or ghost. So while a deity “catches” a person, an evil spirit “hits” them. There are instances wherein people at Pandi Koyil are possessed, not by Pandi, but by a ghost or evil spirit, and it is the task of the people around them to determine the identity of the possessing entity. Different people at the temple gave me various explanations for how it is possible to tell the difference between a possession caused by Pandi versus one caused by a bad spirit. One of the most common ways people claimed that these different types of possession could be determined was whether the person would prophesy - only people possessed by Pandi were able to give prophecies (although many people possessed by Pandi do not prophesy). Furthermore, when asked, evil spirits possessing a person will often speak, revealing their names and identities to the questioners. Other people told me that people possessed by evil spirits may be unable to enter into the inner sanctum at Pandi Koyil, or will be unable to pierce a lime onto the points of the *sulam* (tridents) planted in the temple’s main hall. Susan S. Wadley similarly notes a difference in terms for possession in Uttar Pradesh that correspond with the type of possessing entity as either malevolent or benevolent. Similar to what I found at Pandi Koyil, Wadley explains that ghosts and evil spirits “‘ride’ or ‘adhere’ to victims,” while beneficent deities “‘come to’ their oracles.” Wadley, “The Spirit ‘Rides’ or the Spirit ‘Comes,’” 235-236.
particular attention to the locus of agency and its complex repercussions. In identifying that various terms to describe possession cross-culturally tend to emphasize the action of the possessing entity while the possessed person’s body and consciousness are overcome, Keller puts forth a theory of what she terms “instrumental agency” to describe the possessed person. Keller writes,

The terms used by possession traditions to describe the dynamic of the possessed body include mounted, played, pounced, wielded, emptied, and entered. Reflecting on these terms, the most fundamental analysis of the agency of the possessed body is that it is instrumental in the possession. Consciousness is overcome, and the body is used like a hammer or played like a flute or mounted like a horse so that the possessed body is an instrumental agency in the possession.

Possessed persons at Pandi Koyil are indeed “instrumental” in many ways, particularly when they speak as and for Pandi himself, telling prophecies and giving advice - a point I will return to below. But first, I will describe what happens to the bodies that dance due to Pandi’s coming.

Possession as it occurs at Pandi Koyil is almost always marked by two things - motion and sound. Possessed women sway, hop, skip, leap, shake, tremble, fall to the ground, jump up and down, run in circles around the temple, contort their faces, raise their arms above their heads, clasp their hands, alternately bend and straighten their elbows, fold their tongues and press them against their teeth, whip their hair, jerk their heads back and forth, push past onlookers, stumble and fall into people standing near them, open their bulging eyes wide, and slap the inquiring devotees who surround them. In addition to the frantic, often strenuous movements exhibited during possession, the

140 Ibid., 74.
surreal, frightening noises that accompany these activities are ubiquitous. A hissing susurrati
suspiration is one of the most common noises possessed women make, interspersed with sharp intakes of breath or gulping belches. This strained breathing often escalates into a fast-paced panting or even hyperventilation. Heavy breathing is accompanied by long moans and is often pierced by agonized screams. Possessed women yelp out, make rhythmic emissions of sound and garbled speech, weep profusely, or throw their heads back with resounding peals of laughter. They may shout out partially incomprehensible words, especially as they face Pandi directly in his inner sanctum. I heard some possessed women in this area scream out variations of phrases like “I have come!” “You have brought me here!” and “I am being tested!” Possessed persons also boldly speak prophecies to the countless devotees who seek them out for advice and for commands flowing directly from Pandi himself - an aspect of possession so important that I will treat it in isolation below.

In commenting on the intense rigors of the possession experience at Pandi Koyil, Dr. Elangovan offered the following evocative description:

The first moment of the possession, the woman doesn’t care about her own being, how she appears, the dress isn’t in its right place. Her hair becomes totally loose. Her conscious mind doesn’t work. She doesn’t care about physical alienation, and also mental alienation gives her a kind of strangeness to her appearance. The face becomes very angry as if she is a drunken woman. The words don’t come in a coherent way. Single words and some kinds of eerie sounds come from her mouth. But those too have some kind of meaning to them. It is those around them that decode those things. It is the onlookers who give the meaning to the utterances of these frenzied women.

Even amongst the communities in which possession takes place, it creates a spectacle, and it was extremely common at Pandi Koyil for the family members accompanying possessed women to try their best to contain the possession by adjusting the woman’s
slackened clothing so as not to expose too much of her body, supporting her from falling, or even laughing awkwardly, eyes darting about in embarrassment as Pandi present within their mother, wife, or daughter caused such a scene. Possessions, particularly the loudest and most intense, unfailingly drew stares from the crowds of other devotees at the temple, even though possession was so common there. The only people who hardly even glanced up when an ear-splitting scream rent the temple’s atmosphere were the staff members like sweepers and shopkeepers, and the priests who seemed totally unfazed by the possessions and responded simply by administering vibuthi to calm the possession at the proper moment.141

The dazzling spectacle of possession contributed, not only to the demonstration of divine power, but also to its often disparaged reputation. Attitudes of embarrassment, censure, and skepticism often surrounded possession. While possession was usually interpreted by Pandi Koyil temple-goers as the genuine presence of Pandi within the bodies of his possessed devotees and treated respectfully, it nevertheless inspired ambivalent opinions due in part to the drastically atypical bodily comportment it caused in women. One of the dangers of possession was certainly what it did to women’s bodies, threatening to expose them as clothing became loose and shifted about, revealing glimpses of legs, bellies, hips, and breasts typically wrapped in more layers of fabric. A possessed woman I saw at Pandi Koyil on one occasion was stomping back and forth in a rhythmic shuffle, both arms extended erect over her head. As she moved and her arms jerked, the length of sari fabric neatly folded over her chest kept slipping and tugging,

141 See Gold, “Spirit possession perceived and performed in rural Rajasthan,” 40, for a description of spirit possession as “commonplace and non-spectacular.” With a slight modification, I would say that at Pandi Koyil, possession is “commonplace but spectacular.”
revealing the front of her blouse underneath. The blouse is a part of a Tamil woman’s daily dress similar in some ways to a bra as it is worn beneath the sari, and the blouse’s front part is a portion of the outfit which is always covered while in public. The older lady accompanying this possessed woman, possibly her mother, extended her own hand to smooth and adjust the disheveled sari on her companion every few moments throughout the entire time the possession lasted, working hard to keep the possessed woman’s decency in check.

The anthropologist Kalpana Ram’s work on possession and women in Tamil Nadu draws attention to the drastic bodily changes the possession experience initiates and the contrast that such alterations pose to the typical, socially sanctioned bodily comportment of proper women. Ram writes:

Possession represents at once a break with a woman’s ordinary natamurai [comportment] and a behavior that assumes its drama only against the invisible backdrop of that ordinary, day-to-day discipline … From the perspective of spectators, the ordinary comportment of a woman remains alive and salient as the horizon against which the behavior of the present becomes interpreted as “possession” … [In some instances of possession] the changes may be spectacular. The sari is transformed from a modest garment to the gear of an athlete, ready for the strenuous dancing and acrobatics that will follow … The hem of the sari is hitched to the waist, occasionally by carers, as the women turn into acrobats. Language, which must normally express the restraints of femininity, now expresses coarse and foul abuse. Deference to mothers-in-law, to elders, to saints, and to men generally is transformed to vilification. The female body runs, jumps, leaps in the air, shins up pillars, and makes men afraid. As one man described it to me, women suddenly possess “the strength of tigers.” These transformations naturally take center stage.  

Ram’s description of possession in Tamil Nadu that so closely resonates with my own observations at Pandi Koyil is by no means the only example of the socially transgressive

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implications of possession - a theme that has been well articulated throughout the anthropological literature.143

At Pandi Koyil, among the various aspects of possession that were viewed with an ambivalent mixture of reverence and suspicion, none was both as highly valued and as hotly contested as prophesying, an activity to which I turn my attention in the following section.

*Prophesy and Pandi’s Multiple Mouths*

At any time at Pandi Koyil, a possessed person may transition from the largely incoherent noises of screaming, yelling, and panting, to directed speech. Possession by Pandi is often marked by a specific type of speech known as *arul vaakku solradu* or *kuri solradu* - “saying grace statements,” or “saying prophecies.” The *kuri* (prophecies) that are told by people possessed by Pandi are a key feature of the temple, particularly on its busiest days. Especially on Fridays when Pandi Koyil is crowded with people, the area surrounding the *aruval* and *sulam* weapons is thronged by devotees eager to speak to Pandi through the mouths of his possessed devotees. Although prophecy telling may take place in various parts of the temple complex, it almost always coagulates around where Pandi’s weapons are planted. This area is located in the middle of the temple’s main, central hall, and it directly faces toward the inner sanctum. Separating the *aruval* area from the inner sanctum are the metal railings delineating the *darshan* queues, but the space from which possessed people prophesy is close enough to the inner sanctum that while standing there, Pandi’s large statue can be seen within his shrine. Many non-

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possessed devotees circulate around this area, often waiting patiently to meet with particularly popular or active prophecy tellers. It seems that many devotees come to Pandi Koyil, in large part, to converse directly with the deity through his possessed devotees.

When a person is possessed by Pandi, they are generally regarded as a manifestation of Pandi himself and are typically treated with reverence by onlookers who approach them to hear prophecies. Devotees inquiring about their prophecies will often touch the feet of the possessed, and address them with respectful terms like Ayyah - “Sir” - and Appa - “Father.” Devotees seem to always use masculine terms of address when speaking to those who are possessed by Pandi, even though the possessed people are almost always women. The words that the possessed women utter are Pandi’s own as they speak from his perspective. For example, they may refer to Pandi Koyil as “my temple,” and instruct the devotees around them who are seeking blessings to “bring me” any number of offerings, from limes to animals for sacrifice. Possessed women speaking as Pandi will often chide the people requesting some favor from the deity, asking with a cocky tone, “If I do this for you, what will you do for me? What will you bring me? Will you cheat me?”

On one occasion, a possessed woman addressing an inquirer asked, “If I get you a good marriage, what will you get for me?” The inquiring woman who was asking about the marriage prospects for her daughter responded to Pandi’s question by saying, “What do you want?” Pandi, speaking through his possessed devotee, replied with a haughty tone, “You’re able to get me whatever it is that I want?” Chastened, the inquiring woman

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144 There are instances wherein possessed people will address Pandi directly as if they are speaking to him rather than from his perspective as him, although most typically, possessed people speak as Pandi himself.
retorted, “You know we may not be able to get it for you.” Willing to accept these terms, Pandi responded, “Ok, then after you have found a match, come back here and tell me and I will tell you at that time what you can do for me.” Pandi then went on to give clues to the mother seeking a marriage for her daughter on how to find the right groom - he would be the only son in a household with four daughters, in a family in which the father is still living but the mother has died. Many of the conversations between possessed people and inquiring devotees follow a similar pattern to this one, forming the first link in a chain of ongoing, reciprocal relations of returning to the temple and bringing offerings. In such a relationship, both parties - Pandi and the devotee - are held to their ends of the bargain.

