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# Like an Indian God

## *Hinduisation of the cult of Saint Anthony of Padua in Tamil Nadu*<sup>1</sup>

Brigitte Sébastia

### 1- Introduction

The shrine of Puliampatti is located near Tirunelveli, in the south of Tamil Nadu. Dedicated to saint Anthony of Padua, he has a double identity: it is a pilgrimage centre and a 'hospital'. Pilgrims who attend it belong mostly to two castes: *paravar* which are the fishermen of the Fishery coast and *nāṭār*<sup>2</sup> which traditionally collect fruits of coconut trees and borassus palmyra to make wine, alcohol and sugar with the sap. While the devotion of *paravar* to Saint Anthony is inherited from the missionaries who evangelized the region, that of *nāṭār* is the consequence of the foundation of the village and the church by two families. Patients, quite often accompanied by one or more members of their families, suffer of ailments belonging to three main categories: 1-serious psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia, bi- or mono-polar disorder, mental retardation; 2-somatic and depressive disorders due to traumas; 3-organic diseases. The patients of the third category, who are taken to the shrine after to be discharged from hospitals due to the incapacity to cure of them, quite often die few days following their arrival. The two first categories of patients distinguish themselves not only by their illnesses, but also by the manner they express it: patients with psychotic behavior are never possessed, while those who experienced high traumatic events are subject to frequent possession symptoms.

Indians, like many other societies over the world, hold witchcraft and /or evil spirits responsible of psychiatric and mental disturbance as the result of transgression of a social or divine order. In the way to identify the cause of the disorder and to rectify the situation, they invoke Hindu deities or sufi saints (*pīr*) who are lying in the *dargā* who have the reputation to defeat the evil spirits or to overpower the effect of sorcery. Some Catholic icons have also this quality so that they were promoted by missionaries of India to perform exorcisms. However, the correspondence of missionaries which exposes many detail on the Indian life, rarely mentions Saint Anthony of Padua to perform exorcisms and one can wonder why this saint has this specificity in Tamil Nadu, and more specifically, at Puliampatti. This question is all the more relevant as, in western Catholicism, although his cult is very important, he is never invoked to drive away demoniac entities.

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been written from a thesis titled *Les rondes de saint Antoine. Culte, affliction et possession à Puliampatti (Inde du sud)* defended in 2004 and published by Aux lieux d'Être in 2007 under the same title. The fieldwork of sixteen months was financially supported by the French Institute of Pondicherry through a fellowship.

<sup>2</sup> The transliteration used for Tamil words follows that defined by the Tamil Lexicon, Madras, 1982. The plural of words is *kaḷ* which change according to the final letter: *kkaḷ* after a vowel; *kaḷ* after a consonant excepted 'm'; *ṅkaḷ* where 'ṅ' is the nasalization of the 'm'. The plural of caste communities is not marked. The Sanskrit words are specified by 'sk.'

Based on the ethnographic study of the shrine of Puliyampatti, the objectives of this article are to show how Saint Anthony of Padua and its cult have been absorbed into the Indian pantheistic universe. The saint holds a function similar to that of deities which, in popular Hinduism of this south region of Tamil Nadu, assures protection against various life hazards and provides help and relief to people, notably women who are the first victims of this society undergoing social, economic and structural transformation (marital violence, escalation of dowry, polygamy, male descendents, alcoholism, work and economic insecurity) In Puliyampatti, devotees perform specific rituals which are not possible in the famous shrine of Velankanni Virgin, the place of her apparition in India. The acceptability of practices is based on the quality of the icons defined by the Church. Virgin, considered as pure must be protected from 'superstitious rituals' which, in opposite, are possible for Saint Anthony. In other words, Virgin is treated as the Great Devī while Saint Anthony as a minor god. By this difference, his cult is rich of a great variety of Hindu practices and conceptions.

## 2- Foundation of the shrine of Puliyampatti

Susaikanninadar, a nonagenarian, is the owner of the largest hotel of Puliyampatti, today managed by his three daughters. He is the descendant of Antoninadar, the founder of the Saint Anthony shrine. He told:

In the village of Kilavipatti, near Sivakasi, there were two brothers, Ramanadar and Lakshmananadar. Both *nāṭār* were Hindus. One day, they left their village to go in search of a good job. They arrived at Naraikkinaru (village at 6 km of Puliyampatti) where the *ūrttalaivar* (chief of the village) who was *tēvar* gave them some job. But they got trouble with him and went to the *jamīntār*<sup>3</sup> of Maniyacchi who hired them for cultivating his lands. He gave them a small plot of land to build their hut. This was the beginning of the hamlet of Pulliyampatti.

Later, Antoninadar Puliyampatti, my ancestor came. He came from Puntapanai, a small village near Eral. He was also a *nāṭār* but Catholic. The *jamīntār* of Maniyacchi hired him and put him at Puliyampatti with Ramananadar and Lakshmananadar families. Ramananadar who had a daughter, gave in marriage to him, who thereby became a Catholic. Antoninadar founded a small chapel in coconut leaves and put a statue of Saint Anthony. He took care of the shrine until the Jesuits discovered Puliyampatti and succeeded to capture the chapel by dint of trials. They demolished the chapel and build a new church with brick walls. My ancestors continued to manage the chapel as catechists (*upatēci*) until a permanent priest was located here.

The author of the booklet on the shrine Punita Antōniyār tiruttalam (1973) states the 17th century as its edification time. But, it is invalidated by the list of Susaikanninadar's ancestors who served the church until 1954. This list which mentions six generations suggested that the shrine was not very old when the Jesuits appropriated it in the early 19th century. This dating is confirmed by the origin and identity of the founders of the village and the sanctuary. Robert L. Hardgrave (1969) and Dennis Templeman (1996) who studied *nāṭār* caste, considered that it emigrated from the former kingdom of Travancore (south part of Tamil Nadu) to six cities of the

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<sup>3</sup> A *jamīntār* was a territory owner (*jamīn*) for which he had to pay land revenues thanks to the taxes collected from people who farmed his lands.

