

2 The Text Material

2.1 A Text Branching Off into a Northern and Southern Line

The ancient story of the vengeful Nīli of Paḷaiyaṅūr-Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, which in my opinion goes back to a basic text—some underlying, and possibly oral one that created its authors¹—evidently branched into two lines, a northern and a southern line, the latter a product of the text’s migration southwards to the region of the bow-song tradition, which it became tied to.² These two branches seem to have become largely autonomous. However, despite the ramification, the standard theme remained the same: Nīli-Icakki’s avenging of her own and her brother’s untimely and violent deaths on both guilty parties, the Ceṭṭi³ and the seventy Vēḷāḷas⁴. The earliest version of this narrative must presumably be sought within circles of the Vēḷāḷas. A listing of allusions in Tamil literature (see my discussion in Chapter 3) shows that the story relates to the Vēḷāḷas and must have been orally widely known in Tamiḷakam (Tamil country) by the seventh century C.E.⁵

The *IK* text I am focusing on belongs to the southern line, which has its own integrality. Its features are those of oral epic texts in general, and the *villuppāṭṭu* (bow-song) tradition in particular.⁶ As Blackburn (1980:206) has pointed out, “the vil pāṭṭu variant is identical to [the] standard variant except that it intensifies the sexual conflict by altering the relationship between the man and woman; she is not the wife of the Brahmin, but his lover.”⁷ There is yet another divergence to be mentioned: the heroine’s name is now mainly (if not exclusively) Icakki rather than Nīli, the latter being the sole one she goes by in the northern branch.

My base text (N1) was obviously produced in a series of versions which are relatively close to one another, very much in the way oral epics are naturally diffused. The text was in the hands of bards rather than in the hands of musicians and performers of texts who used to sing before chieftains and at court.⁸ Moreover, this epic narrative of the southern branch is a highly ritualised text, exclusively connected with the *koṭai* festival, where it is performed as a bow-song (*villuppāṭṭu*). The text is found throughout the southernmost districts of Tamilnadu (Tirunelvēli, Kaṅṅiyākumari) and is still very much alive.

¹ I argue that there is no single author who composed the *katai*.

² I follow here the Finnish theory of diffusion, the thesis that stories do migrate; see Krohn 1926:123.

³ Ceṭṭi, Ta. “merchant.”

⁴ Note that the various names (Vēḷāḷa, Veḷḷāḷa, Piḷḷai, and Karaiyāḷar) used to designate the social group of landowning peasants are used interchangeably throughout the work. For further details on this social group, see Sect. 7.2.

⁵ For a seventh-century textual allusion to our story, see Chap. 3, No. 4 *Tēvāram*.

⁶ The bow-song tradition is distinguished by its themes, the ritual context of the *koṭai*, the phenomenon of possession, and the character of the deities (i.e. Muttār Ammaṅ, Cutalaimāṭaṅ etc.).

⁷ See Sects. 2.2.1 and 4.7.

⁸ I base myself on Blackburn (1980:107f.), according to whom there is no evidence that royal courts ever patronised the bow-song tradition; the author assumes that they did not do so, given the very low social status of the Nāṭār bow-song bards.

The *IK* of the *villuppāṭṭu* genre, is, however, only one piece of a tradition which accumulated around the narrative core. The *yaṭcakāṇam* genre, for instance, also took up the Nīli story. The common knowledge and historical memory relating to the main events, then, not only produced an epic narrative, but made the leap to the semi-courtly environment of the *yaṭcakāṇam* genre favoured in Andhra and Karnataka, where it united with genres such as *nāṭakam* and *kaṇiyān pāṭṭu*,⁹ and, perhaps, other ones found in Tamilnadu as well, such as *terukkūttu* (street theatre) and *kaṇiyānkūttu*.

The Two Lines and Their Distinguishing Marks

Based on the most significant differences in motifs, I have classified the stories of Icakki into two main types: the sword–fire type and the margosa¹⁰ leaf–plough type, the former associated with the northern line and the latter with the southern line, as is echoed by the motif of the plough (*nāñcil*) itself being featured in the very name of the southernmost region of the Tamil land: Nāñcilnāṭu¹¹ (the land of the plough). This categorisation, which provides an easy way to distinguish between the two lines of the *katai* (story), emerged from an examination of the various versions (with regard to deviations, gaps, and thematic elaboration), and has time and again suggested itself. As for the function of the motifs, in all the versions focused on, the margosa leaf and sword are virtually without exception treated as instruments in the human defence arsenal against hungry spirits, while the plough and fire are two means of ending one’s own life. It seems logical to assume that the binary oppositions of margosa leaf–plough on the one hand and sword–fire on the other likely belong to two different cultural spheres. This is supported by a further point—a third category, which may be added as a distinct motif of the two lines: the pair devadāsī–wife,¹² representing not only two strands of the Tamil female world, but also two distinct traditions as far as our story is concerned, namely the matrilineal (and devadāsī) tradition on the one hand,¹³ and the patrilineal tradition on the other.¹⁴ A good case can be made that the southern line bears the hallmarks of a superimposed matrilineal tradition, the devadāsī motif being only the most visible one.

Where the one category appears, the other is missing. Still, there are interesting cases where a motif from one branch interacts with a motif from the other, in versions where the two lines mix. Such cases are found in N5, N6, and N9 (see the chart below).

For readers who want an overview of where the text of one branch appears to contain episodes or elaborations of episodes not found in the other, the distinguishing motifs defined above can prove to be a helpful tool.¹⁵

In Appendix B I exemplify the significant differences and variations between the two branches on the basis of some select topics.

I had access to ten¹⁶ manuscripts of the *Nīli Katai/IK* (The Story of Nīli/Icakki), of which eight were taken into consideration when preparing the text edition and translation of N1. N3 was irrelevant for my purposes, in that it is a very simple prose text, and N4, too, whose story-line is entirely different, has been ignored except when analysing and interpreting textual content. Three versions (N10, N8, N2) proved to be helpful when correcting the highly defective N1 text, and therefore their manuscripts

⁹ See Mahāleṭcumi (2003), who shows that the *kaṇiyān pāṭṭu* genre adopted the story as well.

