1 Prolegomena

1.1 An Introduction to the Field of Research

ஆவதும் பெண்ணாலே அழிவதும் பெண்ணாலே
āvatum peṇṇālē aḻivatum peṇṇālē
Becoming is through the female, destruction is through the female.
(A Tamil proverb)

My research deals with a text[1] that is closely related to an oral tradition. It is a text that is distinct for having no known author, no certain date, and no single fixed composition to work with. My work focuses on the Indian diversity of cultural identities and on the regional sections of society (with their local sacral and political centres) rather than on the Brahmanic cultural spheres and pan-Hindu deities. I have chosen a Tamil context to approach these fields. In the study of oral and local traditions there are many important themes that can be considered. I have chosen only one: story *(katai)*[2] and ritual *(koṭai)*[3]. My work considers the worship of the goddess Icakki in the southernmost districts of Tamilnadu (Tirunelvēli, Tūttukuṭi, Kaṉṉiyākumari) from the perspectives of her story and the ritual it is incorporated into. The first perspective treats the text and its variants and attempts to constitute, as far as possible, on the basis of my present state of knowledge, the 'complete' story of Nīli/Icakki, as preserved today in a number of variants in the *villuppāṭṭu* (bow-song) tradition.[4] It also looks at earlier epochs in order to trace, in chronological sequence, the appearance of this popular figure throughout Tamil literature. In doing so it shows how the local (popular) and classical traditions have a common basis,[5] inasmuch as there exists a psychological and thematic continuity between them. The present undertaking will thus also shed light on the interaction between the local and classical Tamil tradition as mirrored in this particular case study.

By investigating the local tradition, several scholars have demonstrated the diversity and dynamics of this tradition and contributed to our understanding of the contemporary construction of "regional

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[1] The term *text* in the sense I use it requires some clarification. In a strict sense, the word *text* refers to a written tradition. However, it seems justified to extend the use of the term to ritual narratives in an oral tradition, keeping in mind their "quality of coherence" (Hanks 1989:96), their relative stability in the cultural memory, and their eventually being written down for preservation (out of fear of loss) and transmission. For a more detailed discussion, see Gaenszle 2002:12ff.

[2] For a clarification of the term *katai* as it is applied in this work, see Sect. 4.1 below. I frequently use the term *katai*. In doing so, I have in mind the narrative relating to Nīli-Icakki that is closely tied to an oral tradition.

[3] In a strict sense, the term *koṭai* means "gift," and is generally used to refer to the annual festival held in honour of a local deity.

[4] *Villuppāṭṭu* (*vil*, "bow" and *pāṭṭu,* "song") is a genre that only exists in the three southernmost districts of Tamilnadu. For a thorough discussion of this tradition, see Blackburn 1980. The bow *(vil)* is the main instrument used in the performance (see Photo 1, p. 354). It is usually made of a piece of wood taken from the base of a palmyra tree and is about ten feet long. Eleven (and sometimes 13 or 9) small bronze bells are attached to it by rings. The bow-string is made of twisted hide. The sound of the played bow combines the tinkle of the bells and the resonance of the string, and is achieved by striking the string with a pair of thin sticks, one in each hand. See also Blackburn 1986:175.

[5] See Shulman 1986:105–30, and Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986:14f.; cf. Zvelebil 1989:290–303.

identity."[6] Such identities are seen to be mirror images of social and historical processes, and so inevitably are constantly reconstituted. It will become clear from the material gathered during my field research that Icakki, an independent and ambivalent figure who was once human and then deified, provides an identity for sections of the region's population in her function as an "Erinnerungsfigur."[7] A cultural identity is formed by the recitation of her story and hearing about those who were once involved in her social world. One might speak here, in Assmann's (1992:299) sense, of a nexus of culturally remembered history and identity. The text answers the question "Who are we?"[8] and harbours certain social implications. It is interesting to see why the Nīli/Icakki story, which has as its main theme death and vengeance—and may be understood as a narrative of the type violation–death–deification–revenge (see Blackburn 1986:169)[9]—has become such a central one for the Tamils.

My work does not limit itself to an edition and annotated translation, but attempts an interpretation of the text in the context of its performance within the annual *koṭai* festival held in honour of Icakki (also known by the names Iyakki or Ēkki), the "most violent of all Tamil goddesses" (Shulman 1980:194f.). I thus endeavour to approach the goddess from a second perspective: her *koṭai* ritual. Assuming that ritual is a practice, I shall look at the markers in the ritual that highlight the relationship and interaction between the *villuppāṭṭu* text and the ritual practice, as well as the role the text plays within the ritual. Does the ritual apply what the narrative teaches? Or is the ritual a 'text'[10] of its own, which has its own values and programme?"[11] A careful analysis of the ritual will necessarily address important questions of both social and ritual reality, and the ritual's efficacy as well. Here we touch on another significant question: What factors guarantee ritual efficacy?