North Tamil Nadu during 19th century; Sivakasi was their first location. Regarding Antoninadar, he came from a region which knew a strong evangelic activism by protestant and catholic missions in the mid-18th and 19th centuries. Thus, as he was a Catholic, the edification of the shrine is more recent than the 17<sup>th</sup> century. If the dating of the shrine foundation is uncertain, that of the church of Saint Antony is well known. The Directory of the Diocese of Palaiyamkottai (1973) mentions it was built by the French Jesuits of the New Mission of Madurai<sup>4</sup>. It is based on the records in the diary of Father Gregory, Jesuit missionary from 1849 to 1853, which recounted: “The September 14, 1851, leaving Sivalaperi, I had to go Puliyampatti to visit the church of Saint Anthony which is building - the brick kiln is ready.”

The church of Jesuits has been enlarged by keeping entirely the altar of Saint Anthony and it reopened in 1961. Many infrastructures has been added in its compound which allow to accommodate numerous of pilgrims and patients and their families, and especially, favour long stays from few days to months, and even, years.

### 3- A shrine organized for pilgrims and patients needs

Some infrastructures were built by priests who administered the parish and by some laymen. French Jesuits have erected ecclesial buildings (priests' residence, shelter for the procession carts) while diocesan priests have built lodges, a small *maṅṭapam* (hall) and a small clinic in the Mary Immaculate convent at Savalaperi, a small hamlet nearby Puliyampatti. Some devotees have offered a large *maṅṭapam*, two *cattiram*, the *koṭimaram* and a small chapel called Mātā Kōvil. The present *maṅṭapam* consists in a large hall with an altar where masses are said during pilgrimage days and where people, pilgrims as well as patients and families, find protection from sun or rain. They also sleep there during the night, the head oriented towards the altar, in order to favour incubatory dreams in which Saint Anthony is expected to come and give his instructions for improving or getting healing<sup>5</sup>. Excepted the *maṅṭapam* which was built with political objectives, the four other edifications were offered by *paravar* families of Tuticorin, and are related to some attributes of Saint Anthony resulting from his hagiography or belonging to the pan-Indian context in which the cult was developed.

The *cattiraṅkal* are pilgrim shelters located in the part of the village where *nāṭār* are located. The pilgrims, mostly *paravar*, occupy these shelters when they organize a visit to Saint Anthony for fulfilling a vow or performing the ear-piercing ceremony for a child. The first *cattiram* was built in 1942 by Pullavarayar to thank for his daughter's healing who suddenly began dumb. Saint Anthony is celebrated for his talents of preaching, a quality that he acquires

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<sup>4</sup> The Society of Jesus was broken up by the brief Dominus ac Redemptor by Clement XIV July 21, 1773, and this, until 1838. However, before this papal decision, Portugal in 1759 and France in 1764 had decreed the dismissal of the Jesuits established in India, in order to stop the famous quarrel on the Malabar Rites (see Meersman 1971). However, the French Jesuits stayed in India and worked under the jurisdiction of the Foreign Mission Society appointed in 1776 by Louis XVI and approved by Rome to replace the Jesuits (Launay, I, 1898).

<sup>5</sup> Incubation is a therapeutic method very ancient. fort ancienne connue sous le terme d'incubation. It was known in Mesopotamia, in Egypt and especially in Greek where it was practised in 300 to 400 *asklepiads*, therapeutic shrines of the god of medicine *Asklepios*, in which patients stayed until their healing (Kakar 1996; Nassikas 1987; Weatherhead 1955). This practice is also performed in Hinduism (Morinis 1982)

after his tongue was discovered in perfect conservation state at the moment of the translation of his body. According to the custom of thanksgivings established in some Catholic pilgrim centres in South India, Pullavarayar offered a golden ex-voto in the form of tongue. This form of ex-votos which symbolizes the subject of the vow on a plate of metal (part of the body; child; couple) was very popular in western Catholicism, but its adoption in Indian context has been facilitated by this pre-existing expression. In Hinduism, the common ex-votos are the shape of animals (horse, *naga*) and deities in pottery or in stone settled in front of the temple, of cradles or winnowing baskets for child vows or of *tāli*<sup>6</sup> for marriage arrangement. *Tāli* as well as cradle has been incorporated among the ex-voto used by Indian Catholics.

The second *cattiram* was offered by Marchiado for the protection of his last child who escaped of the death after he lost each of his newborns. As it will see later, this miracle mirrors the history of the founding of Saint Anthony cult at Puliampatti, as it was after the death of his twelve children that Antoninadar has accepted to recognize the power of the saint and to put him in the shrine.

The *koṭimaram* was offered by the great grand-father of Dasan. This structure is a pole to the summit of which is erected the flag of Saint Anthony at the beginning of his annual festival. The annual flag is offered by Dasan who performs the ritual of its erection every year. This ritual is based on Hindu temple festival and means that the flag, embodying the power of the deity (exteriorized form of the deity), protects all the devotees residing in the village. The pole is situated in front of the deity shrine. The ritual of flag erection is performed by the dominant caste which holds the precedence, but at Puliampatti, *nāṭār* who hold precedence as descendants of the founder's shrine, do not participate to the annual festival due to conflicts with the clergy (Jesuits, diocesan priests). Dasan's great grand-father offered a wood pole when he got a child after praying Saint Anthony; the first celebration of the flag took place in 1919. Fifty years ago, Dasan fell ill, he was seized with convulsions (*valippu*) and his mental state was not very good (*putti cariyāka illai* 'son intelligence n'était pas bonne'). Suspecting a spell (*ceyvinai*), his parents decided to take him to Puliampatti for a period of thirteen days<sup>7</sup>. During a night under the old *mandapam*, her mother had a dream in which somebody told her that if they replace the badly damaged wood pole by a new one in iron<sup>8</sup>, her son will be cure. Since the cure of Dasan, the family perpetuated the celebrations of the flag started by their ancestors.