The language of prophecy telling provides some insight into the relationship terms established between Pandi speaking through the possessed and his non-possessed, inquiring devotees. Possessed women offering prophecies address the inquiring devotees using informal pronouns and verbal forms, while the inquiring devotees always use the respectful forms - language that indexes the higher social position of the possessed person who is actually the deity during the duration of the possession. This unilateral pattern of respect flowing from the non-possessed devotees who have come to seek prophecies toward Pandi in his multiple forms of different possessed persons remains in place even if the normal linguistic conventions observed between the individuals involved is drastically altered. For example, non-possessed men inquiring from significantly younger, possessed women will use respectful linguistic forms even if they typically would not do so with the same woman if she was not possessed. Similarly, parents will address their possessed daughters (or sons) using respectful language in a
way that entirely disrupts quotidian speech habits wherein familiar terms of address are typically used for younger family members.

Temple-goers ask about many different topics when they address people possessed by Pandi for prophecies. They make inquiries about jobs for themselves or family members, get information about what they must do for Pandi in order to have him heal some illness, ask about marriage and children, and seek to discover what is the root cause of any current obstacles or problems they are facing in life and how best to remove it. Sometimes, people ask Pandi about extremely personal matters. Due to the public setting of the inquiries, onlookers may gather around and listen to the at times intimate conversations occurring between inquirers and the possessed. One prophecy session that attracted quite a large crowd that I saw at Pandi Koyil was between a possessed man and a woman who had come to seek Pandi’s advice. The possessed man was seated on the floor in the main hall behind the *aruval* area where he was rapidly moving his torso around and around in a circle, periodically chewing on half sections of lime, spitting out the rind and pith as he spoke. His voice was loud and attracted a lot of attention from the many people who were gathered on that busy Friday. The possessed man told the woman who had approached him that her husband was not being faithful to her and was seeing another woman. He explained that the cheating husband had ceased coming to his wife and was no longer affectionate with her, all because of this other woman. Pandi assured the distraught wife that he would seek out her husband’s mistress and possess her. Pandi
also instructed the wife to leave an egg and a lime as offerings in the name of Pandi at midnight at a *mucchandi* - the magical meeting point at the crossing of three roads.145

The topic of marital infidelity came up multiple times during prophecy sessions. The following example is drawn from a conversation between a possessed, older woman, and a younger woman, perhaps in her 30s. Earlier on that day, I had seen the younger woman become possessed, but while she was inquiring from the elderly woman, she was no longer herself in a state of possession. The inquiring woman was weeping profusely and had an anguished expression on her face. The two women were speaking loudly and drew the attention of a small crowd of onlookers standing near the *aruval* area. The younger woman was telling her troubles to Pandi present in the older woman, explaining that her husband had taken a second wife - a situation that was extremely upsetting to her. The younger woman spoke about how she had taken a vow to not enter within the inner sanctum at Pandi Koyil because her husband had this other family now and she was extremely angry with Pandi for not being good to her as he had allowed her husband to be so unfaithful. The slighted wife was using her refusal to enter into the inner sanctum as a means of protest against what she deemed was Pandi’s unjust treatment of her. The distance she was establishing between herself and Pandi by refusing to enter into the inner sanctum at his temple seemed particularly marked because she was otherwise quite close to Pandi - earlier in the day she had been possessed by him and was offering prophecies from his perspective to other devotees. Hearing these troubles, Pandi responded through the older possessed woman. He told the younger woman that she

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145 The magical location of a *mucchandi* is an ideal place for warding off evil spirits who may be confused by the multiple pathways converging at one point. Many people in Tamil Nadu smash watermelons at such junctions in order to dispel and appease evil spirits and ward off *tirushti* - the evil eye.
absolutely needed to go inside of the inner sanctum and worship him there, asking how
could her problems be solved if she was choosing to stay away? Pandi explained to the
younger woman that she must first get his blessings by going inside of the inner sanctum.
Through this exchange, Pandi was requesting the younger woman to renew her devotion
to him by ending her protest of separation. Only then could her sorrows be rectified.

Countless examples of similar exchanges occurred during my period of field
research, as the active bonds between Pandi and his devotees were forged in part through
the prophecy telling common to the possession experience. In addition to the intimacy
between devotee and deity that possession and prophesying created, these phenomena
were also contested terrain. When Pandi’s voice can be heard in so many different
mouths, it causes many people to question which prophecies are genuine and which are
faked. More broadly, the entire phenomenon of possession was also contested by many
Pandi Koyil temple-goers. While I did not hear anyone at Pandi Koyil ever suggest that
all possessions were fake (as some people from the wider Madurai community sometimes
claimed), many people at the temple were wary of certain instances of possession.

Prophesying was an integral aspect of the contested line between what was *unmai* -
“truth” - and what was *chumma* - “waste.” 146

One of the most immediately visible ways that devotees at Pandi Koyil showed
uncertainty about possession was through their laughter, judgmental stares, and

146 The word *chumma*, sometimes *summa*, is a flexible term with a wide semantic range used in spoken
Tamil. One of its common colloquial uses is to indicate the word “just,” as in “just kidding” or “just
pretending.” Amongst the many definitions of *chumma/summa* listed in the *Cre-A Tamil to English
Dictionary* are “without any purpose or motive,” and “without any use.” It is in this last sense, of “without
any use” that the people I spoke with at Pandi Koyil used the term to describe some possessions as
“useless,” “worthless,” or as Hema translated it - “waste.” *Kriyaavin Tarkaalat Tamil Akaraati (Cre-A
more on the distinction between “true” and “false” possessions but in a North Indian context, see Gold,
“Spirit possession perceived and performed in rural Rajasthan,” 42.
comments while waiting in the line to take darshan. A very characteristic aspect of possession at Pandi Koyil is that women who are in the throes of possession are able to surge through the darshan line, pushing past the other patiently waiting, non-possessed devotees to skip ahead to the inner sanctum. As the wait-time in the darshan queue often exceeds a half hour, especially on busy days (I once waited for more than one hour from start to finish), many devotees patiently waiting their turn to stand before Pandi in his inner sanctum looked at the possessed people pushing past them with amused and sometimes annoyed skepticism. It was quite common for people to make side comments that such possessed people were faking it in order to cut the line and get inside the inner sanctum more quickly. This perspective on the opportunism of possession was heightened by the fact that many possessed women were closely followed by their husbands or other family members who pushed ahead through the open space their possessed companion forged in the crowd. I even heard one man waiting in line jokingly suggest to his wife that she should get possessed so that they could move forward more quickly.

As the narrow pathways for the darshan lines are railed in by shoulder-height metal posts, the waiting can get quite cramped. Possessed women often knock into the queued devotees that they press past, inadvertently hitting people with their flailing arms, stomping on their feet with their rhythmic steps, and even once knocking the glasses off an older man’s face. But not everyone at Pandi Koyil was disturbed by the possessed women’s ability to cut ahead in line. I once saw a small verbal dispute break out after a group of young men waiting in the darshan line were teasing a possessed woman who was attempting to push past them. The men were chuckling and trying to obstruct her
passage. Seeing this, a non-possessed woman standing nearby in the line chastised the younger men, questioning them why they wanted to act in such a manner, blocking this possessed woman’s way? She then urged the young men to allow the possessed woman to pass by unobstructed, which they reluctantly did.

Despite the looks of annoyance and periodic expressions of distrust regarding the truthfulness of possession displayed by some temple-goers, the sheer quantity of devotees who sought out the special attention, blessings, and prophecies of the possessed suggests that a large number of people at Pandi Koyil regard possession with a high level of respect. It is very possible that some people hold multiple attitudes toward possession simultaneously, sometimes disparaging it, while approaching it reverently at other times. Furthermore, it is certainly clear that many people regard specific instances of possession with great faith, while calling out others as completely bogus. The coexistence of and creative tensions between multiple opinions regarding possession have been treated by Ann Grodzins Gold in reference to spirit possession as part of folk theater performance in the North Indian state of Rajasthan. Similar to what I observed at Pandi Koyil, Gold states, “on stage, as in life, spirit possession may be mocked or venerated, faked or genuine.”

Many of the temple staff members that I spent most of my field research days with were quite eager to comment on the reality or falsehood of specific possessions. This group of women who included Shivani, Kumari, and several others, were employed in the temple as sweepers and shopkeepers, and were well versed in the many different types of possessions that take place at Pandi Koyil. Because they were in the temple on

147 Gold, “Spirit possession perceived and performed in rural Rajasthan,” 36.
almost all days, they were able to observe which possessed people regularly came to the
temple and how their possessions differed from each other and from day to day. I never
saw any of the women in this close circle of temple staff members get possessed,
although I heard several of them claim that it happens to them regularly or has happened
on at least some occasions.

This group of women were particularly critical of two regulars at the temple who
they claimed were complete frauds. One of the supposed fakes my friends pointed out to
me was an older woman with a shaved head who I saw almost every day at Pandi Koyil.
She was typically rather quiet in the way she exhibited possession symptoms, yet she
actively engaged in prophesying on a regular basis. She would often meet with inquiring
devotees, working to heal them or rid them of malevolent influences by rotating limes
around their bodies, splashing water and milk on their faces to scare away evil spirits, and
squeezing lime juice and sprinkling vibuthi onto their ailing limbs. The group of temple
staff members would tease this woman with the shaved head, telling me that she was only
pretending to be possessed and prophesy in order to make money by soliciting donations
from the inquiring devotees that approached her. Kumari would at times even play tricks
on her by hiding her bag when she wasn’t looking.

Another woman this group of temple staff pointed out as a power hungry fraud
came to Pandi Koyil on every Friday during my period of field research. She typically
wore a red sari and had a fierce, commanding expression on her face. Although she never
moved about in the typical way that possessed people at Pandi Koyil do, she had a loud,
barking voice that spoke with great authority to the many devotees that would gather
around her. This woman would regularly smoke cigars brought as offerings to Pandi - an
activity that would only be tolerated by a woman in public in the case of possession. But the group of women I spoke with did not at all believe this red-clad woman to be possessed. They were certain she was totally *chumma*, a complete fake eager for the power and money she collected from the many devotees gathered around her.

My first encounter with the woman in the red sari occurred before I knew that my friends at the temple regarded her as a fraud. Hema and I saw a huge crowd of devotees thronging around this woman whose demeanor was surely arresting. We decided to approach her to ask for our prophecies. We first fell at her feet, then stood before her to hear what she had to say. She spoke to us for some time, asking me whether in the near future I would be in this jurisdiction or elsewhere. She concluded by instructing me to offer an animal sacrifice at Pandi Koyil and to return to her, bringing five limes. Shortly after this encounter, Hema and I went back to our regular spot, sitting with the group of temple staff women by the wall near the *aruval* area where they were stationed to periodically collect the broken coconuts into sacks for selling, and where I could get a good view of the possession and prophesying activity. The group of women explained to Hema and I that the red-clad woman was a cheat. They explained that she comes to Pandi Koyil regularly to siphon money from the devotees eager to hear Pandi’s prophecies. They warned us that if we would just watch a little longer, we would see her sitting around, collecting money from the devotees she had earlier instructed to return to her. They also explained this woman’s crafty side-hustle: she would invariably instruct every devotee that heard her prophecies to return bearing five limes which she would then secretly hand over to a woman selling limes out of a basket inside the temple for resale - the money from which the two clever women would split. Every time I saw the woman in
the red sari, she was indeed instructing the inquirers surrounding her to return with money and five limes.