¹⁰ Ta. *vēmpu/vēppamaram*; also known as Hi. *nīm*, Engl. neem or Indian Lilac (*Azadirachta indica*, Juss., *Melia azadirachta*, Linn., family Meliaceae). The margosa is the royal emblem of Pāṇṭiyaṅ kings (see *Pura* 77). In *Cil.*, Chap. 16, the Pāṇṭiyaṅ kings are described as wearing margosa leaves as a sign of victory won in battles.

¹¹ Nāñcilnāṭu, divided since 1956, comprises today’s Kaṇṇiyākumari district and parts of Kerala state.

¹² See the passage in Blackburn’s work (1980:206) cited above.

¹³ In the matrilineal (and devadāsī) tradition, the sister–brother bond is strong and consequently important.

¹⁴ In the patrilineal tradition, the husband–wife bond is given preference.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the motif pair devadāsī–wife.

¹⁶ N11 of Perumāḷ and Śrīkumār 2002 came to my attention too late to be included in the editorial process.

deserve careful attention. The various versions are distinguished by number and referred to so throughout:

N1 (Ms. Tollaviḷai/K.K.Dt., T. Naṭarājan):	(devadāsī-) margosa leaf-plough
N2 (Ms. Pākkiyaletcumī of Teṭkukkūṇṭal, K.K.Dt.):	(devadāsī-) margosa leaf-plough
N3 ----	
N4 (Publ./Ms. <i>Peṇṇaraciyar Katai</i> , Cukkuppārai):	entirely different textual content
N5 (Ms. Trivandrum Library):	(devadāsī-) margosa leaf-fire (hybrid version)
N6 (Ms. IAS, Chennai):	(devadāsī-) margosa leaf-fire (hybrid version)
N7 (Publ. Maraimalai Library, Chennai):	(self-impregnated wife-) sword-fire
N8 (Ms. Ku. Āṟumukapperumāl/K.K.Dt.):	(devadāsī-) margosa leaf-plough
N9 (Ed. Cu. Caṇṇukacuntaram./Nellai Dt. ¹⁷):	(devadāsī-) sword-fire (hybrid version)
N10 (Ms. T.M.P., Paṇaṅkoṭṭāviḷai/K.K.Dt.):	(devadāsī-) margosa leaf-plough

2.2 The Edited and Translated Text: The Choice of the N1 Version

It is the version N1 of Tollaviḷai that I have edited and translated here.¹⁸ This decision was a natural one in view of the length of the palm-leaf manuscript copied by Professor T. Naṭarājan. For a long time it was the longest text available in the corpus. Despite its defective nature I have chosen it for this reason. Though the lately discovered N10 version is now beyond doubt the longest and most valuable text in the corpus, my work was too advanced to present to the reader an edition and translation based on it. However, my reconstruction and translation of N1 make it relatively easy for readers to follow the story and thus engage in content analysis. The shortcoming of the choice has been compensated for by making the N10 text the basic point of reference in the encyclopaedic apparatus (see Section 2.3).

2.2.1 A Synopsis

The synopsis given here of the *IK* of the southern branch is mainly intended to help the reader to find his way through the confusing landscape of the various versions.¹⁹

The story begins with the birth stories of the main characters and moves on to the Brahmin priest who has squandered the entire temple treasury on his lover, a devadāsī. When he runs out of money, he is thrown out by the woman's mother. He then leaves the village, but his lover runs after and catches up with him. Further along the way, when she grows tired and falls asleep, he kills her and steals her ornaments. Only a *kallī* plant²⁰ is witness to this. The brother of the murdered woman finds her and commits suicide. The murderer dies too, bitten by a snake. This first part of the narrative, in which the violation occurs, is only a small fraction of the whole. The major part of the story takes place in the second portion, in which the murdered devadāsī becomes an avenging goddess. In this portion, the three persons are reborn: the Brahmin as a Ceṭṭi merchant's son, with a margosa leaf to protect him from evil, and the murdered lover and her brother as twins of the Cōḷa king. However, the twins turn out to be *pēys* (hungry spirits) and are abandoned in the forest under a margosa tree. There the twin brother is murdered by landowning Vēḷāḷas/Karaiyāḷars, who cut

¹⁷ Perumāḷ (1990:54) explicitly states that this version, featuring Nampi and Cantāṇa Naṅkai, is unique to Nellai district.

¹⁸ See Sects. 5.3 and 5.4.

¹⁹ For an account of the events in the *IK* that are standard in Kaṇṇiyākumari district, one may also refer to Blackburn 1980:206–8. His summary, incidentally, in treating the sister-brother bond as insignificant is representative of previous scholarly neglect of this—in my opinion—important theme.

²⁰ Latin *Euphorbia tirucalli*. I have been told in several interviews that the type of *kallī* plant mentioned in the story is not identical with the type now found growing in southern India.

down the tree in which he has been living as a hungry spirit. The woman swears an oath to take revenge on both the merchant and the Vēḷāḷa landowners. After a long search, she finds the merchant and chases him through the forest to a nearby village, where the seventy Vēḷāḷas live. There the merchant pleads with the Vēḷāḷas to protect him. Then the avenging woman appears before the assembly of the Vēḷāḷas, disguised and with a *kallī* plant in the guise of a baby in her arms. She pretends to be the legitimate wife of the merchant and lays claim to him as her husband. Since no decision has been made by the time the sun is setting, the two are locked in a room overnight, in the belief that they are a couple. The merchant, knowing her to be a demoness, is afraid, but the seventy Vēḷāḷas promise their own lives as security for his. In the intimate setting of the room, the woman sings the merchant to sleep with a lullaby, thereby convincing the people that all is well. However, when the protective margosa leaf falls from his hand she kills the merchant and escapes by way of the roof. The avenging goddess, in a second move, takes revenge on the Vēḷāḷas by assuming the shape of an old woman who claims to be the merchant's mother. When the Vēḷāḷas come in the morning, they find the man covered in blood and the *kallī* plant on his chest. The Vēḷāḷas are forced to be true to their word and commit suicide. Then the goddess kills their wives and children with poisoned milk, thus extinguishing all trace of the community. Afterwards she is reunited with her brother.