The last structure, *Mātā Kōvil* (chapel of Virgin), does not result from a vow. This building was erected on a land bought by a *paravar* from Susaikanninadar for constructing a family vault. But the priest did not agree this project which would have aroused indignation from devotees due to impurity related to the death, and thus the *paravar* converted the building into a chapel. Despite of its name, the chapel does not possess any statue of the virgin, but a Descent from the cross; Marie Magdalene who prays at the foot of the cross is likened by devotees as Virgin. The place that was chosen for erecting the vault is interesting because the entrance should

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<sup>6</sup> The *tāli* is a thin cord made of 108 threads and colored with curcuma (purifying and cooling substance) which is tied to the bride neck during marriage ceremony. In Catholicism, the jewel symbolizing a Hindu god which is hung up to the cord is replaced by a cross or icon of Virgin. The *tāli* as an ex-voto consists in the thin cord on which a piece of curcuma is hung up.

<sup>7</sup> The number of thirteen refers to the specificity of Saint Anthony's cult. According to the tradition, thirteen was the date of his death.

<sup>8</sup> The replacement of the wood by iron is in relation with the opposite qualities of these materials. Iron is considered to repel the evil spirits while they are kept by the wood. The presence of a wood pole in Hindu temple is to protect the shrine from malevolent forces (Reiniche 1979).

be situated just in front of Saint Anthony altar so that the people buried at this place might benefitiated from the power of the saint. This idea is based on the concept of *darśan* (sk.; tm: *taricanam* ‘vision’), a Hindu devotional ritual which consists in ‘seeing’ the deity and ‘be seeing’ by it in order to get its power and protection. This concept is central at Puliampatti because the middle of Mātā Kōvil and the *koṭimaram*, both erected at the east, in front of the Saint Anthony altar (like in Hindu temple, the deity faced up east) corresponds to the statue of the saint. These three places are very frequented by devotees, patients and their families who circumambulate around the three structures. While state of possession is rarely manifested inside the church, it is intensively expressed at the *koṭimaram* where patients have talks with Saint Anthony and at Mātā Kōvil where they beseech Saint Anthony and Mātā for relief.

#### 4- Saint Anthony, the kulateyvam of *paravar* and *natar*

In the West, the devotion to Saint Anthony of Padua is very much alive. From the number of candles burning in front of his statue and his presence in the churches, his cult is as fervent as that of the Virgin. If he well-known specialty is to recover lost things, his worship is not confined to this only area. In her ethnographic study on the saint, Elisabeth Blanc (1991) has shown that devotees invoke him for mundane affairs, from child request to healing through success in examination, marriage etc. She states: he is “a saint to do everything”, a confidant, a friend, almost a member of the family that we visit regularly.”

Saint Bonaventure, in his Song, claimed (*Petit trésor des amis de Saint Antoine de Padoue* : 32):

If you want miracles, go to Saint Anthony! He has power over death, fault, disasters of any kind, demons, leprosy and all diseases. He breaks the chains, calms the waves and recovers lost things and limbs.

The cult of Saint Anthony has spread in India through missionaries who worked for the Padroado<sup>9</sup>. The saint was native of Portugal and belonged to the Order of Friars Minor. In his iconographic study, Louis Réau points out that during the 16th century, Saint Anthony became “firstly the national saint of Portuguese who put their churches abroad in his name, and then, an universal saint” (1958 III: 117). Therefore, it is possible that his cult in southern Tamil Nadu was promoted by Franciscans, or by Jesuits as Francis Xavier distinguished himself by the christianization of *paravar*<sup>10</sup>. Put at the prow or on a small altar, the saint protected the vessels against sinking during the travels across the dangerous waters of Cape of Good Hope. The importance of Saint Anthony cult is remarkable along the Fishery coast by his numerous small chapels erected on the beach or in the villages. Having adopted the custom of the missionaries, *paravar* used to protect their fishing by a statue of the saint tied around the pole or drew on the hull. Finally, the miracle of Saint Anthony that *paravar* regard as the most important is the

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<sup>9</sup> The Padroado was fixed by the bull of Sixtus IV August 21, 1472. This signature confirms the bull of Nicolas V June 18, 1452, granting to King Alfonso V of Portugal privileges on trade and right to evangelize people discovered during their voyages.

<sup>10</sup> For the christianisation of *paravar*, see Susan Bayly (1989); Inès G. Županov (1999).

preaching to the fishes, a miracle quite often depicted in churches and altars dedicated to Saint Anthony.

*Paravar* make up the group of pilgrims the most important; the second community in size is *nāṭār* due their involvement in the foundation of the shrine. For these two communities, Saint Anthony of Padua is the *kulateyvam*, family god or caste god<sup>11</sup>. In Hindu devotion, the *kulateyvam* assures protection of the family/caste, and in compensation, it receives an annual cult organized by family and / or caste. Because of their function, they hold a privileged place within the domestic sphere for protection against difficulties of the daily life, and for performance of biographical ceremonies (naming ceremony, ear-piercing ceremony, marriage, ceremony of the 7th month of pregnancy) which integrate new members into the family; the child becomes a full member of the paternal line, and the bride by joining her new family has to adopt its *kulateyvam*. These ceremonies are held preferentially in the temple of the *kulateyvam*. However, to celebrate the naming or the ear-piercing ceremony (*kātukuttu vīlā*), people prefer to go to the main temple of their *kulateyvam*. Catholics have remained in large part these customs considered by the clergy as social practices and some churches, notably pilgrimage centres dedicated to the virgin such as Velankanni (Sébastien 1998), offer the services for the performance of devotional and biographical rituals.