Kumari explained how she first discovered that the woman in the red sari was a charlatan. Kumari laughed as she told us how one day after her marriage and the birth of her children, she decided to test the woman. Kumari was wearing what she called “modern dress” - a kurta top and leggings - and she had hidden her thali (marriage necklace). Dressed in this way, Kumari approached the other woman, asking for her to speak her prophecy, inquiring particularly about when she would be married. The supposedly possessed woman told Kumari that there was a dosha - a harmful defect that can be caused by negative planetary influences, the evil eye, etc. - on her that needed to be removed. She explained that it was this inauspicious blockage that was preventing Kumari from being married. The prophesying woman demanded that Kumari bring her offerings, including five limes, two goats for sacrifice, a small amount of silver, and other items, and only then would the dosha be effectively removed and Kumari would be able to find a husband. Hearing this prophecy, Kumari was convinced that the woman was a faker and a cheat as the woman in the red sari had concocted the prophecy falsely only after seeing Kumari’s dress and assuming she must be unmarried. The group of temple employees also told a story about how once they had seen this same false prophetess faking a possession and acting in a very active, ferocious way. She was moving around wildly and pushed a small boy dangerously close to a fire of burning offerings. Shivani, Kumari, and the others were so outraged seeing this that they chastised the woman in the red sari, chasing her around with brooms as a punishment.
After hearing all of these stories about the falsehood of specific instances of possession, I was curious to ask this group of women their opinions about which possessions were real and how to tell the difference. They gave me a number of explanations, firmly asserting that a falsely possessed person will merely be trying to cheat people and will accept money from other devotees. In contrast, someone who is genuinely possessed will never ask for money as they are compelled in that moment by Pandi to speak the prophecies they are uttering and are not doing so as a living. Furthermore, the activities of the possessed person’s body will attest to the reality of their possession, with real possessions coming on fast and strong. A truly possessed person will be very ferocious with loud screaming, wild jumping, and an all around intense exhibition of energy. But despite the intensity of such true possessions, they will be short lived - they come on strong and end quickly. In contrast, the people who come to Pandi Koyil and appear possessed for great lengths of time, or who station themselves in the aruval area for hours, telling prophecies nonstop, are certainly faking it in order to get money. One woman in the group of temple staff members, pointing out the woman in the red sari, explained, “People who are truly possessed won’t dance for this long. The god will come, shake you, and go. It will get over soon.”

The women employed as temple staff members were not the only ones skeptical of fakers and cheats. On one occasion, I saw a Pandi Koyil priest go up to scold both the woman in the red sari and another person nearby - a man who had been prophesying while possessed for hours at the temple. I had seen this man several times at Pandi Koyil and he always exhibited extremely loud, ferocious bodily symptoms of possession,

148 This is a translation of the Tamil phrase, “Unmaiyaana saami aadurvanga ivvalavu aadumaattaanga saami vanu aattittu poiyrum udanee mudinchidum.”
attracting large crowds of devotees who sought out his prophecies. The temple sweepers regarded him as a fake for the same reason they disparaged the woman in the red sari: because both were said to be using possession to draw attention and collect money. When the priest approached the man deemed a cheat, he had recently come out of his possession and was resting with his head in the lap of an older woman, perhaps his mother, who was soothing him by rubbing *vibuthi* on his forehead. The priest passed by the resting man and the woman in the red sari and chastised them, saying that he wanted all of them gone by the time he came back. This was the only instance during which I saw a temple priest attempt to kick anyone out of the temple for any reason. Typically no one was told to leave, no matter how wildly they danced, loudly they screamed, or strangely they acted.

On the day when I first encountered the woman in the red sari who my friends regarded as a cheat, I asked the group of women to point out to me someone they believed to be genuinely possessed. Shortly later, they led me by the hand over to where a woman wearing a fancy blue sari was dancing in a rhythmic, stepping motion, back and forth with her arms extended over her head near the *aruval* area.149 This woman was accompanied by two other women who were likely relatives, and she spoke prophecies to the groups of people who approached her. The possessed woman had a deeply strained look on her face and seemed to be exerting herself in a physically painful way. The possessed woman carried on like this for a time, and then all of a sudden, like a light switch had been turned off, she “woke up.” Blinking, she stared around her, seemingly unaware of what had just happened, and coming to as if she had been shaken suddenly out of a deep sleep and was now back to her normal waking state.

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149 This is the same possessed woman I referenced above whose companion was repeatedly adjusting her sari over her exposed blouse.
In discussing this particular possession later on with the group of temple staff women, they pointed to the intensity of the woman in the blue sari’s movements and the abrupt manner in which her possession ended as proofs that it was a genuine possession. They also said that she was “decent” (using the English word), and a family woman, and therefore her possession was clearly real. They indicated that this woman who was visibly well off and from a good family had nothing to gain from cheating others into giving her money by faking a possession. In fact, as a “decent” woman, she actually had a lot to lose from displaying such controversial motions characteristic of the possession experience, including the somewhat scandalizing exposure that her possessed movements subjected her body to. If it wasn’t Pandi really inhabiting this nice, decent woman’s body, then why would such a lady act in this way? Pandi had clearly overcome this woman and her respectable sensibilities.

A further instance of the contested theme of truthful versus false possession was evident in the following example of a debate between two simultaneously possessed people.\(^{150}\) Pandi is typically able to recognize his own presence in multiple bodies at once, but during this quite interesting exchange, the truthful presence of the deity within the other was questioned. Amidst a large crowd of devotees swelling around the aruval area on a particularly busy Sunday (it was the first day of the New Year 2017), a heated

\(^{150}\) At Pandi Koyil, it is not uncommon to see two possessed people interacting with one another; sometimes they engage in conversation together, prophesy blessings and good tidings for one another, or silently stare into each other’s bulging eyes. Similarly, it is not infrequent to see possessions appear to transfer from one person to another. In a general way, possessions that take place at any given time seem to catalyze still further possessions, as the peals of laughter and resounding shrieks of one possessed person, as well as the agitating calls of ululating onlookers, seem to bring on possessions in others. In more localized instances, one possessed person prophesying for another devotee may place their hand on the inquirer or grab them by the hair. Swaying or stomping back and forth, leading the inquiring devotee along and staring intently into their eyes, the previously unpossessed petitioner may sometimes begin to tremble and pant as Pandi similarly comes to them.
argument broke out between a possessed woman and the ferociously possessed man regarded by some as a cheat mentioned above. The fight was raucous and loud, with both parties trembling and roaring as they attracted a large crowd. The two possessed people were challenging one another over who was the real Pandi. Both the man and the woman were vehemently claiming that they were the true and most powerful Pandi, implying that the other one was a fake. The man shouted out loud statements of bravado from the perspective of Pandi, threatening the woman, “When I show my real form, will you be able to manage it?” as he bragged about how fearsome he truly was. As the man boastfully claimed that no one would be able to handle his powerful form, the possessed woman faced toward the inner sanctum, appealing for Pandi to prove conclusively that he had really come to her and was possessing her truthfully.

What emerged from the complex scene of multiple voices present at Pandi Koyil - both of the possessed themselves and of others commenting on the truth or falsehood of specific possessions - was a sliding and unfixed notion of authority. When Pandi’s voice is capable of issuing from many different mouths, Pandi’s powerful authority is diffused throughout the diverse crowd of his possessed devotees. Furthermore, this rich multiplicity invites commentary and judgement from the onlookers who witness possessions or who seek out the prophecies offered by possessed devotees. Both the formal authorities of the Pandi Koyil priesthood as well as devotees without formalized authoritative power within the temple were able to comment on the possessions of others, supporting the possessions they regarded as real by seeking out prophecies from them, while disparaging and avoiding the prophecies of those they deemed fakes and cheats.
This diffuse configuration of authority and the multiple voices coexisting and competing with one another have parallels in comparable spaces elsewhere, such as in the dynamic preacher circles and discussion groups of lay Buddhist practitioners located in the outer courtyard of a temple in Beijing, China described by Gareth Fisher.\textsuperscript{151} Contrasting more formalized structures of ritual authority located in the temple’s internal monastic hierarchy, Fisher details the atmosphere of the temple’s outer courtyard as one that many practitioners describe “as a chaotic venue full of competing ideologies and practices,”\textsuperscript{152} in which “no central authority has control over the organization of the space or the content of the discourses that are formed there.”\textsuperscript{153} While Pandi Koyil, like the Buddhist temple studied by Fisher, does indeed have a formalized authoritative structure manifest in the hereditary priesthood, the dynamism of possession and prophecy telling in the \textit{aruval} area within the temple’s main hall evidences a diffusion of authority as Pandi makes himself available through multiple channels in addition to the one maintained by the priests’ service. This multiplicity also evokes what at times could be described as a chaotic scene of contested claims to truth and accusations of falsehood.

Akin to the multiple narratives told about the origin story of Pandi and his temple addressed in the previous chapter, the multi-vocality of the practices of possession and prophecy telling at Pandi Koyil similarly demonstrate the diversity of perceptions about the ambiguous power of Pandi Muneesvarar. In the next chapter, I offer a more thorough picture of Pandi’s powerful and ambiguous characteristics and the significance these aspects of his personality have on the relationships he sustains with his devotees.

\textsuperscript{151} Gareth Fisher, \textit{From Comrades To Bodhisatvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 18.
Chapter 3: Power and Personality

Potency and Ambiguity in Pandi’s Character

Pandi Muneesvarar’s personality is complicated. As suggested by the multiple versions of his temple’s origin story laid out in Chapter 1, and the coexisting and contested difference of opinion about the practices of possession and prophesy surrounding him discussed in Chapter 2, Pandi is a deity who may strike observers as difficult to pin down. The dimensions of Pandi’s complexity become even more evident if the ambiguous features of his personality are described in relation to one another. Pandi is both the source of danger and fear, yet the shelter from harm for his devotees. He is sexually provocative and capable of destroying marriages, yet he is the giver of children, the bestower of happy family life, and a responsible family man himself. Pandi is a vegetarian god, yet he accepts animal sacrifice which is performed regularly and in great quantity at his temple. What can be distilled from all of these juxtaposed roles and characteristics is the potency and fruitful ambiguity of this deity. It is, in large part, the ambiguity of Pandi’s character that supports his ability to attract such a large and diverse retinue of followers. Furthermore, his power is not limited by conventional boundaries between ostensibly opposite characteristics. Instead, Pandi incorporates a number of different and sometimes paradoxical personality features that serve to broaden his scope and thereby heighten his efficacious power.

It is not uncommon for a Hindu deity to have a number of paradoxical elements incorporated into their personality,154 and Pandi fits well within this pattern. In order for

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154 Perhaps the most well known example in the scholarly literature on this topic is Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s work on the god Shiva (a deity that some people in the larger Madurai community suggest Pandi Muneesvarar is a manifestation of). See, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Siva: The Erotic Ascetic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
Pandi’s personality to come into sharper focus, I will first address his power and the various ways it manifests before turning to a discussion of his ambiguity.