2.3 The Encyclopaedic Apparatus: The 'Complete' *Icakki katai* (see Appendix C)

I have attempted to present a fairly 'complete' story of *Icakki* in a transparent, yet concise form in an encyclopaedic apparatus divided into various registers (see Appendix C).²¹ The manner in which this has been done differs considerably from conventional ways. The apparatus reflects a method evolved in the process of trying to understand and reconstruct the highly defective N1 base text, which was, until a late phase of my work, the longest version available to me. The apparatus was initially produced on the basis of N1. However, after the discovery of N10 I took a new approach—one that relied upon the latter as the basic unit, while still including the complete N1 text and some other versions. It is this series of relations that the apparatus makes transparent. I do not provide a critical edition in the classical sense; what I do offer in lieu of it is a conspectus that presents the N10 text with the corresponding parallels and variants.

The evolved method, which followed leads supplied by the manuscripts, is also used to consider an unresolved issue, namely whether these kind of oral epics represent a fixed or an improvised text (I may refer to the debate in the Homeric tradition). In short, the model I present here concludes with a profile of a text that is to a large extent a relatively fixed one, enclosed within a 'complete' text which admits of improvised variations based on formulaic oral material, very much in the style of any living oral epic. It is an oral text that is more or less stable,²² whole lines of which are often identical with those of other versions. This result is not surprising, for in the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition the oral text (written down on palm leaves and in notebooks²³) has been passed down and memorised verbatim. Moreover, it is important to remember that the ritual context—the only environment in which the *IK* is performed—requires utmost

²¹ My attempt takes as an underlying assumption that none of the versions by itself forms the whole of *Icakki*'s story.

²² Note the textual fixity claimed in Smith 1991:25ff. for the epic of Pābūjī, a story of a god in Rajasthan.

²³ That these oral epic narratives are available as products of scripturalisation very probably has to do with the fear within the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition of losing these oral 'texts' in the process of cultural change, especially against the background of the relatively recent, yet increasingly radical, changes occurring in the artistic and social self-understanding of the singing groups and in the wider cultural landscape (for similar argumentation in another context, see Hinüber 1990:71). Representatives of the old *villuppāṭṭu* style provide particularly strong support for this, since they expressed great interest in my project of editing the *IK*. There is one more reason why the story is written down. Today the transmission of the oral epic narrative from one generation to the next takes place in a blended form of learning; that is, the student learns the text both on his own and to a lesser extent in the presence of his teacher, as I learnt in a personal communication from the bow-song bard T.M.P., who runs a *villuppāṭṭu* school in Nagercoil, Kāṇṇiyākumari district.

accuracy in the rendering of the story. It is no accident, therefore, that the palm-leaf manuscript or the notebook is present at any given performance. Nevertheless, textual variations in the form of extensions or diminutions invariably occur, owing to the interaction between the ritual, the bow-song, the patron, and the audience within the ritual process.²⁴

The reader may want to consult the apparatus for other scholarly purposes as well. He may at first have some difficulty in finding and interpreting the relevant information. The added explanation of my basic arrangement supplemented by a brief list of symbols and abbreviations used in the encyclopaedic apparatus (see Appendix C) will hopefully make this task easier.

My apparatus is divided into different registers. Some of the versions available to me have not been included. They failed to meet the criterion of being oral texts of the bow-song tradition, and therefore were not relevant to the editorial decision making. Their inclusion would only have made it more difficult to keep the apparatus transparent. This does not mean that these variants are of no interest in their own right. In the encyclopaedic apparatus I assume that the N10 narrative order is the ‘correct’ one both in terms of logic and continuity. By comparing line by line all the versions that were considered when working on the text, I was able to develop a measure of their relative importance within the collection.

The apparatus provides us with a set of background information:

- Apart from restoring the logical order of the N1 text and making the reading of N1 transparent on the basis of other versions
- it constitutes a complete text of the “Story of Icakki” (*IK*).
- In doing so, it identifies what the N1 text and other shorter versions did not consider important and therefore skipped.
- However, it also provides us with details of what the N1 text added to the text of N10.
- It enables us to classify the texts within the collection as “identical,” “very similar,” or “differing,”
- and proves the fixed nature of a great portion of the *IK* text (see, for more details, the explanatory section in Appendix C).
- By following the line numbering of the two versions N10 and N1, the scheme provides us with an idea of the scope of freedom within which the bow-song bard can arrange and rearrange the narrative order. Concerning N1, it makes it unmistakably clear that changes in the order of narration occur in the middle of the *IK*, and to a lesser extent at the beginning and end.
- Furthermore, the apparatus shows where the text of the N1 version is missing in the other versions,
- and again, where passages are found in N10, etc., but missing in N1 (see, for example, N10.1450 / N8.535 *piṛappilullāpalāpalaṅō* / N10.1451 / N8.538 *ottumaṅṅarmantiriyum*).
- However, what one should not expect to be recorded is those text passages from versions N2, N8, etc. that do not appear in N10 and N1. This failure of the apparatus is compensated for by having consulted the individual Mss. N2 and N8, which provide these details. The additional text in them that appears neither in N10 nor in N1 comprises 272 lines (see, for more details, under Section 2.4, Nīli8).

2.4 The Text Corpus

It is necessary to say a few words about the manuscripts. All of them were made available to me as hand-written paper manuscripts copied from the originals. Insofar as they are not copies of palm-leaf manuscripts,²⁵ this will be noted.

²⁴ See the insightful discussions in Honko 2000 and Honko 1998.