#### 4-1- *Nērttikkaṭaṇ*: a relation of obligation

The pilgrimage day of Puliampatti is Tuesday which corresponds traditionally to the day of week when the Saint Anthony's corpse was buried. But for important vows and ceremonies, pilgrims come the last Tuesday of each Tamil month. This choice is based on Hindu concepts on effectiveness and completeness of the vow. The end of the month is followed by the beginning of a new one which, implicitly, induces renewal and regeneration. Choosing the end of a month to thank the deity for its intercession, devotees put all chances on their side so that their afflictions cease completely. This time is also appropriated for the ear-piercing ceremony due to the fact that regeneration is in the heart of the ritual. Regeneration concept which is central in Indian devotion is expressed through some religious practices.

Thanking for the fulfillment of a vow is a devotional act performed in western Catholicism. However, at least in its present practice, thanks are rarely mentioned in the books of prayer intentions of the churches which have a miraculous statue. For example, the statistics by G. Herberich and F. Raphael (1982) show that the 'thanks' addressed to the Virgin of Thierenbach represent only 6.6% of prayer intentions and 3.4% when they are accompanied by a new request. Comparatively, the statistics I made from the thanksgivings written in the magazine *Vailankanni Calling* and exposed in the Velankanni ex-voto museum, show a very different devotional practice as 66% concern thanks and requests, and only 22% thanks and only 4% for requests. This difference is understandable by the conception of devotional expression of the *bhakti* in which the devotee, as *aṭimai* (subordinated person), *kaṭavuḷḷukku kaṭṭuppaṭutal* (god slave) interacts directly with his elected deity. The *bhakti* is a religion of emotion and communication in which the devotee is in contact with the divine through touch, vision, prayers, songs, spiritual exercises. As defined by Madeleine Biarreau (1994), *bhakti* involves a relationship of grace from the god to its creature and an entire devotion relationship from the

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<sup>11</sup> In south India, caste and family merge on due to the fact that the preferential marriage, according to the Dravidian kinship, is endogamous.

creature to the god. In this relationship, the vow is central for its importance as well as by its formulation. A favour can not be begged without promising any compensation. In Tamil, the word 'vow' is translated by *vēṇṭatal* 'to wish', and more interesting, by *nērttikkaṭaṇ*, made of *nērtti* 'which is equitable' and *kaṭaṇ* 'loan'. This word gives an account of what is at stake in the prayers: maintain of the communication between the devotee and deity through a relationship of dependency. This relationship must never be interrupted; the devotee fulfils his promises to the deity and, again, begs it for other favours. The maintenance and quality of the relationship devotee / divinity does not focus on the content of the vow (request / promise) but on compliance with commitments and obligations. The manner to thank the deity for its favours is very various in India comparatively with western countries: to go to pilgrimage by foot which may take several weeks; to visit the deity's shrine several times (for ex. to go to Puliampatti thirteen successive Tuesdays); to circumambulate a certain number of times (3; 13; 108) around the shrine or the *sanctum sanctorum* by walking, by rolling on the floor, by laying all the body and walking a distance pertaining to the body length; to offer all kinds of things such as money, ex-voto, written witness of the miracle, and also hair and an *acaṇam*, two important offerings which merit attention.

#### 4-1-2 Hair: 'a dominant symbol'

Hair offering or shaving (*moṭṭai*) is a devotional practice and a part of the ritual of ear-piercing ceremony. It symbolizes the regeneration. Shaving has been introduced into catholic practices because it is considered as a penance and is assimilated to the tonsure of some Catholic orders. If traditionally, *moṭṭai* means the complete removal of hair, at Puliampatti, *paravar* adopt often the tonsure of Franciscans.

The ear-piercing ceremony is practised, in principle, when the child is young, seven, nine, eleven, etc., months<sup>12</sup>. It consists to shave his head, to pierce his ears, to give him a bath and to dress him with new cloths. Shaving and ear-piercing are practised within the compound of the shrine by different specialists, some belonging to barber castes, the other to the caste of jeweller. The ritual involves the participation of the extended family, and notably of the mother's brother who is, in the Dravidian kinship context, the person who finances the ceremony. The ritual is performed in the morning before the celebration of the mass at the *maṇṭapam*, and a meal, called *acaṇam*, ends the ceremony.

In the context of disease, *moṭṭai* is practised by way of thanks for a healing. This ritual corresponds to what Van Gennep called a 'rite of passage', a rite performed to mark the beginning of a new life stage, here, to put an end to the period of illness and to start a new life. At Puliampatti, many patients affected by mental disorders perform shaving to force Saint Anthony to cure them, i.e., to deliver them from 'evil spirits harassment'. The removal of hair seems inadequate if one considers the symbolism of hair in the Indian conception of mental illness. As mental illness is considered resulting from evil spirits, the possession manifestation is expressed by codified gesture, among them, by head whirling with untied hair. Untied hair is an expression of possession because evil spirits are supposed to enter into a person through hair and to leave the

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<sup>12</sup> The symbolism of imparity belongs to conception on transaction that is expressed through the devotion toward the deity. While parity involves completeness, imparity means the continuity of transaction. It is well shown by money transaction in traditional area where the sum may be 101 or 1001 but never 100 or 1000.

body through a hair lock located on the summit of the head. When after long negotiations the evil spirit agrees to come out, the exorcist pulls out the lock and nailed it down on the trunk of a *pulimaram* (tamarinier), a tree which is considered attracted evil spirits (Tarabout 1999).