Pandi’s potency was referenced in a number of ways by devotees at his temple. In addition to his reputation for granting all types of prayers like those described in the previous chapter, Pandi’s power was further evident in the ways people spoke about his personality, his body, and the effects he had on the bodies of the people he possessed. One woman employed in a fancy items shop near the Andicchami shrine in the back of the Pandi Koyil temple complex described Pandi as a *tudiyaana saami* - a powerful god. The adjective *tudiyaana* that this woman prefixed before the generic word for god, *saami*, is derived from the Tamil word *tudi* which literally means “beat,” as in the beating of a heart, and connotes the shaking, trembling, palpitating movements of a fast pulse. When used as an adjective, the word means “active, spirited.” The shopkeeper’s unusual application of this word to describe a deity evocatively indicates a god that is “heartbeat-like” - active, responsive, trembling, full of life. The shivering, writhing, fluttering, quivering motions of Pandi were evident in his active engagement with his devotees, particularly noticeable in the embodied movements of the people he chooses to possess.

Pandi’s energetic motion, channelled through the bodies of his *saamiyaadi* (god-dancers) sometimes verged toward the extreme, forceful, and even violent. Many women who are possessed by Pandi exhibit tireless strength and bold physical gestures of control over the people who come to seek prophecies from them. For example, many prophecy tellers will grab onto an inquiring devotee’s hair, using it as a handle to forcefully whip their heads around in a circle. Possessed women often slap the devotees around them with hard smacks on the top of the head, or knock their own foreheads into the skulls of their
gathered inquirers. I once observed a possessed woman grasp onto a baby’s arms and fling it high into the air, then down to the ground - not necessarily hurting it, but certainly shocking it to tears. Another possessed woman smoked a cigar at such a rapid pace that Shivani was impressed enough to comment. Shivani said that this possessed, cigar smoking woman must be one of Pandi’s favorites because cigars are his favorite and she was able to smoke a whole cigar so quickly. Clearly only a person who was favored by Pandi and genuinely possessed by him would be tough enough to take on such a feat.

The intense physical exertions of the possession experience require a great quantity of energy that is supplied by Pandi, the tudiyaana saami. But when Pandi leaves the bodies of the people he possesses, the abrupt disengagement with his divine source of trembling power leaves the bodies of his saamiyaadi reeling, faint, and weak. The stiffened limbs and rapid movements characteristic of the possession experience give way to slackened bodies and dazed expressions as the palpitating Pandi departs. Shivani and a group of other temple staff members once explained that, following a possession experience, the chosen devotee will often physically suffer a great deal. For at least the next two days, the formerly possessed person will feel extremely tired and unwell and is particularly susceptible to coming down with fevers, colds, or other illnesses. So while Pandi is certainly a deity well known for his vast healing capabilities, a close encounter with his powerful personality may very well leave an intimate devotee in a temporarily sick state. Even as a possession by Pandi facilitates the power and grace of the deity to
flow into and through the bodies of his devotees, such an experience is also extremely physically taxing and energy depleting.  

Pandi also lent his potency to infertile couples seeking out his blessings. Kumari told a story about how Pandi’s power of bestowing children on his devotees had worked through her to aid another woman. Kumari related how once a woman who was having difficulty conceiving came to Pandi Koyil to pray for a child, stopping at Kumari’s shop to buy a wooden cradle offering. At the time, Kumari herself was pregnant - a factor making her shop a particularly auspicious place to buy a charm intended to help facilitate pregnancy. Kumari stopped the woman before her purchase and told her that she needn’t buy a wooden cradle at all. Instead, Kumari advised the woman to tear a portion of fabric from the end of her sari’s pallu, wrap it around a lime, and hang that makeshift cradle in the temple. Kumari promised the childless woman that if she did so, she would definitely be blessed with a son within the year. Hearing this advice, the woman decided to follow Kumari’s instructions, despite the fact that she was wearing a very costly sari which she would have to spoil for the purposes of making the cradle. Kumari then related how her advice had born fruit as Pandi had followed through in blessing this woman. The once childless woman returned to Pandi Koyil within the year, doubly blessed after having given birth to twin sons. She offered prayerful thanks to Pandi and gifted Kumari a sari out of gratitude. Kumari also spoke to me about how Pandi’s potency had assisted her during the birth of her own children. She explained that during her two pregnancies and

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155 The painful physical rigors of possession are not unique at Pandi Koyil. See Gold, Fruitful Journeys, 166, for an example of a priest in village Rajasthan who “was enraged with the god for causing him to suffer so deeply through being possessed.” In Gold’s account, the priest is so angered by the physical suffering induced by possession (which included bouts of vomiting), that he even curses the possessing deity’s mother.
deliveries, she shouted out “Pandi! Pandi!” in her pain. Kumari said that most women generally shout out other expressions, such as the common exclamation, “Amma! Appa!” - “Mother! Father!” while giving birth. Kumari commented on the influx of strength caused by her invocation of Pandi’s name, attributing the fact that she had “normal” (i.e. vaginal) deliveries to Pandi’s powerful intervention. In contrast, Kumari said that her younger sister had to have a cesarean section.

Pandi’s powerful, energetic qualities are not only manifest in the bodies of the devotees he chooses to possess and to bless, but are also written on his own form. One of the embodied signs of Pandi’s intense power is his long, matted hair. Often regarded as a marker of renunciation, spiritual potency, and magical power, dreadlocked hair carries a number of complex associations often fluctuating between the virile and the ascetic in South Asian religiosity. Dhanalakshmi was the first person to point out Pandi’s dreadlocked hair to me. She asked Hema and me if we had noticed on Pandi’s statue the thing that resembles a wall or the back of a chair that appears to be behind the god’s shoulders. Dhanalakshmi explained that although this portion of the statue looks like the sides of a throne on which Pandi is seated, this backdrop is actually the god’s long, thick locks of hair extending down his back and billowing around his torso. Dhanalakshmi used the term sadai mudi to describe Pandi’s hair. In Tamil, mudi means hair while sadai

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156 For an ethnographic account of women’s discourses of pain in childbirth and information about the prevalence of cesarean section births in Tamil Nadu, see Cecilia Van Hollen, Birth on the Threshold: Childbirth and Modernity in South India (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), especially Chapter 4, “Invoking Vali: Painful Technologies of Birth,” 112-140.

refers to a plait, thick rope, or knotted, matted lock. Dhanalakshmi described the wondrous quality of Pandi’s *sadai*: when the priests bathe the statue, this part of the sculpture has the texture of real human hair and feels drastically different to the touch from the rest of Pandi’s stone body. Dhanalakshmi told us that the priests find it very difficult to wash this part of the statue as it is not at all like the smooth stone surface of the rest of Pandi’s form. Although Pandi’s figure may appear to be carved out of black rock, it is in fact *svayambhu* - a self manifested icon not crafted by human hands - and his living hair is a testament to this. Dhanalakshmi used the English word “power” in her otherwise Tamil speech to describe the quality of Pandi’s *sadai mudi*.

Dhanalakshmi spoke about how Pandi not only wears matted locks himself, but will occasionally bestow them on select devotees. Pandi will at times cause the hair of “even young girls” to get “stuck” together, as he claims their hair as his own. After the matted locks form, Pandi sometimes requires his devotees to offer this hair that he has designated for himself by shaving their heads (a practice that is undertaken as an offering to Pandi even in instances where the hair has not first formed into dreadlocks). This same effect of Pandi’s powerful influence on the hair of his devotees was also referenced by Kaliyamma, the other older woman in the priests’ family with whom I often spoke. Kaliyamma shaved her head early on during my period of research, and when I asked about it, she told the following story. She explained how she is originally from the southern part of Madurai city, but that she shifted to the north side where Pandi Koyil is located after her marriage. It was at that time, many years ago, that she vowed to offer

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Although I am not certain of the etymology of the Tamil word *sadai*, it seems plausible that it is linked to the Sanskrit word *jata* used, for example, to describe Shiva’s dreadlocks, and the Kannada word *jade* referred to in the work of Lucinda Ramberg. See for example, Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess*; and Ramberg, “Magical Hair as Dirt.”
Pandi her hair, but she was unable to do so for decades as she was now married and her in-laws would not approve of her shaving her head. But recently, now that she was an older woman, Pandi had finally claimed her hair as his rightful due. Kaliyamma’s hair had begun to form into dreadlocks. She related this experience in similar terms to the way possession is often described, using the Tamil word for “to grab/catch/like” for the motion Pandi performed to make her hair stick together in such a way. Kaliyamma said, “I vowed, ‘I am at your doorstep serving you, I’ll offer my hair to you.’ So saami [god] beautifully grabbed/caught my hair into matted locks.”

This potency of Pandi’s - evident in his movements, his body, and the bodies of the devotees he chooses - is certainly powerful, yet it is also ambiguous. It is dangerous at the same time that it is protective. It is both sexual and familial. It is to these seemingly contradictory aspects of Pandi’s personality to which I now turn.

Sexuality, Danger, and Protection

The first time I went to Pandi Koyil alone after I had become a familiar face there during my period of field research, many of the temple staff asked me over and over: Wasn’t I scared? Wasn’t I afraid to be there alone? Afraid to walk by myself on the quiet, dusty path from the bus station located several streets away? The next time I returned to Pandi Koyil with Hema, the same women who had questioned me about fear reminded us both to be careful and that it was better for us to come to the temple together, lest something bad happen to one of us as a solo young woman walking around those parts. This theme of potential fear was pervasive throughout my period of field research, as well as in the context of other settings in Madurai. Despite the fact that I have always

159 This is a translation of the following Tamil phrase, “Naan neendumkkiten, ‘Un nilayileeyee irukkeen unakku mudi kudukakureenu.’ Atanaala saami azhahaa sadai pidicchiruntatu.”
personally experienced Madurai as a very safe city and am used to walking on my own in public places both there and in far more dangerous cities in my home country, it is fairly atypical for young women to wander around alone in Madurai, and if they do so, it is often commented on by their elders. Many people in Madurai frequently asked me related questions, such as: Aren’t I afraid to live alone in an apartment? Aren’t I scared to be so far away from my parents?

What are the implications of this discourse of young women’s fear and why were such questions especially prevalent at Pandi Koyil? Although people asking me such questions did not always explicitly link the fear a young woman might feel while alone to sexual danger, the possibility of rape and sexual assault, as well as the closely related threat of ghosts and evil spirits formed the undercurrent of such inquiries. Whether by human men or lascivious spirits, a woman’s chastity was certainly put at risk while wandering about alone, especially at night. Fear was a trope that extended past the danger posed by malevolent human and spirit entities to encompass a fear of the deity of Pandi himself. This fear appears to stem from an awareness of Pandi’s awesome power, most especially his tendency to possess his devotees. As mentioned in the previous chapter, while possession was revered as a direct link of blessings and divine advice flowing from Pandi to his devotees through the medium of the possessed person and the prophecies they uttered, possession was nevertheless considered somewhat suspect. While doubt in the reality of possession (or certain possessions) caused one source of suspicion, a genuine fear of the possibility of possession formed another. The same way young women walking alone were deemed vulnerable to attack, this same demographic was
considered the most open to penetration by Pandi and the concomitant troubles that such a possession may inaugurate.