²⁵ There were two varieties in use: the leaves of the palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*), and those of the talipot or South Indian fan-palm (*Corypha umbraculifera*). The usual width of the former is between 1 and 1.75 inches; that of the second, between 1.75 and 3 inches. Tamil manuscripts, *ēṭu/ēṭṭuccuvaṭi*, were generally written on palmyra palm leaves. In southernmost Nāñcilnāṭu, palm leaves were until about 1930 the most common writing material (Blackburn 1980:103). According to

Nīli1 – The edited base text:

The unpublished copy of a manuscript on palm leaves from the village of Tollaviḷai (on the way to West Maṛavaṅkuṭiyiruppu) was made available by Professor T. Naṭarājan of Maturai Kamrāj University. Here called N1, it is 2,485 lines in length, and was until the recent discovery of version N10 the longest text at my disposal. It has necessarily served as the base text. The text, written in Tamil cursive script using the local conversational idiom (a regional Tamil dialect influenced by Malayalam and the caste dialect of the Nāṭārs), is in parts barely legible, and contains various scribal mistakes and illegible corrections. It has been corrected (in parentheses) a good deal, and omissions have been supplied at times. For a more detailed account of the peculiarities of this text I refer to Section 5.1.1.

Nīli2:

This unpublished version, which I call N2, bearing the title “Paḷakai Nallūr Nīli eṇṇum Icakki Ammaṅ Katai,” consists of 98 pages of A5 notebook format, in small, at times unclear handwriting, with 19 lines on each side, and a total of 1,857 lines. N2 is evidently identical with N8, a published version prepared by Ku. Ārumukapperumāl Nāṭār. The copyist of the palm-leaf manuscript, Ms. V. Pakkiyaletcumī of Teṛkukkūṇṭal (adjacent to Kaṇṇiyākumari town), informed me on my visit during the fieldwork (March–April 2002) that she had supplied Ku. Ārumukapperumāl Nāṭār with the palm leaves, borrowed by her from a temple (whose location she could not remember) for her own purposes. Though both are congruent texts, Pakkiyaletcumī’s version successfully corrected some mistakes, and I have benefited greatly from this. The text, written in Tamil cursive script, uses the local conversational idiom (a regional Tamil dialect influenced by Malayalam and the caste dialect of the Nāṭārs). This text is an integral part of the bow-song (*villuppāṭṭu*) tradition.

Nīli3:

Another unpublished text (N3) in an A5 notebook format (made available by Professor Dr Marie-Luise Reiniche and handed over to me by Professor Dr Ulrike Niklas) contains 134 pages in a large, clear hand-written form, and 10 lines on each side, each line consisting of a maximum of four words. The author and title are unknown. The text, composed in simple prose style, belongs to the southern line. This text, a popular lay retelling of the story, is evidently not used by bow-song (*villuppāṭṭu*) singers.

Nīli4:

This hand-written version, copied by Tirumāl Nāṭār of Teṛkukkūṇṭal, bears the title “Icakkiammaṅ Katai.” The text, written in Tamil cursive script, uses the local conversational idiom (a regional Tamil dialect influenced by Malayalam and the caste dialect of the Nāṭārs). The palm-leaf manuscript belongs to P. Taṅkarāj Nāṭār, pūjārī and owner of the Icakkiammaṅ temple in Cukkuppārai Tēriṅṅai near Akastīcuvaram, Kaṇṇiyākumari district. This palm-leaf manuscript, which I saw on my visit on 27 March 2002, was edited by Dr Ki. Jeyakumār and T. Pūminākanāṭaṅ, and published in the folklore series of IAS, Chennai, in 1995 under the title *Peṇṇaraciyar Katai*. It includes a word index.

I have an excellent audio recording (3 x 90 minutes) of this version performed in the old bow-song style at a *koṭai* festival of the goddess Icakkiammaṅ at Cukkuppārai temple, a shrine quite probably dating back to the seventeenth century (*kollam* year 845=1670 C.E.; see Jeyakumār and Pūminākanāṭaṅ 1995:xxviii). I would like to thank P. Taṅkarāj Nāṭār, the owner of the temple, for this generous gift.

Despite its being different from all the other versions available to me, certain passages suggest an acquaintance with them. It looks as if this version did not migrate from the north of Tamilnadu, but is rooted strictly within the southern region, an area that stretches from Maturai to the very south of Cukkuppārai Tēriṅṅai near Kaṇṇiyākumari (see Jeyakumār and Pūminākanāṭaṅ 1995:xv). N4 (Princess Puruṣā Tēvi’s story) does not fit into either category defined above, and has to be regarded as a different epic narrative, namely the story of Periya Icakki (Puruṣā Tēvi) and Ciṅṅa Icakki (her nine-month-old foetus)—in other words, a mother–daughter story that, in the person of Ciṅṅa Icakki (who is made motherless), nevertheless displays certain features linking it with the *IK* (e.g. her becoming a vengeful

Blackburn (ibid.:104), “the dated vil pāṭṭu manuscripts fall between 1600-1965.”

spirit). Though the *Peṅṅaraciyar Katai* is irrelevant for the edition of the N1 text, it still needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting the text and worship, since it features two sister-like Icakkis: a benevolent elder and an enraged younger one. The matriarchal system underlying this version raises a series of important questions for the comprehension of the versions on which I am focusing. In terms of the two categories of epics, namely “martial epics” and “sacrificial epics,”²⁶ expressions coined by V.N. Rao (1986:140), we may identify the story as a “sacrificial epic” in which the protagonist is a “female leader,” the antagonist a “member of an alien [group],” the central theme the “protection of [self-]integrity,” the “sources of power” are “mental strength [and ...] inner-directed power,” the “mode of action” is to “kill [one]self” / “self-immolation,” and the “end result” is “victory over the enemy.”

The text details the exploits of the warrior-queen Puruṣā Tēvi (“masculine goddess”), Peṅṅaraci’s daughter, who presided over a country in which all the citizens were women with a pronounced preference to live without men.²⁷ Its setting is within a royal milieu. The conflict involves both direct female–male opposition²⁸ and an indirect clash between patri- and matrilineal structures. The supernatural rebirth of Puruṣā Tēvi on Mt. Kailāsa and her being renamed Icakki is the starting point of her transformation²⁹ into an exclusively benevolent goddess, who along with her vengeful daughter (a nine-month-old foetus ejected onto the battlefield, and thereafter called Ciṅṅa [Little] Icakki) and her former enemies returns to earth—she herself with the aim of leaving all further revenge up to her daughter (Ciṅṅa Icakki). The latter’s atrocities start in Maturai (the town where the goddess Miṅṅakṣī rules) and, turning southwards, spread to Ēḷukāṇi, Tāḷakkuṭi,³⁰ Mēḷāṅkōṭu,³¹ Kokkōṭṭūr, Kaṅṅiyākumari,³² Parakkai Nīrmataku, and Kāṭṭuviḷai (which has a Puruṣā Tēvi temple). The atrocities finally stop in Cukkuppārai, the locality of the Nāṭārs of Tikkukuṭi, where she is deified. The Cukkuppārai temple of Akastīcuvaram (seventeenth century) is the southernmost temple dedicated to Icakki (Puruṣā Tēvi/elder Icakki) and Ciṅṅa Icakki (daughter/younger Icakki).