I consider this local cult to have originally developed out of a tradition that honours powerful childless female spirits of the dead. In the course of time this function receded into the background, and the rites acquired a fertility-enhancing function of tapping these powerful female spirits of the dead (which by then had been subsumed under a composite spirit named Icakki) for purposes of procreation. The ritual thus stands in striking opposition to the story of the goddess, which ends in human death, leaving no chance of reproduction. It is a central concern of my study to show how the goddess's *koṭai* ritual—in a creative, transformative act—turns the wheel from death and revenge back around to where the stories of the goddess originally began: to solicitous care and giving birth.[12]

The narrative theme of a twin sister–brother bond and the inner logic of the ritual's system are likewise important objects of my analysis.

The study of the Tamil epic narrative *Icakkiyammaṉ Katai (IK)* and the analysis of the worship of the goddess Icakkiyammaṉ within its religious, social, and regional context necessitates a combination of various methods and an exploitation of other areas of research. My study of the *koṭai* rituals has been greatly influenced by, in particular, the scholarship and teaching of David Shulman and Don Handelman. Their approaches to Tamil culture have entered my work at key points.

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[6] See Chap. 3 "Culture panindienne et identité régionale, l'apport des sources orales" in Champion 1996.

[7] I borrow this concept from Assmann 1992:52: "Das *kulturelle* Gedächtnis richtet sich auf Fixpunkte in der Vergangenheit [... auf] Erinnerungsfiguren, wie sie in Festen liturgisch begangen werden und wie sie jeweilige Gegenwartssituationen beleuchten. Auch Mythen sind Erinnerungsfiguren: Der Unterschied zwischen Mythen und Geschichte wird hier hinfällig." Assmann (1992:139) states further: "Das Bewußtsein sozialer Zugehörigkeit, das wir 'kollektive Identität' nennen, beruht auf der Teilhabe an einem gemeinsamen Wissen und einem gemeinsamen Gedächtnis [...]."

[8] I draw here on ideas put forward in Assmann 1992:142.

[9] Blackburn (1986:172) emphasises that this type of story is the "heart of the bow-song tradition."

[10] Note that linguistic models applied to ritual studies are nothing new. Several anthropologists have addressed the question. Kreinath (2004:275), for instance, speaks of ritual performance "as a commentary on social reality." I do agree that the ritual can be read and interpreted almost as one would read a written text. To follow the analogy of language and reading, the signs and modules of a ritual could be considered to be like the words in a language. The individual attributes and utensils of the ritual (the colours, gestures, ornamentation, sounds, smells, and objects featured) are, then, like the letters of the words in a text.

[11] One might think here of a normative 'text'. Cf. Assmann (1992:142), who defines normative texts as follows: "Hier geht es um Werte [...], um die Gelingensregeln des alltäglichen Zusammenlebens [...]. *Normative Texte* antworten auf die Frage: "Was sollen wir tun?"

[12] The findings confirm and exemplify the remarks of Blackburn et al. 1989:11: "Epic performances ritually protect and cure, while epic narratives express local ideologies [...]."

1.2 The State of Research

Hitherto existing works available on the topic at hand include five editions (to which I shall refer later) along with a number of general studies and summaries on the *IK/Nīli Katai* (by Blackburn, Hameed, Reiniche, Shulman, and Zvelebil; further Ti.Ci. Kōmatināyakam, A.Ka. Perumāḷ, and Ve. Vētācalam), but so far no detailed study. To my knowledge, Indologists have paid little attention to this Tamil *katai* of epic length. Zvelebil's article (1989) addresses the question of dating and evaluating the text. In a short, but relatively complete listing of literature, Zvelebil shows that there are literary analogues to the name Nīli stretching back both to the *kāppiyam* (Skt. *kāvya*) work *Cilappatikāram* (450–500 C.E.?) and to Śaiva literature from the seventh to nineteenth century, though he emphasises that it cannot be conclusively stated that the Nīli in the *katai* is identical with the Nīli mentioned either in the *kāppiyam* literature, or by the Śaiva authors Tiruñāṉacampantar and Cēkkiḻār, or in the Jain work *Nīlakēci.* Shulman (1980:194f.) deals with Nīli, "the most violent of all Tamil goddesses," in connection with his religious study of the "motif of the sealed shrine" (prominent in some of the Tamil temple myths) and its association with "miscarriage of justice." Blackburn (1980) in his pioneering studies on performance within the *villuppāṭṭu* bow-song tradition is of particular relevance to my topic in his section on "the split-goddess" (205–23), where he focuses primarily on the dual sexuality of goddesses in *villuppāṭṭu* stories. On the basis of a synopsis of the Nīli story (206f.) he demonstrates the "murderous aspect of the goddess's sexuality" (205) prevalent in stories that he classifies as type B ones. Another study, an article by Hameed (1971), is an attempt to identify "structural patterns" by comparing the *Nīli Katai* with the *Kaṇṇaki Katai* on the basis of Vladimir Propp's model of analysis. Some years later Reiniche (1975:173–203) examined Nīli/Icakkiyammaṉ within her article on "Les 'Demons' et leur Culte dans la structure du pantheon d'un village du Tirunelveli." A historical study of the worship of *iyakki*s (Skt. *yakṣī*s) was undertaken by Ve. Vētācalam (1989). A.Ka. Perumāḷ (1990:35ff.) presents the different versions of the *Nīli Katai* in the form of summaries. Finally, Ti.Ci. Kōmatināyakam (1979:263–311) offers a version of the *Nīli Katai* told in a very simple style.