The symbolism of hair is so rich in symbolism that it is a 'dominant symbol' according to Victor Turner's expression (Nabokov 2000). The different meanings attached to the same symbolism sometimes seem contradictory, but the meaning is defined by the context. We may state that two opposing ways of a same substance have a close symbolization, and even, identical. If the shaving is done for thanking or requesting of mundane things, it is also practiced to express a state of asceticism, a situation in which the person is temporarily or permanently cut off from mundane life. The body marking, for exemple, favours the separation of a deceased person from the living word and indicates the state of impurity which restricts them to take part in auspicious social celebrations. Shaving is also practised by people who choose a religious path (Jain, Buddhist) or who are assigned to religious duties (brahmins), activities which prevent or limit sexual practice, a central activity in human relationships. The congruence between adoption of the chastity and the obtaining of spiritual powers is a fact that Marine Carrin observes in her study of santal women (tribe) who become priestesses (1997). The Goddess manifests to them as she goes long matted locks of hair appear on their head and their psychology and physiology change with the cessation of menstruation. Marine Carrin analysis differs from the psychoanalytic theory in *Medusa's hair* (1984) by Gananath Obeyesekere who considers the bun of tangled hair locks (hindi *jota*) as an expression of the phallic shape and shaving as a principle of castration. From speeches and life stories of the priestesses, Marine Carrin notes that the appearance of *jota* coincides with the loss of sexual identity. The cessation of menstruation involves the stopping of reproductive function and, thereby, the disinterest in sex and the social world.

#### 4-3 *Āṭuvaṭṭal* Adaptation of the goat sacrifice

Puliyampatti is well known for its offerings of animals. Each week, on average twenty goats and a few cocks are 'sacrificed' to Saint Anthony and the number reaches fifty the last Tuesday of Tamil months, and one hundred goats during the festival. The word used by people to define this offering is *pali* which means 'sacrifice'. This term refers to the worship of non-vegetarian Hindu deities, but the method adopted in Catholic context differs from that practised in temples. It is a symbolic *pali* authorized by the clergy who get advantages by selling goat skins. This practice is definitively forbidden at Velankanni as the purity of the virgin cannot be stained by the sacrifice blood. She is honored with coconuts, fruits and flowers which are offerings for vegetarian deities.

The protocol of goats offering follows partially Hindu practice. The animal is bathed for purification, adorned with a garland of flowers, and presented to the deity by circumambulating three times around his *sanctum sanctorum*. Then, the animal is beheaded outside the church area, in a *cattiram* or in lodge compound, while in Hinduism the sacrifice is performed in front of the deity. The slaughter of the goat and then, the *cari* cooked with it is done by a specialist hired through the shrine administration or by cooks who are attached traditionally to the family. Once the 'sacrificial' goat is cut up, the pilgrims offer its skin to the church. This practice differs from the Hindu one in which the deity receives the first part of the food (*pataippu* 'food offering on a banana leaf'. The second part of the food is consumed as the *piracātam*, the sacred 'leftovers' of the deity. The skin of the goat donated to the shrine, implicitly, represents the offering of food prepared with the 'sacrificial' goat for which devotees receive from the church a poster of Saint

Anthony regarded as a *piracātam*. Food offerings are a part of Saint Anthony cult as it represents the ‘Saint Anthony bread for the poor’, a practice born from one of thirteen miracles of Saint Anthony<sup>13</sup>. A large part of food is offered to other people, in principle for thirteen people, as *acaṇam*, a term use in Tamil Catholicism. In some *acaṇam* organized by or for a recovered patient, the ex-patient serves the thirteen people by taking a sample of food from each portion and swallowing it. By this process, the food is invested with the qualities of *piracatām*, the divine leftovers. People who beneficiate of the food offerings, are mostly patients and their families. This distribution is an important source of food for them as they are often completely impoverished due to their long stay.

## 5- Saint Anthony, the saint for patients and possessed

Unlike pilgrims, patients and their caregivers belong to the various castes of the region (*paḷḷar*, *kōṇār*, *nāṭār*, *tēvar*, *paravar* etc.) and are predominantly Hindu (55-65%), Christians shared between Catholics (25-35%) and Protestants (5-10%); Muslims do not frequent the shrine, preferring to go to *pīr*<sup>14</sup> in *dargā* which have a very good reputation to expel evil spirits. The most famous among the *dargā* is that of Ervadi, sadly known since the tragedy in 2001, where 28 patients, charred by a fire in a mental home, died. While the venue of pilgrims at Puliampatti is based on the particular relationship they maintain with the saint, patients and their families come for the healing and exorcist qualities of the saint. This shrine is also the most famous for exorcism located within one hundred kilometers.

### 5-1- The construction of the exorcist vocation of Saint Anthony

By its hagiography, Saint Michael is certainly among all the saints, that who is capable to fight the devil. His specificity is present at Puliampatti where, perched above the entrance of the sacristy located in the back of the church, he kills the demon. Unlike Saint Michael’s martial attitude, nothing in the iconography of Saint Anthony of Padua suggests his exorcist function. Carrying Jesus child who is sitting on a book, he is the embodiment of gentleness and paternal affection. Nevertheless, his representation at Puliampatti is different from that in the west as, like Saint Francis Xavier, he brandishes a cross in his right hand, symbol of evangelization. This gesture reminds the technique used by the priests to expel the demon. This specific iconography of the saint at Puliampatti is very little widespread outside Tirunelveli region and Fishery coast,

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<sup>13</sup> The miracle concerns Miss Bouffier who could not open her shop, the lock being broken. She called a locksmith but the man did not succeed and went out to look for another worker. She thought: “if you promise to offer bread to Saint Anthony’s poor, may be he will help you to open the door.” When the locksmith came back with another employee, the door opened without any resistance. From this moment, Miss Bouffier institutionalized the ‘bread of Saint Anthony for the poor’ (*Petit trésor des amis de saint Antoine de Padoue* 1897).