The synopsis follows the story-line of the edition prepared by Jeyakumār and Pūminākanātaṅ (1995 [=1996]),³³ with comments of my own in brackets:

Beginning with an invocation to Gaṇapati, Sarasvatī, and Murukaṅ, the performative text of epic length proceeds with a narration of the events in the life of Peṅṅaraci, the queen of Tiruvaṅaiyār [who has a reputation for justice], her seven loyal female friends, and her child Puruṣā Tēvi. With the god’s will Peṅṅaraci is impregnated by the south wind [*ciṅkalakkāṭṭu*]—famed for its potency—that blows across the Palk Strait from Cinkaḷam [Śri Lanka] every twelve years. She gives birth to a baby girl, Puruṣā Tēvi [later renamed Icakki].

At the age of seven Puruṣā Tēvi is taught various arts: the classics, the fine arts, and the martial arts

²⁶ The terms have been criticised by Hildebeitel.

²⁷ This female fantasy to live a life without men appears in *villuppāṭṭu* stories elsewhere, as Blackburn (1980:395, n. 32) remarks with reference to “the comments by the seven celestial virgins in the Muttār Ammaṅ story [... and a speech by Kāḷi] in one performance of the Kāḷi Ammaṅ story, [where] [s]he says, ‘Oh, Śiva, we also want to live for 100 years in the forest, and without any male relationships; we want to rule by ourselves!’” – The story of the warrior-queen Puruṣā Tēvi and similar narratives—Zvelebil (1992:103) refers to Arrian’s *Indika*, viii–ix, quoting Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya (ca. 324–300 B.C.) in Magadha, as telling what he had heard, namely “that the Pāṇḍyan kingdom was in fact a ‘queen-dom’ never ruled by males”—are part of a web of stories that relate the southernmost part of India to the reign of women.

²⁸ See Blackburn 1980:203. For an account of the female–male conflict as a primary theme of *villuppāṭṭu* narratives, see *ibid.*:182ff.

²⁹ In Blackburn’s terminology (1980:395, n. 33), this corresponds to a transformation from a type B to type A story.

³⁰ This is where the grave of the poetress Auvaiyār is found. The Tāḷakkuṭi Muppiṭāri Ammaṅ / Mokampari / Mukāmpari (Puruṣā Tēvi) temple dates back to the fourteenth century. According to temple inscriptions, a renovation of the *gopuram* took place in 1336 C.E. = *kollam* year 511, in the month of Māci (mid-February); see Jeyakumār and Pūminākanātaṅ 1995:xxviiif. (= 1996:xxv).

³¹ This is the site of two temples, one each for the elder and younger Icakki (Icakki and Ciṅṅa Icakki).

³² This is the seat of the virgin goddess Kaṅṅiyākumari/Bhagavatī.

³³ I have drawn on these authors’ own summary (1995:xf./1996:xif.); see also Blackburn’s rough summary (1980:203–4).

of fencing, Cilampāṭṭam [a well-known martial art of Tamils still practised widely in Tirunelvēli and Kaṇṇiyākumari districts], horse riding, and elephant riding.

When Puruṣā Tēvi sexually matures at the age of twelve, she is touched and impregnated in the same way as her mother, by the south wind. [Interestingly enough, the sexual maturation of the female body coincides with the twelve-year rotational arrival of the wind.] Puruṣā Tēvi's mother orders a fortress to be built for the expected child.

The fortress awakens in Cempaṇmuṭi, the king of the neighbouring state, a feeling of envy, which prompts him to send a messenger to ask for safe passage through Peṇṇaraci's land on a pilgrimage to Kāci. The queen denies the request, with the argument that her country is populated exclusively by women. [This is apparently an allusion to a conflict between matrilineal and patrilineal structures.] Cempaṇ cannot stomach this insult and goes to war with the queen.

At first the queen is victorious. Cempaṇ, deeply humiliated, asks for support from the king of Kāṭatti. When Peṇṇaraci realises that she has been defeated, she commits suicide with her seven female friends. Her daughter Puruṣā Tēvi confronts Cempaṇ. She slits her womb, hurls her nine-month-old foetus onto the battlefield at the feet of Cempaṇ, and stabs herself to death with the sword.

Cempaṇ and the king of Kāṭatti, bewildered by the way the women have ended their lives, follow suit, unable to face the idea of surviving virtuous virgin women such as the queen, the princess, and their friends.

All except the foetus go to Mt. Kailāsa to bathe in a fire that transforms them into deities with new names: Icakki (Puruṣā Tēvi), Ceṅkiṭāykkāraṇ (Cempaṇ), and Kaḷukkāraṇ (Kāṭatti). Śiva sends Icakki (Puruṣā Tēvi) on a final mission to Teṅkāci. He promises to grant her any boon if she goes there as the goddess Icakki to find a woman called Poṇṇirattāḷ, to sacrifice her to Śiva by consuming her, and finally to approach his feet: “*unta ṅakkuvaram vēṅṭumē yāṅāl / utta teṅkāci vūrati lēpōy / citti ramākiya poṇṇirāt tālai / ceṅṅē palini yuṅṅē varuvāy / varuvāy palikoṅṅa ṭorunā laiyilē / vantāl varamatu taruvē ṅeṅavē / taruvē ṅeṅavē araṅṅār colla*” (1996:90). Since Puruṣā Tēvi has already indirectly killed her male enemy, she herself seeks no revenge after being reborn, but leaves all malevolence up to the foetus, which becomes the main figure in the remaining part of the story. Having survived the battlefield, the nine-month-old foetus goes forth into the wilderness, where it grows up alone. It is said to have a red face. Śiva orders the girl to go to Mt. Kailāsa to be thrown into the purifying furnace. However, the child does not see any need to do so, considering herself sinless in view of her abnormal birth of being born motherless: “*eṅpēriṅ kurramillai...piṅrāntākkāl tūṭṭumuṅṅu periyavarē eṅṅāyār / iṅṅanta aṅṅē uruvāki īsvararē vantēṅṅāḷ!*” (1996:92).