Pandi’s power to threaten seemed particularly enhanced in the area of his jurisdiction surrounding his temple and stretching between the two big hospitals. A close friend named Sridevi who I know from outside of the Pandi Koyil community had married into a family whose former home was located within this jurisdiction. Sridevi told me a story about how “in those days,” women were never permitted to walk in this area at night, especially after midnight, and it was even deemed dangerous for men to do so. This danger was ambiguously linked to Pandi himself as both protector and powerful agent of possession watching over the boundaries of his jurisdiction. Sridevi related that once her husband’s younger brother was walking around in this area near Apollo Hospital late at night, despite warnings against such activity. He was carrying milk that he had purchased earlier. While hurrying home, he accidentally dropped the milk, spilling it onto the ground. A passerby commented that this was Pandi’s jurisdiction and the powerful deity must have desired milk, causing the young man to spill it as an inadvertent “offering” to Pandi. This area was deemed liable to this type of eerie occurrence brought on by Pandi’s powerful desires.

Although none of the people I spoke with at the temple directly indicated that Pandi posed a sexual threat to women and young girls, this theme was all but bubbling beneath the surface. Every time I asked people at Pandi Koyil why Pandi possesses women in such great numbers while rarely possessing men, they always gave the same

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160 This is a common phrase that people in Madurai use, both in its English and Tamil equivalents (anta kaalattila/anta neerattila, literally, “in that time”) to refer to some unspecified time in the past which may be a rather recent past that is believed to be quite different from the present in one way or another, or it may imply significant antiquity.
response: Pandi \textit{likes} women. Especially beautiful young women. Tamil terms for romantic love and sexual attraction were not used, but the euphemistic, underlying tone was that Pandi was indeed attracted to human women in such a way. For example, an older Muslim woman I met at the temple spoke about how she gets possessed by Pandi, although she is unable to remember her possession experiences and only knows that this happens to her based on what people around her have said. She explained that Pandi had chosen her at an early age as he is especially fond of possessing young girls that he thinks are beautiful. Pandi has continued to possess her ever since.

While speaking about Pandi’s preference for possessing women with Dhanalakshmi, she mentioned another foreign woman who had done research at Pandi Koyil whom Pandi sometimes possessed. With a smile on her face, Dhanalakshmi assured me that all foreigners who do research at Pandi Koyil eventually get possessed by Pandi, and in the end, I too would get possessed by him. She emphasized that Pandi is particularly attracted to and attracts young maidens, and that he likes “talking” to girls. Dhanalakshmi gestured toward Hema and me as an example as she spoke, saying, “Pandi is drawn to people like you,” i.e. young, unmarried women. Echoing a similar theme, my friend Pushpakkala once told me that approximately twenty years ago, prepubescent girls had not been allowed to enter within Pandi Koyil at all.\footnote{I am not sure whether this rule was an official one sanctioned by the Pandi Koyil priesthood, if it was a customary practice of all or some families of regular devotees at the temple, or if it was just Pushpakkala’s conviction that such a rule was formerly in place. Even in the case of the latter option, it is still a revealing memory that indicates devotees’ perceptions of Pandi’s potential danger, as well as the way such perceptions may have shifted over time.} She claimed that this was due to such children’s especially vulnerable state, putting them at severe risk of possession. Only after a girl matured past her first menstruation was she permitted to visit Pandi.
Koyil. Pushpakkala explained that this practice had waned over time, and now all people, including girls of all ages were allowed access to the temple. I did indeed see a large number of girls and women of all ages at Pandi Koyil during my period of field research, and a significant number of possessed girls appeared to be young and unmarried.\textsuperscript{162}

One of the ways Pandi draws a person that he has chosen to him is through the medium of dreams. This was a point emphasized by Shivani and the group of women employees at the temple. I also heard countless stories from devotees about the dreams they had of Pandi. Shivani explained that when Pandi wants a certain person, he appears to them in their dreams and “takes them by the hand.” In such dreams, Pandi may not appear in his own form, but in any number of forms that appeal to or draw the attention of the devotee he seeks to secure as his own. I heard stories about Pandi appearing as a beggar asking the dreamer for money, as a man dressed in white, as a man with a distinct white beard, or disguised in the form of a person known to and well liked by the dreamer. Shivani told me that if Pandi appears in a dream in the form of a man, he can be recognized by his prominent mustache, but if he appears in a dream in the form of a woman, she will have loose, untied hair or perhaps a side-bun up-do.

Shivani shared a number of her dreams about Pandi with Hema and me, some of which had content that was scandalous enough that she reduced her voice to hushed tones during the telling, or was scolded by her friends for sharing such information with innocent young girls. One dream Shivani related took place during her second pregnancy.

\textsuperscript{162} I never saw anyone, either boy or girl, who appeared prepubescent to be possessed during my period of field research. Multiple people, including Shivani and Dhanalakshmi, spoke about how children would often get possessed by Pandi, although I never observed this. Shivani and especially Dhanalakshmi spoke about children being possessed in a particularly positive way, emphasizing how “beautiful,” innocent, and genuine their possessions were, whether or not they were aware of what was happening to them, or were able to prophesy.
Her first child had been a girl and everyone around her was saying that they believed she would again bear a daughter. Shivani had her horoscope read which also confirmed that her second child would be a girl. But then Shivani had a dream in which she felt as if someone had come near to her and was trying to touch her. This person attempting to come toward her was Pandi, revealing himself in the form of a man dressed in white. In the dream, Pandi cradled a baby boy in his arms and offered it to Shivani, telling her that she could have this child if only she would “come” to him. When Hema and I pressed to find out more details about what the man in white was asking from Shivani in exchange for the son he held out to her, Shivani replied euphemistically, saying that the man in her dream was asking her to come to him “in the way that a woman comes to a man in a film.” Using the safe language of cinema as a comparison to obscure yet suggest sexuality, Shivani indicated Pandi’s intention with her in the dream. But Shivani refused to accept the man’s bribe and did not come to him in her dream. Despite the dream distance Shivani kept between herself and the man in white, Pandi nevertheless blessed her with a son, giving her the boy child from the dream even though she did not join with him as a man and a woman in the movies might.

This dream struck me as especially interesting because of the parallels between Shivani’s refusal to come to Pandi, dressed in white, in her dream, and her prayerful requests that he cease possessing her (as related in the previous chapter). Both of these active decisions to keep some distance between herself and Pandi were made by Shivani around the same period of time - after the birth of her first child and before the birth of her second. This caused me to speculate about what reading Shivani’s dream alongside her prayers to Pandi might reveal. I wonder if perhaps there is a parallel, at least as
suggested in Shivani’s case, between a “film-like” intimacy between Pandi and his devotee and the act of possession; perhaps there is a similarity between a person agreeing to let Pandi come to them in an erotically intimate way and agreeing to allow him to possess them.

As an illicit affair before or outside of wedlock would certainly cause difficulties for a young woman trying to find a husband or with her current spouse if she was already married, possession was often described as an impediment to fixing a marriage for a single woman or as a source of strife between husband and wife. Hema suggested that some women, after becoming possessed regularly by a deity, may become “obsessively” devoted to them, even perhaps taking a vow of celibacy. Hema cited an example from her own family. One of Hema’s relatives - an elderly woman who works as a flower seller in Chennai - became quite distant from her husband and ceased spending nights with him after she began being possessed by a favored deity, eventually choosing to take a vow of celibacy to dedicate herself more fully to her religious life. Although no one at Pandi Koyil spoke about celibacy as an outcome of regular possession, along the lines of Shivani’s claim that possession by Pandi would definitely interfere with her relationship with her husband, Pandi’s marriage-spoiling potentiality was certainly present.

Shivani recalled other dreams in which Pandi approached her in an aggressive or demanding way. For example, she confessed to once having smoked two cigars - the only time she had ever tried tobacco. After falling asleep later that night, Pandi appeared to her in a dream, chasing her and scolding her, shouting, “Hey! Why did you take my cigars?” This dream morphed into a scene where two men were chasing Shivani, demanding that she “come” to them. But once again, like when she had refused to come to the white-clad
Pandi, Shivani reproached the pair of men chasing her, addressing them as *thambi* (younger brother) to shame them for acting in this prurient way toward her.

Shivani then launched into a story about a brutal experience she had witnessed as a child. Shivani’s family regularly worshipped at Pandi Koyil during her youth, and once while they were at the temple, an unknown man committed suicide there. Shivani watched as a man standing on the pathway between the Andicchami and Samaiyan Karuppasamy shrines shouted out that he didn’t want to live this life anymore, that he just wanted to die. The suicidal man warned no one to intervene, doused himself in gasoline, and set himself on fire. Later in life, thirty days after the birth of her first child (a time that almost exactly corresponds to the first and only time Shivani was possessed by Pandi), this horrifying childhood experience resurfaced. At that time, Shivani had a dream wherein Pandi appeared to her in the form of the man who had committed suicide all those years ago. In this dream, Pandi urged Shivani to “come” to him - an invitation which she characteristically refused.

And while Shivani had stressed to Hema and me how her intimacy with Pandi was secured through her employment at the temple rather than through possession, another of her dreams reveals the anxiety Pandi sometimes caused her about even this aspect of their relationship. In this dream, Pandi appeared before Shivani, chastising her for not fulfilling her job responsibilities and criticizing her for not being fit to do her job at the temple. Pandi then went on to tell Shivani that she should just leave her work so that some other woman could come and do the temple sweeping in her place. Startled, Shivani awoke from this dream abruptly, thinking that she had overslept and was late for her early morning shift. But she soon realized that it was midnight, not 5:00 a.m. when
she typically wakes up, so she applied vibuthi to her forehead as a salve and went back to sleep. Throughout this retinue of intense dreams, Pandi appeared before Shivani in a number of arresting forms, from an alluring man, to an aggressive stalker, to a traumatic childhood figure, to a dissatisfied boss.

Pandi’s presence in the dreams of his devotees could be both fearsome, as evidenced in Shivani’s case and in the example of the Muslim woman Habiba related in the first chapter. But Pandi’s dream presence was also alluring - attracting (compelling) women to come close to him and to visit his temple to worship him. The first time I spoke to Dhanalakshmi and explained my interest in Pandi Koyil and my research there, she asked me if Pandi had appeared to me in a dream, or else if I had felt his presence strongly in some way - an encounter which would cause me to be initially drawn to the temple. Elaborating on this point, Dhanalakshmi explained that unless Pandi specifically chooses for a person to come to his temple and brings them to him, they won’t be able to enter inside. It is Pandi who draws his devotees to him and compels them to come to his temple. So while Pandi possesses his closest devotees based on his attraction to them, all people who visit Pandi in his temple can be said to be attracted to him as well - drawn close to him through his power and will.

In order to seek out his devotees and fetch them, even from far away, Dhanalakshmi affirmed that Pandi will even leave his own jurisdiction, appearing to those who have been absent from his temple for some time. He will compel them to return to worship him in his temple, as he doesn’t like it when his specially chosen devotees do not visit him regularly. Dhanalakshmi asserted that in such cases when one of Pandi’s close devotees haven’t come to the temple in a long time, Pandi will retaliate
by causing them troubles, even possessing them at home in order to force them to come to Pandi Koyil again. Dhanalakshmi, who often sits in the inner sanctum right next to Pandi’s shrine, told about how she has seen such things take place. This type of distant devotee will immediately become possessed as soon as they approach the area around the temple. When they eventually make their way inside the inner sanctum, the priests will often ask how long it has been since they’ve come to worship Pandi. Dhanalakshmi emphasized that if Pandi possesses a person, he actually requires that they come regularly to his temple, at least on Tuesdays, Fridays, or Sundays, so that they can be possessed by him. This explanation offered by Dhanalakshmi is quite telling - possession is both affliction and cure. If a devotee Pandi chooses is negligent in coming to his temple, he will possess them. Yet when they come to his temple, Pandi will possess them. He requires regular attendance and regular possession - both outcomes that this powerful deity responds to with further compulsion to come to him and yet more instances of possession.