Four of the five *IK/Nīli Katai* literary editions accessible to me claim to be academic in nature: One is Cu. Caṇmukacuntaram's, published by Maṇimēkalai Piracuram, Madras. Another is the edition published by the Institute of Asian Studies as part of the Folklore of Tamilnadu Series. It contains a translation and comprehensive introduction. This edition of the *Nīli Yaṭcakāṉam* (ed. Pū. Cuppiramaṇiyam) can be taken as a version rooted in the northern region of Tamilnadu, and so of secondary relevance to my study. The third and fourth editions are very recent publications and came to my knowledge too late to be considered during my editorial work. One is the edition produced by A.Ka. Perumāḷ and S. Śrīkumār (2002), and published by Śrī Ceṇpakā Patikkam. The two authors inserted the edition into a revision of a work published earlier by A.Ka. Perumāḷ (1990; see above). The other recent edition, the work of S.M. Mahāleṭcumi (2003), was published under the title *Muppantal Icakkiyammaṉ Kaṇiyāṉ Pāṭṭu.* Neither edition comes with a translation. I do not regard these new publications as having rendered superfluous my own editorial work which, apart from the text, offers variants and an encyclopaedic apparatus as well. The edition prepared by Ku. Āṟumukapperumāḷ Nāṭār of Akastīcuvaram, Kaṉṉiyākumari district, aims at a broader public, not academicians.

1.3 Personal Research Work

In the initial part of my study I shall deal with the text. It is as a performative popular-religious oral poem that the text should be approached by the critic.[13] I shall first provide a complete description of the material available in hand-written manuscripts.

[13] I use "popular religion" (though the term itself is contested), since other older schemata of "folk" or "little" traditions have been critiqued and largely abandoned.

Secondly, I shall offer an edition of a relatively complete unpublished palm-leaf manuscript, the N1 version, together with an annotated translation. The text and the translation have been twice completely revised, first after the rediscovery of the lost variants N2-N9, and again after the discovery of the N10 version.

Thirdly, in an attempt to give significant new contour to the textual history, I have produced on the basis of the newly discovered N10 version—the longest and most comprehensive manuscript now available to me—an encyclopaedic apparatus (Appendix C) of lines and phrases belonging to a shared repertoire and an underlying basic text, possibly oral. The way it was compiled and is presented differs considerably from conventional ones, and may perhaps be useful for the future editing of texts of this nature.

Fourthly, I shall examine the allusions in the classical tradition to Nīli in the story of the *IK* sung today within the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition. I have newly compiled and enlarged the list of references to Nīli in Tamil literature that has been accumulated by various scholars in the past. (Though I have added to the lists of others some further references to Nīli in later Tamil works, I cannot claim to have made an exhaustive search.) In addition, I have undertaken a thorough examination of all sources and come to a number of conclusions—a task that to my knowledge has not previously been done.

Fifthly, in the second part of the study I shall first provide an introduction to the *IK,* referring in short to its genre and the problem of dating, and then proceed to address themes of the story that may be considered central. I shall also provide an alternative reading to the usual interpretation of this story, which has generally been viewed differently from what I propose here.

Sixthly, in the third part of my work I shall introduce the reader to the living context of the *IK* and examine the two names the figure we are concerned with goes by: Nīli and Icakki. I shall discuss this apparent contradiction and reveal its causes.

Seventhly, I shall then present a detailed investigation into the *koṭai* ritual sequence and an analysis of the multifaceted rituals I attended. Furthermore, I shall examine the organisation of the ritual and the relationship between ritual and text.

Eighthly, on the basis of video documentation, audio recordings, and notes, a detailed tabular summary of the ritual sequences of the *koṭai* festival in Paḻavūr has been drawn up (Appendix A).

Ninthly, a firsthand experience of the performance in all its concrete sensuousness can only be feebly conveyed by a written description. Therefore I shall present video documentary material of the ritual practice in which I participated.

The work may be read and understood on several levels. The reader who wants to focus on the text, literarily rendered (Section 5.4), and on the ritual, sequentially described (Section 9.2 and Appendix A), may dispense with the interpretative sections. For those who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the text and ritual, and particularly how certain notions that can be seen as central to Tamil culture are played out in each, Section 4.7, Chapter 6, and Sections 7.3.1, 7.3.2, 8.2, and 9.3 are offered. For more wide-ranging questions pertaining respectively to the dynamics of a local (non-Brahmanical) ritual, its organisation and inner logic, the relationship between ritual and narrative text, and the significance of the local versus translocal nature of text in the ritual context, Sections 9.4, 9.5, Chapter 10, and Section 9.3.4 will be profitable. The reader who is interested in bardic creativity, the variability versus the fixity of texts, or distinct models for editing texts may be referred to Section 2.3 and Appendix C.