Unmoved, Śiva hurls the girl into the sacrificial fire (*vēḷvitti*), where she remains for twelve years. [Note again the coincidence of a twelve-year stay in the sacrificial fire with the period during which a female body usually matures sexually.] Once grown into a beautiful young woman [her *alaṅkāram* appearance is described], she comes out of the womb of fire, and Śiva names her Ciṅṅa Icakki (Little Icakki). Śiva sends her to earth accompanied by three guardian demons (Mantiramūrṭti, Cāmuṅṅi, and Kālimūrṭti) and equipped with divine power [to protect the truth and to fight the wicked by causing them to remain barren or to lose their children³⁴]. The first place she visits is Teṅkāci [the abode of Śiva as Kuṅṅālanāṅṅar], where she joins her mother Puruṣā Tēvi, who plays a part in the story of Poṇṇirattāḷ, one of the stories within the story: Kriṅṅaṅ and Lakṣmī are childless and wish to have a baby girl. Śiva grants their wish, and the girl is named Poṇṇirattāḷ. She marries Vaṅṅakar, but remains childless for twelve years. Finally, Poṇṇirattāḷ conceives a baby girl. Icakki (Puruṣā Tēvi) awaits Poṇṇirattāḷ as a worthy sacrifice promised to Śiva. Icakki's plan succeeds with the support of treasure hunters who are in search of the gold of King Veṅkalavaṅṅ [yet another story within the story], gold that he had buried before committing suicide with his wife and daughter. As the treasure hunters' plan is illegitimate, they decide to propitiate the gods by sacrificing a pregnant woman. Poṇṇirattāḷ foresees her fate in a dream. In the ninth month of pregnancy, after sunset, she is accosted by treasure hunters under a banyan tree. They take her to the Aiyaṅṅar temple, raise an

³⁴ See the parallel powers of Icakki in the local story sung during the *koṅṅai* festival at Paḷavūr (Sect. 9.2.2, midnight session).

altar, and sacrifice her. Icakki (Puruṣā Tēvi) has fulfilled the task Śiva had set her. She is freed. Poṇṇirattā, now a hungry spirit, pleads with Śiva-Kuṛṛālanāṭar to grant her the wished-for vengeance. The curse reaches Maturai with a band of vengeful spirits (Ciṇṇa Icakki [the child of Puruṣā Tēvi], Ceṅkiṭāykkāraṇ, Mantiramūrṭti, etc.), who proceed to destroy the town. They spare no one, neither woman nor child. Mantiravēlaṇ, a hunter and *mantiravāti*, is called in by royalty (the Pāṇṭiyaṇ king) to help against the evil spirits. However, he is killed while trying to control them. It is only upon a request of Mantiravēlaṇ's wife that Ciṇṇa Icakki agrees to restore her husband, on condition that they sacrifice their pregnant daughter. Vēlatti agrees and Ciṇṇa Icakki accompanies them to the nearby hills of Ēlukāṇi ("seven estates") close to Teṅkāci. Ciṇṇa Icakki kills Vēlaṇ's daughter and consumes the sacrifice.

Afterward the *pēys* (hungry spirits), Ciṇṇa Icakki, Mantiramūrṭti, and Ceṅkiṭāykkāraṇ proceed to Tālakkuṭi near Nagercoil to commit atrocities on behalf of a man named Maruppaṇ, who is seeking revenge for being humiliated. To appease them, the Karaiyāḷars of Tālakkuṭi build a temple for Icakki near a field owned by Nīlaṇ Kuṛuppu of Mēlāṅkōṭu.

Nīlaṇ Kuṛuppu, disturbed by the pūjā waste thrown on his fields, burns the temple down. Ciṇṇa Icakki and her escort come to Mēlāṅkōṭu to take revenge on both Nīlaṇ and the town. The king of Travancore builds a temple to pacify the demon goddess.³⁵ Finally, the demons go to Kaṇṇiyākumari to worship Bhagavatī,³⁶ and from there to Tenkamputūr to the god Ayyaṇ/Ayyappaṇ [why they go to Ayyappaṇ, a celibate who does not allow women to worship him in Sabarimalai, is not clear to me] to ask him for help in building a temple to serve the people. For some time Icakki stays peacefully in Kāṭṭuviḷai. Finally, the demons go to Cukkuppārai,³⁷ where Nāṭārs live. Ciṇṇa Icakki's basic instincts are aroused once again. This time she turns to Māyavaṇ Nāṭātti. First, she plays a game each night with her, just to kill the virgin girl. Icakki strikes again and kills the girl's mother, Piramacatti. The people call for a *mantiravāti*, who persuades Icakki to come and reveal herself. Icakki advises them to build a temple, adding, "*mantiravāti ceyta tantiramāna tellām / māyavē ceytavarkku ētu colvāl / eṇṇaip piṭittataikka ēlātu untaṇukku...*" Whatever you do, you'll never win. I'll never be bound by you (1996:208).