<sup>14</sup> *Pīr* are Muslim saints who died while they Islamized India. *Dargā* were erected where their bodies were buried. Their tombs are famous for exorcism rituals which are often carried out by a person who claims to be a descendant of the *pīr*.

as he is commonly represented under his sulpician icon. Nevertheless, in the whole Tamil Nadu, he is venerated as exorcist and healer.

How Saint Anthony gets his reputation of exorcist and healer in Tamil Nadu, and specifically at Puliampatti? It is difficult to answer as the missionary correspondence is hardly informative on the cult of saints in India. If one considers Saint Anthony's hagiography, the second of his thirteen miracles (or Tuesdays) is based on his ability to fight the demon. This second miracle, which follows the first one dedicated to the protection of children, means that this ability was recognized to him and held a central position in his worship. One can suppose that this function has been spread through missionaries, but through Jesuits or Franciscans? According the French Jesuits correspondence, they practiced exorcism by invoking either the Virgin, the Christ (Guchen 1889) or sometimes Saint Benedict (Lacombe 1892) while Portuguese Jesuits invoked Ignace Lloyala, Saint Francis Xavier or the Virgin, but both never referred to Saint Anthony of Padua. This suggests that this specialty was developed by Franciscans. Jesuits often denounced Franciscans for their lack of harshness to forbidden the superstitious practices and the hinduisation of rituals. If these criticisms are rooted in a period of intense rivalry between *Padroado* and *Propaganda Fide* for the jurisdiction of Fishery and Coromandel coasts, they provide valuable information on the practices of the converts. Among examples, many concern Oriyur, a martyr village of Saint John de Britto that David F. Mosse (1986) had studied in his thesis.

From ethnography of Tamil shrines dedicated to Saint John de Britto, Saint James and Saint Anthony the Desert, David F. Mosse highlights the special qualities of the saints that are sought by pilgrims and patients. These three saints hold the characteristic to be associated with the savage, unorganized, and asocial world. This world is that of Hindu deities who receive animal sacrifices. They protect the frontiers of the village, the lineage and caste. By their functions, they endow the devotees with well-being, but this protection can be reversed into affliction when devotees commit transgressions.

The ambivalent character of Saint Anthony of Padua, and the theme of wilderness are recurrent in the history of the founding of Puliampatti shrine that Susaikaninadar told me. This story is also published in the booklet *Pun̄ita Antōṇiyār tiruttalam* (1973). I mention here the main facts which occur in continuation of the foundation story.

As said previously, Antoninadar married Ramanadar's daughter. The couple had thirteen children. At this time, there was no church at Puliampatti and the family used to go to the small portuguese Saint Francis-Xavier church at Sendapettai (near Sivalaperi) located at six kilometers. The family was happy, but suddenly, their life was stricken by the disease which affected twelve of their children. At each child affected by the disease, Saint Anthony visited Antoninadar and asked him to be install in a shrine. But Antoninadar was too poor for answering the request and finally lost twelve of his children. Badly hit by these series of affliction, he shut himself off into prayers and loneliness. Once again Saint Anthony came to him for requesting him a cult. He went to Sendapettai and confined in Saint Francis-Xavier his distress. During the night, Saint Anthony came and told him to visit the *jam̄ntār* of Maniyacchi for requesting a piece of land. He followed this advice and on the way to Maniyacchi, he met the *jam̄ntār* and described him his misfortunes and his dreams. The *jam̄ntār* informed him that, during the night, a saint person came in his dreams and asked him to offer a piece of his lands for building a shrine. Considering the convergence of the dreams as a sign of the Providence, he invited Antoninadar to choose a land at Puliampatti. Antoninadar inspected the lands for an ideal place, when suddenly, he discovered a *caṅkuceṭi* (a shrub with blue conch-shape flower) which branches formed a cross.

Seeing it as a sign of Saint Anthony's choice, he selected this land. Few days later, while he began the church foundations he dug up a golden cross. From this holy place, he built the altar and put up the small statue of Saint Anthony which was in the cemetery of Sengapettai.

This story shows several interesting features to understand the qualities devoted to Saint Anthony. The first one is the ambivalence of his character which is symbolized by the death of Anthony's children until Antoninadar accepted to establish him a shrine. The series of deaths suggest an act of witchcraft. In popular interpretation, the repetition of misfortunes that falls upon innocent victims is considered as a sign of sorcery resulting from transgression or faults. In this story, the twelve children were subjected to saint's vengeance provoke by the fault of their father, implicitly, his lack of faith and confidence. Such reactions are well known from certain categories of Hindu deities, notably of minor gods. However, if this story highlights the ambivalent character of Saint Anthony, he is also perceived by devotees as much more tolerant and kinder than Hindu gods which are susceptible and very difficult to satisfy. The moderation in the ambivalent character of Saint Anthony as well as of Catholic figures in general, are often expressed by patients who accuse Hindu deities to be responsible for their suffering (*tunpam*).

The second factor that shows a parallel between Saint Anthony and the Hindu minor deities is the wilderness and asocial space, as this space is that of ambivalent deities which possess exorcist qualities. Nearly Iraiyr in Villupuram district, there are two small shrines of Saint Anthony of Padua, established by devotees, which are located in desert places called *kaṭu* ('forest', 'jungle', 'uncultivated land'). One of them is erected at the edge of the forest while the second is built under a grove of banyan trees. Both informal shrines are kept by *upatēci* (catechists) who organize prayer sessions for devotees and patients and practise exorcisms. At Puliampatti today, Saint Anthony shrine is close to houses, but according to the history, the hamlet was funded by two *nāṭār* families, from one Antoninadar married the daughter. This suggests that the number of houses was limited.