During this conversation with Dhanalakshmi, Hema and I would periodically pause to discuss certain points in English. Overhearing our speech, Dhanalakshmi picked out the English word “possession” and “possessed” that Hema and I were using to refer to spirit possession. Elaborating on an alternate definition of this word than the one Hema and I were intending - Dhanalakshmi adamantly agreed that yes, Pandi is indeed “possessive.”163 In fact, Pandi is quite controlling in his possessiveness over his devotees,

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163 Interestingly, the English word “possession” is itself ambiguous and can refer to deity/spirit possession in the way that I have been using it throughout most of this thesis, while the word also indicates ownership. The ambiguity of this English term and its flexible usage closely corresponds with the way Pandi as a jealous god was said by people I spoke with at the temple to exhibit his “possessiveness” through “possessing” the women he chooses as his own. I only made the connection between these various uses of
as the following poetic statement of Dhanalakshmi’s suggests: “He sees that they are like a doll being controlled in his hand (as a puppeteer moves his puppets).” Discussions of Pandi’s domineering character and jealous personality proliferated throughout his devotees’ descriptions. Pandi’s possessiveness was especially linked to his relationships with his chosen women. Dhanalakshmi detailed how when Pandi chooses to possess a woman, whether the possession episodes begin before or after she is married, “Pandi will think, ‘This is my girl,’” and become fiercely jealous of her relationships with others. Pandi may even think that the woman’s husband is taking her away from him - a situation that especially agitates this protective deity’s jealous mood. In explaining this, Dhanalakshmi reiterated the commonly articulated point that in such a situation, Pandi may endeavor to make the woman’s marriage a challenge due to his jealous attitude toward the other man in her life. Dhanalakshmi even stated that if Pandi possesses a woman, that woman “won’t be able to live with her husband.” Perhaps this phrase doesn’t necessarily convey a literal separation with husband and wife living in different homes, but it certainly underscores the great difficulty possession by Pandi may bring upon the marriages of his jealously guarded favorites.

Dhanalakshmi asserted that she had witnessed women in such a circumstance on many occasions. She related how while possessed, these troubled women may forcefully remove their own thali and “throw it away.” The thali is a marriage necklace that goes far beyond just a visible marker of a woman’s marital status. The thali is the emblematic

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164 This is a translation of the Tamil phrase, “Avaru kaiyila irukkira bommai maariyaa aattivaikka paappaaru.”

165 The English word after Hema so insightfully brought it to my attention. Dhanalakshmi reiterated this important point to me through her accidental slippage between the two different (yet related) English words.
symbol in Tamil Nadu of the auspiciousness of married life. One of the most common ways a wedding is referred to in Madurai is by the synecdoche “tying the thali,” in which the main ritual action of the wedding ceremony stands in for the celebration and institution of marriage as a whole. Furthermore, I heard several people at Pandi Koyil reference the thali in other ways that highlight the deep importance of this piece of jewelry. A possessed man offering a prophecy to a weeping woman inquiring from him described that he was having difficulty mystically identifying the culprit causing trouble in this woman’s life because there was a problem with her thali and pottu. The implication of this statement was that there was an issue in the woman’s relationship with her husband that was blocking the possessed man’s ability to prophesy accurately. A woman is supposed to never remove her thali for any reason other than the death of her husband. If she receives a second thali to replace an older one (as happens on some ritual occasions, often occurring one year after the marriage ceremony when the rope necklace may be exchanged for a gold chain), the new thali is firmly secured around the woman’s neck before the old one is removed. In this context in which a thali symbolizes, creates, secures, and enacts a woman’s marriage, it is of great significance that Dhanalakshmi mentioned the frequency with which women possessed by Pandi “throw away” their thali - rejecting their marriages to human spouses (at least temporarily) and affirming Pandi’s claim to them as his own.

Following this theme, many people spoke about Pandi’s jealousy toward the husbands of women that he possesses. Shivani once told an interesting story about a foreign woman who became possessed during a visit to Pandi Koyil with her husband and
two young children many years ago. The foreign lady was especially ferocious and active during her possession and began beating her husband and prophesying to the many gathered devotees surrounding her. Apparently, the woman’s husband and children were very scared seeing their wife and mother’s wild behavior. The devotees at Pandi Koyil reassured the woman’s family that she was fine - her strange and violent actions were due only to Pandi’s presence within her. They told her husband that Pandi would leave her body after she went into the inner sanctum and had vibuthi applied to her forehead, and that her symptoms would be cooled afterward. According to Shivani, the foreign woman had visited Pandi Koyil as a young girl with her parents at which time Pandi had taken a liking to her. Now she was grown with a family of her own and had returned to Pandi Koyil because Pandi had drawn her back to him. But seeing her husband accompanying her, Pandi had become quite jealous, causing the woman to undergo such an intense possession experience that even included some amount of husband-battering.

As Shivani told this story to Hema and me, she laughed recalling the unusual scene. But the other women surrounding us - mostly other temple employees - who overheard this conversation, chastised Shivani for her crass story. They argued that this story was bound to frighten me, and they all questioned me over and over about whether I was scared hearing what Shivani said. Wasn't I afraid that Pandi would possess me? I responded by saying that I wasn’t afraid. Shivani looked me dead in the eyes and said that if Pandi likes someone he will possess them. I asked her if she thought it would happen to me too, and she assured me it would. Shivani stated matter-of-factly that if I get married and return to Pandi Koyil bringing my husband with me, Pandi will definitely

165 I am not sure whether this woman was the same foreign scholar referenced by Dhanalakshmi or someone else.
be jealous and possess me as a result. After becoming more familiar with Shivani and the other temple employees, the much talked about future possibility of my marriage (and subsequent potential possession by Pandi) was a regular topic of our conversations and jokes.

Pandi was not only said to be jealous of his women devotees’ husbands, but also of other gods as well. Dhanalakshmi claimed that Pandi didn’t allow any other deity to possess people and speak prophecies within the boundaries of his temple complex. According to Dhanalakshmi, if Pandi likes you and claims you as his own, he won’t permit you to worship any other deities. She admitted that she herself gets possessed by Pandi and for this reason, she is unable to worship anyone else. She mentioned the small Vinayagar shrine located inside the Pandi Koyil temple complex, immediately within the threshold of the front entrance. Dhanalakshmi stated that she once went to worship at this shrine, but Pandi appeared to her in a dream, angry and jealous of her wandering attentions. In the dream Pandi asked Dhanalakshmi accusingly, “Whose temple is this? Isn’t this my temple? Then why are you worshipping another deity?”

Similarly, Dhanalakshmi claimed that if you keep a picture of Pandi inside of your home, he won’t permit you to worship any other deities, and so all other gods and goddesses will leave from your house. Pandi is so meticulous about how his image is kept by his devotees that he causes great problems for them if they happen to snap a photo of him on their cellphones. Because a cellphone travels everywhere with its owner, even to unclean places like funerals or areas that Pandi might not approve of, Pandi will cause

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166 Dhanalakshmi’s statement contradicts other accounts I heard by devotees who sometimes noted that other beings (including ghosts, evil spirits, Samaiyan Karuppasamy, and Valliyammai Patti) occasionally possess people at Pandi Koyil.
such a phone to be lost or broken, or he may compel the person who clicked the photo to return to Pandi Koyil and offer their phone into the hundial (collection box) there. These anecdotes may be linked to the claim I heard several times at Pandi Koyil that one shouldn’t keep images of Pandi in their homes as such pictures are inauspicious. But despite the at least partial taboo on owning pictures of Pandi, there are many images of him for sale at the multiple shops in the marketplace surrounding his temple, including pendants to be worn as protective amulets. The ambivalent attitudes devotees expressed about photos of Pandi further underline the ambiguous nature of Pandi’s persona as both dangerous and inauspicious, yet protective and certainly worthy of taking darshan.

But while the ever-present threat of possession by Pandi and his dangerous, fear-inducing traits loomed in the shadows of his power, these qualities were by no means always regarded as negative. Pandi’s ferocious loyalty to his devotees in both fulfilling their prayers and protecting them through all kinds of hardship was a constant theme of his devotees’ conversations. In the previous chapter, I offered many examples of Pandi’s faithful distribution of blessings to his devotees. At times, even Pandi’s infiltration into the bodies of his women devotees was regarded, not with fear, but as an ennobling, strengthening presence. During a conversation early on in my field research, Shivani and Latha - another woman employed as a sweeper at Pandi Koyil - were enthusiastically warning Hema and me to be careful not to walk alone in the roads around the temple. Hema retorted with a playful tone, teasingly stating, “Pandi protects us. Even if someone is trying to hurt us or murder us or rape us, Pandi will definitely kill them and protect us.” Sobered by Hema’s joke, Shivani’s face grew serious as she lifted one arm above her
head, wielding an invisible sword like Pandi’s curved aruval in her raised hand. “At that
time,” Shivani intoned, “you yourselves will become Pandi and kill those people.”

*Animal Sacrifice, Vegetarianism, and Distribution*

The final aspect of Pandi’s ambiguous personality that I will address is his
reputed vegetarianism in the face of the prolific animal sacrifice which takes place at his
temple. Along with possession, animal sacrifice was one of the most commonly
mentioned practices people in the wider Madurai community I spoke to associated with
Pandi Koyil. And like possession, animal sacrifice was often mentioned with some
amount of distaste by people who did not frequent Pandi Koyil. Animal sacrifice is
widely practiced throughout Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in India, and despite the popular
perception of Hindu India in the West, most Tamil people are not vegetarians.

Vegetarianism is often exclusively associated with high caste Hindus, particularly
Brahmans, but non-vegetarian diets seem to be the norm for most people in Madurai.

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167 Multiple temple staff members told me that as many as 200 animals were offered in sacrifice to Pandi
per day, especially during auspicious months with high levels of devotee attendance at the temple. I never
witnessed anywhere near that number of sacrifices in one day. I personally saw only one or two animals
being sacrificed on any given day, but usually I noticed many more goat and chicken heads piled up -
sometimes far more than ten on busy days - indicating that more sacrifices had occurred earlier on. Perhaps
the reason I personally witnessed fewer animal sacrifices than the number claimed by staff members was
due to the time period in which my field research took place - the Tamil month of Margazhi. Margazhi is
considered an inauspicious month in general, but it is sacred to several important deities, notably Perumal
(Vishnu) and Ayyappan. Ayyappan is a popular South Indian deity whose main temple is located just over
the border of Tamil Nadu in the neighboring state of Kerala. Margazhi is the month in which the
Sabarimala pilgrimage to the Ayyappan temple is undertaken by huge numbers of primarily Malayali and
Tamil men. Ayyappan devotees (who are recognizable due to their characteristic black clothing), en route
to Kerala, can be seen in great numbers worshiping at temples along the way. I saw countless Sabarimala
pilgrims during my month of field research, both at Pandi Koyil and other temples in the Madurai area.
Ayyappan devotees take stringent vows during their pilgrimage which include abstention from meat. More
than one temple employee at Pandi Koyil attributed the lesser frequency of animal sacrifice at Pandi Koyil
during the weeks of my field research to this temporary vegetarianism effecting many Tamil families. For
more on the Sabarimala pilgrimage, see Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, “‘Ayyappan Saranam’:
Masculinity and the Sabarimala Pilgrimage in Kerala,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*

168 Many restaurants in Madurai are exclusively “pure veg” meaning that they also do not cook with eggs,
and such restaurants are quite popular both with vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike. Many families that
Like humans, deities can also be categorized according to the type of food that they eat. Deities in Brahmanical temples, like the priesthood who cares for them, are usually said to be vegetarian, while deities who are described as accepting non-vegetarian food offerings seem to exclusively have non-Brahman priesthoods. For example, Meenakshi - the goddess of Madurai’s most prominent temple - is vegetarian, but many other gods and goddesses in the city are not.

