CHAPTER TWO

MYTHS OF MURUGAN: ASYMMETRY AND HIERARCHY
IN A SOUTH INDIAN PURANIC COSMOLOGY*

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Myths of creation tend to be especially informative about the organization of cosmology. Such accounts of emergence often bare cosmological principles that, in other kinds of myth, are condensed or summarized. In this regard, Tamil Shaivite conceptions of the divine seem contrary. On the one hand, there is god, the distant and sublime ruler, who is identified with the cosmos and responsible for its regulation and maintenance. This sense of the divine is central to the theology of Saiva Siddhānta. On the other hand, there is the wholly compassionate divinity who is close to, and is intimately involved with, his devotee. Remote ruler or ardent lover, transcendent or immanent—these abstractions appear mutually incompatible. However, the interpretation offered here of portions of a Tamil text, the Kandapurāṇam (Kantapurāṇam), suggests that these aspects are located along a cosmic continuum that depends for its coherence, in part, on relations of hierarchy and encompassment.

The Kandapurāṇam, likely composed in the seventeenth century, is a classical rendition of the Murugan myth, one prevalent in the northern Tamil country. It tells the story of the god, Skanda, but bears no relation

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1 Proper names and other terms are presented in phonetic approximation to spoken forms. The first occurrence of each Tamil term is followed by an exact transliteration and, in turn, by a transliteration of the Sanskrit equivalent, where relevant. The first occurrence of Sanskrit terms, especially those of less common usage, is transliterated.


3 The Kandapurāṇam was composed by Kacciyappacivacariyar in the Kumara (i.e., Murugan) temple in Kancipuram. For the substance of this text, I rely on the extensive
1. Murugan, south Indian bronze, c. 16th century.

to the better-known Sanskrit *mahāpurāṇa*, the *Skandapurāṇa*. Skanda is known in South India by a host of names and is said to be perhaps the most popular of deities there today. Here, to avoid confusion with the Sanskritic Skanda, the deity will be called Murugan (Murukaṉ) to denote his more transcendent configuration, and Shanmugan (Caṅmukan/summary by R. Dessigane and P. Z. Pattabiramin, *La légende de Skanda: Selon le Kandapurāṇam Tamoul et l'iconographie* (Pondicherry: Institut Français d'Indologie, 1967). Other summaries of portions of this text are given in David D. Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 275 ff.