The story of Susaikinadar refers twice to universe of the wildness through the details of the chapel location and the origin of Saint Anthony's statue. The place of the chapel was chosen among *jamīntār*'s lands, at the spot where a golden cross was dug up. This detail calls for comments. The discovery of a sacred object is a recurrent feature in the foundation myths of Portuguese (and Spanish) chapels as well as of Hindu temples (Tarabout 1999; Reiniche 1979). David F. Mosse in his thesis on Ramnad district gives an interesting example (1986) of a small temple foundation. Its foundation results from the discover of a buried goddess statue close to a well (*ūruṇi*) after villagers dug at the place of a stone on which a shepherd woman often tripped over when she crossed the land (*kaṭu*). The two terms *ūruṇi* and *kaṭu* refer to wild space, that of the auto-manifested (*cuvāyampū* from sk. *svāyambhū* 'self-existent') deities's seats (*pīṭam*). These deities have an ambivalent, versatile and unexpected disposition.

Saint Anthony statue would come from the cemetery of Saint Francis Xavier church at Sendapettai. The church, very damaged, still exists and is managed by a mother and her son who organize Friday masses. The son who was healed from evil spirits affliction by Saint Francis Xavier, performs exorcism. The church is located in a very wild space near Tambraparni river where some graves are scattered. The nearest houses are located at one kilometer from the church; they are entirely abandoned today. The cemetery, the place where Antoninadar took Saint Anthony's statue to put it in his shrine, gives to the statue a power as huge as dangerous. Funeral areas in India are places where danger and impurity are correlative to regeneration and transcendence. This polarity is symbolized by Shiva-Rudra, the ascetic and the terrible who, covered with ashes collected at the cremation place, has the power to destroy and regenerate the

world. As Isabelle Nabokov (2000) has shown in her analysis of exorcism rituals, the fact that the cremation areas are selected to perform exorcist rituals derives from this double symbolization destruction/regeneration because these rituals portray the separation of evil spirits from body and then the reintegration of the possessed in the social world. The cemetery as the place of origin of Saint Anthony's statue is often mentioned by the devotees when they emphasized the destructive and exorcist powers of the saint.

Lastly, another significant dimension that explains the exorcist function of Saint Anthony of Padua is the superposition of his cult with that of Saint Anthony of the Desert. This cult overlap is not specific to Indian Catholicism and is often reported in iconographical and ethnographical studies in the west (Reau 1958; Blanc 1991). One of the hagiographical particularity of Saint Anthony of the Desert called 'the temptation of Saint Anthony' refers to his numerous battles against the devil and the forces of evil (Reau 1958; Guerin 1878). In India, while the cult of Saint Anthony of Padua is spread among fishing castes, that of Saint Anthony of the Desert is well established among agricultural castes. During the Hindu ritual *Poñkal*, a feast of new rice celebration, in some churches devoted to Saint Anthony of the Desert, the priest uses to bless the cattle the day of *māṭu poñkal* 'cow *poñkal*', as this saint has the quality to protect animals, specifically pigs. According to the records in the diaries written by Father Arulanandan who worked at Puliampatti between 1953 and 1973, his celebration was practiced at Puliampatti, that seems testify a certain superposition of cults.

### ***5-2- The clergy and the patients: ambiguous discourses and pressure***

Therapeutic rituals are fully organized by patients' caregivers or by patients themselves when their stay at Puliampatti is old or when they are alone. These rituals are informal and take place outside the church compound, at the *koṭimaram* and *Mātā kōvil*. Possession state is rarely manifested inside the church, and when it occurs, caregivers oblige the possessed to go out the church. This situation results from the rules imposed by the clergy, aware to maintain order and orthodoxy inside the shrine. The priest considers that possessed are rarely affected by 'demonic attack', 'bad evil' as people think, they are mentally ill people. He interprets evil spirit conception of people by their ignorance and therapeutic rituals by an expression of 'folk therapy'. By this way, he justifies his refusal to practise exorcism rituals. If the priest gives little credit to 'demonic attacks' in the possession, however, his sermons abound of references to the 'bad power' (*tīya cakti*) of Satan. Patients are particularly sensitive to these repetitive speeches because, by hearing concepts with which they are familiar, they are reinforced in their interpretation of the illness. In some ways, the ambiguous attitude of Indian diocesan clergy differs very little from that of French Jesuit missionaries who had in charge this shrine. Through their correspondence, the phenomenon of possession is tackled differently according to the period, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century being the transitional period.

Before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the possession narratives were contextualized in a culture where the magical power was well recognized and where people who practised magic were perceived by missionaries as dreadful practitioners. Firmly convinced of the damaging effects of magic, missionaries adhered to the conception of possessed. They rarely refused to perform exorcisms, and even, imposed themselves for this liturgical task. Methods and rhetoric they used, which were defined by western Catholicism, differed little from those of Hindu exorcists. To expel the 'devil', missionaries invoked some saints or the Virgin, gave a holy medal or a Scapular

to the patient, and they sprinkled holy water on them. All these acts had an effect on malevolent spirits which, according to the common concept in many religions, violently reacted when they faced up to holy objects and ask for escaping. Unlike Hindu exorcism which metaphorizes the departure of spirits by cutting a lock of hair and nailing up it on a tree trunk, Jesuits did not perform any ritual of separation. However, this separation is done by conversion to Catholicism. Proposed more or less explicitly by missionaries or desired by the patients as a guaranty of their gratitude, the conversion involved a separation between the world of human and that of 'demons'. While the term 'demon' refers to Satan, the missionaries used it to define all the Hindu deities whatever their status.

The first evidences on the practice of exorcism at Puliampatti are reported in two articles in the French Jesuit journal *Caritas* published in English respectively in 1951 and 1962. They are interesting because they testify the change in possession concepts.