Diane P. Mines, writing on the different categories of deities delineated by the residents of the small Tamil village in which she conducted field research, describes how dietary habits corresponded with certain gods and people and not others in the following way:

[The village’s] residents compare both castes and gods along several dimensions of contrast. They describe castes as relatively high (ocanta) versus relatively low (talnta), as big (periya) versus little (cinna), as pure (cuttam) versus impure (acuttam), the latter correlating roughly with vegetarian on the one hand and meat-eating on the other. They describe gods in similar terms, as high to low, big to little, vegetarian to meat-eating and as soft or gentle (metuvana) to fierce (ukkiramana), a distinction that also corresponds to variables running from cool to hot, “neat” and orderly to chaotic, stable to unstable. Both humans and gods may be further distinguished residentially. Higher, “bigger” (powerful, landowning), and neater castes live in the Big Village while the lower, “little” (landless, service-providing), and chaotic castes live on the peripheries of the village and in the small hamlets out across the fields. Similarly, higher, cooler, and purer gods live in the interiors of the Big Village: in temples on village streets and in alcoves and posters on the walls of residents’ houses. Low-ranking, hot, impure, meat-eating fierce gods live outside: out in the fields or the wastelands beyond or outside and facing away from the house in back courtyards.

are non-vegetarian eat meat infrequently, sometimes only a few times per week, and especially on festive occasions. It is common for non-vegetarian Hindus to give up meat as part of vows made to specific deities. Most of the meat consumed in Madurai is goat (often referred to by the English misnomer “mutton”), chicken, and fish.

This appears to be the case throughout Tamil Nadu, although it is not always true elsewhere in India. Many famous Brahmanical temples to Kali in the North Indian state of West Bengal include animal sacrifice to the goddess there. For more on the worship of Kali in West Bengal, see June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

While the distinctions between deities that Mines draws attention to were absolutely present in Madurai, it was not always so clear on which side a specific deity was categorized. While no one I spoke with questioned Meenakshi’s vegetarianism or her position within high caste Hinduism, the dietary type of certain deities was contested, with different people offering different opinions about whether some gods were vegetarian or not. This seemed to be particularly true in the case of *kaval deivam* (guardian deities) like Ayyanar, who were sometimes said to eat meat and sometimes said to be vegetarian.

As a god known for his guardian role within Madurai city, Pandi also held an ambiguous status regarding his diet. Throughout the wider community of people in Madurai, Pandi is often lumped together with other fierce, meat-eating deities due to the high prevalence of animal sacrifice that takes place at his temple. But upon further investigation, I realized that everyone I spoke with who were regular employees of Pandi Koyil (including priests, members of the priests’ family, sweepers, etc.) claimed quite startlingly that Pandi was actually vegetarian. At first, I was reluctant to accept what seemed to be such a contradictory statement. How could a deity who accepts animal sacrifice be vegetarian? I eventually realized that the key to understanding Pandi’s ambiguous status in this regard was his role as an authoritative family man within the close circle of deities present in his temple complex. In order to show how this is the case, I first detail the practice of animal sacrifice as it takes place at Pandi Koyil before
going on to explain Pandi’s distributive role as the most powerful figure at the center of his world.171

Animal sacrifice can take place on any day of the week at Pandi Koyil, although the greatest number of sacrifices occur on the busiest days, especially Fridays. Devotees who have vowed to offer an animal sacrifice as part of the instructions for success prophesied by a person possessed by Pandi or out of gratitude for a fulfilled prayer, purchase the chickens and goats that are slaughtered at the temple. There is a designated area for the sacrifices located in an open yard on the other side of the concrete wall surrounding the temple’s main hall. A short pathway beginning near the cooking sheds used for preparing pongal inside the temple leads past a couple of shops and out to a dirt clearing. The sacrificial yard sits in the area between the main part of Pandi Koyil where Pandi’s inner sanctum is located, and the Andicchmi shrine a short walk away. In the yard, there is a low platform that sponsoring families often mount along with the goats they lead by a rope, a lean-to sheltering the severed heads and limbs of the sacrificed animals, and a shed where temple staff members clean the slaughtered animals.

The typical routine of an animal sacrifice can be described as follows. If the sponsoring family has chosen to offer a goat, the animal will often be garlanded with a wreath of flowers and left tied to a post within the temple complex for a period of time until the sacrifice can be performed. If the devotees are offering a chicken, they will often

171 See Indira Arumugam, “‘The Old Gods Are Losing Power!’: Theologies of Power and Rituals of Productivity in a Tamil Nadu Village,” Modern Asian Studies 49 (2015): 753-786, for a fascinating account of the recent increase in animal sacrifice in rural Tamil Nadu that contradicts claims to the diminishing importance of blood offerings in India more widely. Arumugam argues that animal sacrifice is being used to reinvigorate tutelary deities whose power is deemed to be decreasing in the contemporary era with its political milieu of electoral democracy. While my research at Pandi Koyil suggested that Pandi’s popularity and power have only been increasing in recent decades, Arumugam’s work addressing similar types of gods is instructive for pointing toward the connection between animal sacrifice, power, and the “charisma” of the deities for whom it is performed.
tie its legs together to still its movements and carry it with them while they wait in the
*darshan* line to enter Pandi’s inner sanctum. The chickens that are brought within the
shrine are handed to the priests who touch the live birds’ bodies to Pandi’s statue before
handing them back to the sponsors. When it is time for the sacrifice to occur, devotees
lead or carry their goats or chickens out to the yard where they perform a ritual alongside
of the temple employees who actually execute the cutting.172 In order to test whether the
animal is acceptable to the deity, turmeric infused water is poured over its head. If the
animal shakes its head, this is taken as a sign of agreement that it is ready and accepted,
but if the animal does not shake upon being doused with the water, it is considered an
unacceptable sacrifice.173 Both chickens and goats are killed by beheading using the same
short knife. Goat and chicken heads are then piled atop a mat laid out beneath the lean-to.
The right front leg of goats are cut off as well and placed on the mat. Temple employees
clean and prepare the animal corpses beneath an open shed in the sacrificial yard. I often
saw one woman dousing the dead chickens in boiling water as another tended the fire.
They would then pluck the feathers and hand the chickens over to other workers - a man
and a woman - who butchered the chickens into cuts of meat. Goats were also skinned
and butchered in this area.174 Latha - a regular member of the group of women staff I

172 During my period of field research, I observed the same man - a temple staff member - perform each
beheading. Sometimes, especially in the case of chicken sacrifices, he was accompanied by an older
woman (perhaps his relative), who assisted in holding the birds’ wings still and stretching out their necks.
In the case of goat sacrifices, the main sacrificer was usually assisted by a group of men apparently drawn
from the sponsoring family who helped out with wrangling the animal to the ground and holding its kicking
legs still.

173 I never personally witnessed an animal being exempted from sacrifice for refusing to shake, as most
animals certainly seemed to do so. Once, a very large goat did not shake its head for so long after the water
was poured over it that the sponsoring family seemed rather tense, quietly awaiting the outcome.
Eventually, after a couple minutes of intense watching, the goat finally shook its head and was accepted as
a sacrifice.

174 To the best of my knowledge, it was one family of temple employees who were charged with the
cleaning and butchering of the sacrificial animals. I am not sure if the man who actually performs the throat
spent most of my days at Pandi Koyil with - often worked in this area of the temple. Whenever I would stand in the yard to watch the sacrifices, if Latha was on shift, she would invite me to sit with her on a stump as she dipped the chickens in hot water and stripped them of their feathers. Latha explained to me that the heads of both chickens and goats and the front right legs of the goats were kept separately as they were intended “for saami [god],” while the meat from the rest of the sacrificed animals was returned to the sponsoring family who would then prepare a curry with it.

Kumari, whose family’s shop straddles the line between the temple and the sacrificial yard, took me to see the area where the non-vegetarian cooking is performed. In order to visit this place, we had to leave the Pandi Koyil temple complex, wind our way through the marketplace out front, cross the main road busy with heavy traffic, and climb down a steep embankment. This lower elevation area, away and across the street from the temple, was hardly visible from the main road and I had never before noticed it. But after climbing down off the road, I encountered several spacious, open sheds beneath which many groups of devotees were clustered around individual fires, cooking curries made from the sacrificed chicken and goat meat. Several butcher’s blocks also dotted the clearing. According to Kumari, this place was set aside for the non-vegetarian cooking, while the cooking sheds located within the temple complex were exclusively intended for the cooking of vegetarian offerings, especially pongal. Devotees preparing meat curries would often eat there in the cooking sheds across the street from the temple.

Dhanalakshmi once explained that devotees often distribute the meat curries they have

cutting was a member of this family or not, but I am fairly certain he was from a different family. I am not sure how these employees are remunerated for their services. They may be salaried temple staff, receive cuts of meat from the sacrifices as compensation, receive donations from the sponsoring families, or a combination of all three modes of payment.
prepared to other devotees as part of their vow, and they also usually share a portion with the priests’ family.

Many if not all members of the Pandi Koyil temple community appeared to partake in the sacrificing, preparing, cooking, and eating of the non-vegetarian food offerings. But to whom were these animals sacrificed? For which saami were the heads and limbs of the cut animals reserved? This was a far more complicated question. Almost everyone I spoke with at the temple regularly asserted that the sacrifices were performed in Pandi’s name. This would certainly seem to be the case, as the sacrificial yard is located closer to Pandi’s main shrine in the inner sanctum than to any of the other shrines in his temple complex. Furthermore, only Pandi’s statue faces toward the sacrificial yard - both Andicchami and Samaiyan Karuppasamy are located in shrines farther away with their backs turned toward the area where the animals are cut. When the heads and front legs are piled beneath the lean-to, they are placed in an area that Pandi would theoretically be able to see if there were not so many shops built up in the temple complex, as the severed parts are arranged in front of his line of vision (although slightly off to his right-hand side). The faces of the severed goat heads are always turned looking toward Pandi’s inner sanctum, not in the opposite direction where the Andicchami and Samaiyan shrines are located. And while I frequently saw devotees bring chickens inside of Pandi’s inner sanctum so that the priests could present their offerings directly in front of Pandi’s statute, I never saw a similar act performed at the other subsidiary shrines.