A point to be stressed most emphatically is that the *Peṇṇaraciyar Katai* is about Princess Puruṣā Tēvi rather than about Queen Peṇṇaraci, and it is her own and her baby girl's psychic disposition that is most clearly delineated.³⁸ According to my main informant, the bow-song bard T.M.P., the *Peṇṇaraciyar Katai* is the story of the "elder sister" (Puruṣā Tēvi), whereas the *IK* is the story of the "younger sister."³⁹ The *Peṇṇaraciyar Katai* is, as far as I know, performed in Kāṭṭuviḷai and Cukkuppārai, but not in Muppantal.⁴⁰ It is striking that the bow-song sung at the *koṭai* festival in Muppantal, a place famous for Icakki worship, contains no echo of the *Peṇṇaraciyar Katai*, even though the elder sister Puruṣā Tēvi is said to reside there;⁴¹ what is performed in lieu of it is the story of the younger sister—namely the *IK*. In this highly confusing landscape of stories it is important to remember that Puruṣā Tēvi, the

³⁵ The royal family of Mēlāṅkōṭu, who had their own local installation of the goddess, considered Icakki (Puruṣā Tēvi) to be a tutelary matrilineal ancestor and protectress of their family's personal political interests.

³⁶ Note their path from Maturai, where the dominant Mīṇākṣī (and her handsome consort, Cokkaṇāṭaṇ) reside, to Kaṇṇiyākumari, the domain of the same *śakti* (female power) in a different form, Bhagavatī Kaṇṇiyākumari (without a consort), clearly marks out the area of matrilineal structures, while the area from Chidambaram northwards (ruled by the dominant Naṭarājā, the dancing Śiva, and his consort Abhiramī) is considered to be bound to patrilineal structures; Tamils distinguish households according to whether Chidambaram (man) is dominant or Maturai (woman). I am grateful to Dr Jeyakumār of Madras University, the editor of the *Peṇṇaraciyar Katai*, for this insightful information, given in a personal communication of April 2002.

³⁷ Cukkuppārai is situated close to Akastīcuvaram, a village that is said to have been the seat of influential Nāṭār families, and that patronises the bow-song tradition as well; see Blackburn 1980:106.

³⁸ Princess Puruṣā Tēvi is just and heroic, her daughter wrathful.

³⁹ Interview of 30 November 2002.

⁴⁰ This was confirmed by T.M.P.

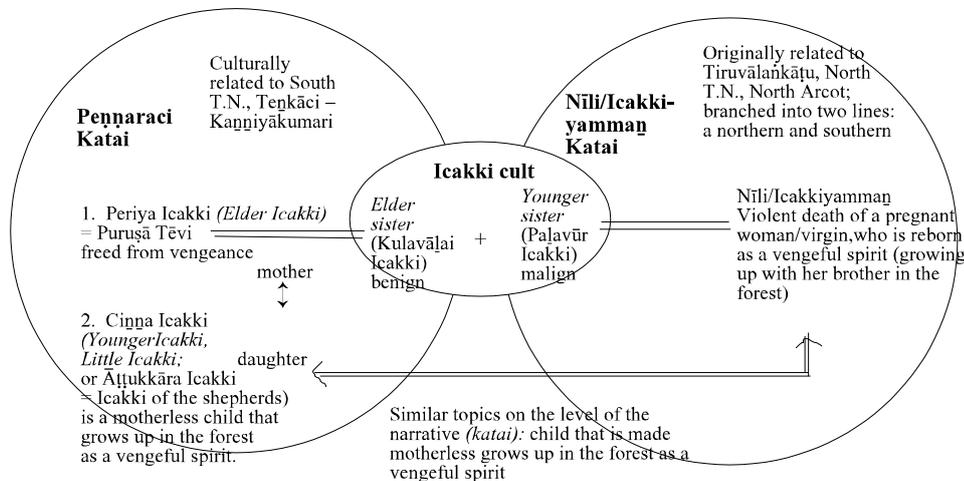
⁴¹ See the interview with T.M.P. below.

elder sister, is considered to be the benevolent one, “in whose temple one can sleep at night” (T.M.P.),⁴² whereas the younger sister, who has taken up her abode in the wilderness of Paḷavūr, is considered to be enraged⁴³—implying that she is powerful. This could possibly explain why the *IK* is sung at Muppantal.

I would like to cite T.M.P., who told me his version of the *Peṅṅaraciyar Katai*, that is, the one according to his knowledge of it. His narration is almost identical as far as the first birth is concerned. I therefore skip over this and draw the reader’s attention to the events on Mt. Kailāsa, with the aim of demonstrating how the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition splits the goddess in two, representing her two psychic dispositions as two sisters. Furthermore, this example shows how this particular bow-song bard, by fabricating rebirths, links the *IK* to the *Peṅṅaraciyar Katai*.

The Peṅṅaraci story is the story of the elder sister [...] Puruṣā Tēvi, the deity residing in Muppantal. [...] Puruṣā Tēvi went to Mt. Kailāsa, where the god said to her, “You must bathe in a fire (*agni*), and afterwards I will give you a boon” (426). A flame was lit, and Cempaṅmuṭi, Kāṭatti, and Puruṣā Tēvi went into the fire. After twelve years they came out of the fire. Śiva gave boons and said to Puruṣā Tēvi, “Go by the name of *kulavālai-Icakki!*” (432). The two kings were garlanded by Śiva. [...] Lord Śiva said to Puruṣā Tēvi, “Go to the *kāttārammaṅ kōvil* (temple) and accept the pūjās and offerings of the people who come to you (438). Receive the animal sacrifices from the Kaḷḷars (thieves).” [...] Lord Śiva said all this, and sent them off. Among those sent by Śiva was the elder sister of Paḷavūr Icakki (439). The child that was born to Puruṣā Tēvi grew up and gave trouble to the *dēvas* on Kailāsa. The *devas* went to Śiva and complained. Śiva asked them to bring the child to him (446). “You are the daughter of Puruṣā Tēvi. I will give you the name of Ciṅṅa Icakki.⁴⁴ And you are powerful. You are more powerful than your mother. In the next birth, you two will be elder sister and younger sister (454). The elder sister will not become angry but the younger sister will always be angry” (458). She took a third birth in order to destroy Paḷakai. (460) That younger sister came to Muppantal and then proceeded to the forest and resided there. (Interview of 30 November 2002 with T.M.P. at the St. Xavier’s College Guest House)

Figure 1: The relationship between the *IK* and the *Peṅṅaraciyar Katai* can be schematised as follows:



⁴² Interview of 30 November 2002.