Puliampatti is well known in the south as a popular pilgrim resort in honor of St Anthony of Padua. (...). It is known that among the clients of St Anthony there are not a few non-Christians and that at their investigation what goes by the name of 'devil dance' is sometimes practiced. This has been severely tabooed. (*Caritas* 1951: 160)

A good many pilgrims go to this shrine of St Anthony of Padua. There are always crowds there, but at once a month – the last Tuesday of the month about five to eight hundred pilgrims can be seen there. Among the sick that come there, many of those who are suffering from hysteria and falsely think that it is possession. I saw this year a number of such patients relieved of their sickness. One young woman lost her husband and a few days after she lost her child also –No wonder she got off her head. Her parents took her to Puliampatti and stayed there for bout one month. She got much better. The girl's father had some sense in thanksgiving wanted to become a Catholic. The father, the mother and the girl –all Hindus- began to study catechism and they were baptised. (*Caritas* 1962: 138-139)

These two excerpts show that French Jesuits conception does not differ from that of the present clergy. They condemned the 'demonic dance' that they described as superstitious practice, and rejected the supernatural interpretation to the benefit of mental disturbances. They used a terminology which did not belong to magic, witchcraft, demoniac universe, but which belonged to the alienism/psychiatry vocabulary: 'hysteria', 'insane', 'to get off the head'. This change in the interpretation of possession mirrors that of the Church which accepts to abandon a part of its competence to the benefit of medicine. Analyzed in the west by Giordana Charuty (1985), this conceptual transformation began in the second half of the 19th century and came from the alliance of church and the alienist medicine

This alliance is based on a new division of therapeutic interventions: the Church abandons to the mental medicine a domain that it considered until now as an area within its competence. Although it continues to recognize the demonic origin of some phenomena, the High clergy appears increasingly reluctant to authorize exorcism rituals that the village priests intend to use, especially in the possession epidemics which multiply during the second half of the century (Charuty: 180-181) (my translation).

However, strategic adherence to the alienist knowledge, including individual experimentation relationship to supernatural towards mental pathology, is not without difficulties. The Church can not, in fact, adhere to 'the hateful doctrine' of these rationalist doctors for whom: "there is no revelation that is not a hallucination, miracle that be reduced ultimately to neurosis." So theologians work to demonstrate the existence of supernatural phenomena that are

unexplainable by human psychological processes alone. But conversely, to retain control on beliefs, all the practices which infringe religious orthodoxy will be condemned not only as superstition, but as dangers for mental health, even as signs of madness (Charuty: 181-182)(my translation).

Ambiguities mentioned in this analysis are also in the narratives of French Jesuits. While they denounced the fallacy of interpretation of suffering to which they attribute a psychological or mental origin, they recognized the thaumaturgic power of Saint Anthony. This means that, although they were aware to prevent the shrine from certain 'superstitious' practices, the 'miraculous cure' allowed to testify the superiority of the Catholic religion on Hinduism, the omnipotence and benevolence of the thaumaturgic saints in comparison with the evil nature of Hindu deities. Moreover, the Jesuits did not ignore the limits of evangelization: a too high intolerance could result in the refusal to convert or to abandon Catholicism to the benefit of another religion more permissive.

These ambiguities and limitations in respect of orthodoxy are certainly the reasons for which the shrine of Puliampatti does not lose its vocation to heal mental disorders. Furthermore, as Susaikanadar told, Antoninadar and his descendants who hold the function of *upatēci* (catechist), took care of the shrine and its devotees until it was declared an independent parish in 1954:

After Antoninadar founded the shrine, miracles occurred. By using the lamp oil which was light in front of Saint Anthony statue, people realized that it possessed healing properties. And thus Antoninadar who was very sensitive to these miracles decided to take care of the shrine and its patients and began the *upatēci*. When patients came, he rubbed the sick body part with the lamp oil, chanted some prayers and practised exorcism.

When Father Arunalandan was appointed to the shrine, he forbidden the exorcist practice and thus my ancestor refused to continue to work as catechist.

The difficult relationship between the *nātār* community of Puliampatti and parish priests who managed the shrine on which they are many references in the priest diaries, certainly results from the lost of status and power of the descendants of Antoninadar after the appointment of the permanent priest. It is very rare that a caste who holds precedence accepts to abandon its privileges to the benefit of another caste like in the case Puliampatti where the organization of the annual festival is entirely in the hands of *paravar*. The unique privilege they retain is that the procession cars turn around the part of the village where they live, but it may be noticed that there is no *paravar* in the village and the other inhabitants of the village are Hindu *pallār*, that that justifies the processional route.

## 6- Conclusion

Cults of Saint Anthony of Padua at Puliampatti as well as of the Virgin of Velankanni are very interesting for their hinduisation features. Performance of biographical rituals performance, large variety of ex-voto and offerings such as coconut at Velankanni or goat 'sacrifice' at Puliampatti, devotional gestures and penances, particular rituals in festival celebration are specific to these places due to the fact that they are important pilgrim centres, Velankanni at the national level while Puliampatti at the regional one. The difference of status between these two icons is expressed by the legitimation of practices by the clergy and thus

comparison of these two famous shrines questions the elasticity of the term of 'superstition' that the Indian clergy manipulates for tolerating or rejecting rituals. As these two centres gather many devotees, Catholics and also Hindus, the clergy is obliged to have an attitude more tolerant than that in the ministry of an ordinary parish. Nevertheless, a comparison with Catholic practice in the west shows that the hinduisation of Catholic cults has been favoured by the fact that Catholicism and Hinduism share many common features. Saint Anthony, the Virgin and many other Catholic icons have been easily assimilated to the Hindu pantheon due to their specific functions and their rich hagiography which is comparable to the Hindu iconography and agama, stories of temple foundation and of god miracles. By playing on the similarity between the two religions, the missionaries are reached to impose their religion. But this type of evangelisation has induced cult confusion that the clergy attempts progressively to eradicate.

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