Hearing that the animal sacrifices were performed in Pandi’s name, reading the spatial layout of the sacrificial activities, and having witnessed countless possessed people speaking as Pandi demand inquiring devotees to bring him chickens and goats, I
was utterly surprised when I began noticing that everyone I spoke with at the temple claimed Pandi was a vegetarian. Why would a vegetarian god demand animal sacrifice? Many staff members and regulars at the temple explained that while Pandi was a vegetarian, his younger brothers Andicchami and Samaiyan Karuppasamy were not. And while the sacrifices were performed in Pandi’s name, this was done only because he is the main, most powerful deity in the temple complex. In order for a sacrifice to happen within the temple he rules over, Pandi must sanction it, but he himself does not partake in the food resulting from such sacrifices. Instead, he distributes the meat to his non-vegetarian younger brothers. I remained rather confused about this seeming contradiction for quite a while and asked for much clarification on this point from some of the most knowledgeable people I regularly spoke with, including Dhanalakshmi and Shivani. Both of them, along with many others, assured me that Pandi is definitely vegetarian, but as the senior-most deity in the temple and within his own divine family, the sacrifices must be performed in his name and he must take on the role of head distributor.

Dhanalakshmi explained that while it might seem like the animals are sacrificed for Pandi, this is not actually the case. Significantly, when they are brought before him in his inner sanctum, they are brought there alive. She spoke about how many devotees, begging Pandi to spare the lives of a sick or morbidly injured relative, might bring a live goat or chicken to present to Pandi, offering this animal in exchange for the life of their human loved one. Pandi would agree to spare the life of the ill person and accept the living animal in their stead. The offered animal would then be kept alive in the area around his temple for some time. I did see many chickens and goats roaming around in the groves and scraggly brush surrounding the temple complex, and perhaps some of
these animals were the live donations made by devotees. Dhanalakshmi said that sometimes these live offerings would be sacrificed at a later time, but their meat would be freely distributed within the temple as a non-vegetarian *annadhanam* or donated to the priests rather than being returned to the sponsoring family.

Throughout all of these exchanges of living animals and meat, Pandi was always described as vegetarian. Pushing for more information on this point, I asked Dhanalakshmi if she and the other members of the priests’ family were vegetarian because the deity they served was vegetarian. She chuckled and responded that it was “compulsory” that the priests and their families be non-vegetarian. She went on to say that even if she had wanted to eat only a pure vegetarian diet, she would be unable to do so as everyday her family was given non-vegetarian food items prepared from the animal sacrifices performed at the temple.

On a different occasion, Shivani worked to dispel my confusion about Pandi’s seemingly ambiguous status as a vegetarian who accepts animal sacrifice. Shivani explained that Pandi, as the eldest brother and most powerful out of the trio of deities present in his temple complex, must first approve all of the sacrifices that take place there.

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175 She used the English word in an otherwise Tamil sentence.
176 Dhanalakshmi’s point echoes a similar one made by a woman named Rajathiammal (her real name) who is the head prophetess and senior member of the Pandi Koyil priests’ family, as presented in a documentary film made about this woman’s life. See *The Poojari’s Daughter*, directed by Gillian Goslinga (2010, Documentary Educational Resources). Unfortunately, I was not able to meet this important and authoritative woman during my field research at Pandi Koyil, although Dhanalakshmi once offered to introduce us at a later date. Rajathiammal was never present at Pandi Koyil during my near daily visits to the temple, and I am not sure what role she still maintains in the temple’s daily affairs. At least during the period when the documentary was filmed (in 2001), she appears to have been very active. In *The Poojari’s Daughter*, Rajathiammal speaks about how she dearly wanted to be vegetarian and did not like to eat meat, but that she was compelled to do so because of her role at Pandi Koyil. She also explicitly states that it is because Pandi eats meat and forces her to do the same that she is unable to be vegetarian. This is the only instance I am aware of in which a member of the Pandi Koyil community directly attributed a meat-eating diet to Pandi himself. I am not sure whether this discrepancy between my own research findings and those presented in the documentary film are indicative of a change in Pandi’s diet over the intervening years, or some other factor.
in his name. But the meat offerings do not stop with him and he does not personally eat them. Instead, Pandi acts as the gateway through which the meat is funneled downward to the two lesser deities under his care. Shivani further elucidated this point, using me as an example. Shivani turned to Hema and stated, “Julie might like a certain thing and we [meaning herself and Hema] might not like that same thing. But still, we can get it for Julie and give it to her.” In the same way, Pandi procures meat for his two younger brothers and gives it to them although he does not himself partake in it - demonstrating his familial care and generous personality.

At first, I interpreted the claims that Pandi is a vegetarian to be an attempt by some devotees to distance their god from the bloody practices associated with lower status deities in an attempt to “purify,” and “Sanskritize” Pandi. And while this may be a factor influencing the perception of Pandi, his younger brothers, and their various dietary habits, I eventually realized that there was more to this distinction than meets the eye. What surfaced again and again as the most important detail was Pandi’s role as distributive head of his family. The same way power flowed from Pandi toward his devotees, showering his grace and blessings, Pandi was similarly positioned as a conduit within his own family - as the most powerful brother through which all food and resources need to flow before being distributed to the rest. As both source and distributor of power and energy, Pandi’s ambiguous personality traits find their justification.

Some Remarks on Ambiguity

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177 “Sanskritization” is a process whereby lower caste groups emulate aspects of Brahman or other high caste cultural practices in order to achieve upward social mobility. The concept of Sanskritization has been much theorized and debated since its original formulation in M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952).
In the above sections, I have sketched some of the primary ways that Pandi’s powerful personality manifests in his relationships with others. He is both protective and dangerous, sexually provocative yet familial, a vegetarian who accepts animal sacrifice. While many of the people I spoke with at Pandi Koyil mentioned the complex deity’s multiple, seemingly contradictory characteristics, they typically did not attempt to resolve this ambiguity. For instance, although many commented on Pandi’s role as bestower of both blessings and what were at times troubling possessions, his ability to both secure and destroy happy marriages, they did not insist on explaining away these ostensibly opposite personality traits.

As the absence of attempts by Pandi’s devotees to reconcile his seemingly opposite characteristics suggests, what I have been calling Pandi’s ambiguity is by no means an anomaly in his cultural setting. In fact, as many scholars of South Asia have indicated, ambiguity and the multiplicity it fosters is of prime importance in many settings, both religious and otherwise. The anthropologist of Tamil Nadu Margaret Trawick makes this point explicit in her analyses of the key significance ambiguity plays within Tamil religion and culture.178 In her article on the interpretation of an ancient Tamil text, Trawick writes,

> Ambiguity, like logic, is a way of creating meaning. And just as, without logic, many kinds of meaning would be impossible, it is also true that, unless one accepts ambiguity as a property of reality, the world of discourse must often remain meaningless. For the ambiguities in this poem, like the ambiguities in other aspects of the culture, are not presented as puzzles to be solved or decisions to be made. They are intended to remain unresolved. In most cases, the two sides of the ambiguity enhance each other’s meaning. But more than this, in some cases

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it is impossible to make any real sense of what is being said unless the ambiguity itself, with both competing sides, is embraced.\textsuperscript{179}

Perhaps it is not necessary to resolve the contradictory aspects of Pandi’s personality.

Perhaps his power can only be made sense of within the terms of this fruitful ambiguity.

\textsuperscript{179} Trawick, “Ambiguity in the Oral Exegesis of a Sacred Text,” 342.
Conclusion

Amidst the prolific diversity, active possessions, contested prophecies, and apparent ambiguity present at Pandi Koyil, streams of power and intimacy, danger and affection, flow throughout. These themes have proved predominate, although many questions have been left unanswered. Recalling the first day of my period of field research and Rajaselvan’s statement during the car ride from the airport (see p. 7), I can say that, in the end, I have not concluded that Tamil people don’t have a religion. Also, despite Arun from the bookstore’s request to hear my definitive opinion about whether Pandi is really a Buddhist statue (see p. 42), I have to admit that I cannot officially affirm or deny it. As both Rajaselvan and Arun’s comments about my research bring into focus, there was certainly a level of uncertainty about Pandi and his temple. Was it religious? Yes, I think so. What religion? And how? That’s harder to answer.

Scholars of religion have often grappled over the field’s main term. What is religion? How can religion(s) be categorized? Is the term even useful? Is the word too steeped in the colonialist legacy of the field’s founding fathers to be salvaged? As is the case with my lackluster responses to both Rajaselvan and Arun’s questions, my responses to these broad and significant queries must also remain indeterminate. As many commentators on the rich religious plurality in India have suggested, the line between “specific religions” and the line between what is “religious” and what is not is often so

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180 For a discussion of the difficulties of defining “religion,” the challenges religion scholars have faced trying to define it, as well as a poignant argument for the continued need for scholars of religion to define their constitutive terms, see Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), especially Chapter 2, “Boundaries: Constitutive Terms, Orienting Tropes, and Exegetical Fussiness,” 29-53.

181 For the colonial legacy of the category of “religion” and various “religions,” see especially Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
blurry that the more we research, the more complex the situation reveals itself to be.\(^{182}\) In the case of Pandi Koyil, the plurality evident in the multiple communities who worship Pandi certainly contribute diverse opinions about who he is, where he comes from, and what he can do.

But while a huge number of different opinions, diverse constituencies, varied practices, multiple narratives, and competing voices of authority surround Pandi’s powerful personality and the temple in which he sits (possibly in meditation) doling out boons, a poignant simplicity prevails: Pandi is intimate with his devotees, and they with him. On one of my very first days conducting field research at Pandi Koyil, Hema and I spoke with a young priest in the inner sanctum, explaining my research and beginning to ask questions. When I inquired about the origin story of the temple and its main deity, he said that he didn’t know. Both Hema and I found this claim extremely strange as he was a temple priest - holder of a hereditary position of authority within a popular temple where almost everyone seems to have some opinion on Pandi’s story. Perhaps he was confused by our question, bored by it, or just simply uninterested in answering. But what the priest did choose to speak about was something that he apparently felt was far more worth sharing at that moment. The priest explained that if a person addresses Pandi using kinship terms, calling out to him *Amma!* (mother), *Appa!* (father), *Anna!* (elder brother), *Mama!* (maternal uncle), then Pandi will be very kind to that person. The priest went on to describe how using such terms creates intimacy between the worshipper and Pandi, and, for instance, if the devotee chooses to address Pandi as *Appa*, they will feel as if Pandi is “standing behind them as a father.”

So, at least according to this priest, Pandi is moved toward familial intimacy with his devotees, despite the different (and at times, gender non-conforming) kinship terms that those closest to him may choose to address him by. For anyone familiar with religion in India, these observations will immediately evoke classic descriptions of *bhakti* - religious devotion - wherein extreme closeness and mutual dependence between deity and devotee are established. Despite Pandi’s ferocious reputation, dangerous character traits, and controversial worship, at least in his willingness to “stand behind” his devotees as a father, as a mother, as a brother, as an uncle, he appears not so different from other deities, in other temples, in other parts of India and elsewhere. And this is likely so: Pandi perhaps is not unique at all, despite (or perhaps because of) the great diversity of practice and opinion that he fosters. But for Shivani, for Dhanalakshmi, for Kaliyamma, Kumari, Latha, and many others, Pandi is *their Appa*, their *Amma*. He is their *Anna*, and *Mama*. Both this and that.
Works Cited


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