⁴³ This “personality configuration” between sisters, as Blackburn (1980:396, n. 39) remarks, is “found in the vil pāṭṭu narratives (younger is rash/older is controlled).”

⁴⁴ One point T.M.P. (21 January 2003; AK-I.02, B, 566) wished to stress is that Ciṅṅa Icakki, as far as the narrative is concerned, should not be identified with Paḷakai/Paḷavūr Icakki (whom we know as the younger sister in our specific context of worship; Sect. 9.2.2).

Nīli5:

This unpublished version, which I call N5, was copied in accurate handwriting by S. Sankararama Sastri from the manuscript Bibl. No. 8016, 8019 of Trivandrum Manuscript Library, Kerala University, Trivandrum. The text goes by the title “Nīli Katai.” The hand-written script consists of 133 pages on A4 paper, the whole divided into sections, with 16 lines on each side, and in total 2,065 lines. N5 is without question a very good manuscript and contains an excellent text, but one that appears to me not meant to be performed.

Nīli6:

This unpublished hand-written copy on A4 paper, which I call N6, bears the title “Nīli Katai.” The palm-leaf manuscript, kept at the Institute of Asian Studies (Chennai), contains 29 pages and 1,200 lines (Acc. No. 54), and is badly damaged. The copy of it consists of 29 pages with 38 lines per side and 1,092 lines in total. This version, written in compact handwriting, is incomplete. Text is missing on various pages: p. 1 (lines 1-8 and 14-20), p. 3 (83-9 and 97-103), p. 4 (112-5, 119-126, 130-141), p. 8 (291, 297-9), p. 9 (315, 323-4), p. 10 (340-2, 366-7, 375), p. 22 (799-806, 831-2) p. 23 (863-4), p. 24 (886-7, 905), p.25 (934-5, 945-6), p. 26 (967), p. 28 (1046-8, 1057-8), p. 29 (1065-6, 1070, 1074, 1079, 1082, 1086-90, 1090ff.). The story ends at the point where Icakki supplies buttermilk to the wives of the seventy Karaiyāḷars.

I do not consider this to be a text performed within the bow-song (*villuppāṭṭu*) tradition.

Nīli7:

This published version, referred to as N7, consists of 45 pages and 1,395 lines divided into 13 sections. The xerox copy cuts out the text along the binding, thus making the beginning of each line illegible. The title page is missing; the publisher and date are unknown. The old booklet, copied at Madras Maraimalai Aṭikaḷ Library under the call number 5049a (now missing there), is probably from the beginning of the twentieth century.

The text clearly tells the story of Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭṭu Nīli (northern line), with rare portions of text in common with N1. It is the northernmost and most deviant version available to me. Apart from the story-line, it has no direct relation to the other versions, and must be seen as an autonomous northern text that is geographically rooted in Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭṭu and Kāñcipuram. Obviously, this text is not within the bow-song (*villuppāṭṭu*) tradition. Its title is “Nīli Katai.” Here a synopsis of the story:⁴⁵

Āticēṣaṅ, a Brahmin doing his service at the Ēkāmparanātar Śiva temple of Kāñcipuram, married Anṇatāṭci, a young Brahmin woman of Tirumayilāppūr [Mylapore]. He did not consummate the marriage, but took instead a devadāsī as concubine. Anṇatāṭci, living sixteen years unrecognised and uncared for by her husband, decided to complain of her ‘imprisonment’ to her parents and the thousand Brahmins of Kāñcipuram.

She went and lived with her parents in Tirumayilāppūr. One day her friends commented on her face being that of Mūtēvi (the goddess of misfortune) because her husband ignored her. To witness Mūtēvi in her face, Anṇatāṭci took a mirror. Her husband appeared in it like a full moon. When she drew nearer to catch his figure, it disappeared. In great astonishment, she swallowed the saliva secreted in her mouth and was impregnated by it.

Meanwhile, the thousand Brahmins pressed Āticēṣaṅ to take his wife back and end the illegitimate relationship with the devadāsī. Āticēṣaṅ, under pressure from being refused rights at the temple, came to take his wife back, whereupon Anṇatāṭci, suspicious of his intentions, arranged for a third person to accompany them.

On the way to Kāñcipuram, accompanied by Anṇatāṭci’s elder brother Nīlakaṇṭaṅ, Āticēṣaṅ came to know about his wife’s pregnancy. Bewildered, he regretted not having left her in her parents’ house. He feared being humiliated by other Brahmins who knew that he had not consummated his marriage. He decided to kill her on the spot (in a forest), and so pretended to faint. While the brother

⁴⁵ Shulman (1980:194–5) has produced an abstract of the same version, leaving out some points that I consider significant.

went to draw water and his wife lamented, suddenly he got up in anger, and inquired the reason for the pregnancy. Unconvinced by the explanation of his wife, who insisted on her chastity, he threatened and killed her, uttering the words, “Would a woman be pregnant without a husband?” He went to Kāñcīpuram and visited the devadāsī with the intention of giving her Anṇatāṭci’s jewels and dresses. When she refused them, he buried them, whereupon he was bitten by a snake and died [see N1].

Meanwhile the brother, Nīlakaṇṭaṇ, had returned to the site of the murder, and seeing his sister, followed her into death [see N1]. He pierced the belly of his sister with his fingernails, then took the foetus and placed it on a nearby *kaḷḷi* plant. Calling the gods to stand testimony, he thrice made a vow that at the time of revenge [his sister] would break the branch of the *kaḷḷi* plant, and it would turn into a child. Moreover, if anybody beat the seed of the *karuvēlam* tree, it would turn into a jingling anklet. He requested Pārvatī and Śiva to take vengeance and died.

When Pārvatī was told the entire story by Śiva, she felt compassion for Anṇatāṭci. Remarking that no one had taken care of Anṇatāṭci, she decided to take revenge. When Śiva warned her of the Brahmin whom nobody could defeat, since he carried a magical sword, Pārvatī became angry and made a vow not to return to Mt. Kailāsa if she failed to wreak vengeance on the man. She asked her brother Viṣṇu for assistance. [Note the parallelism in kinship relation of husband (Śiva)–wife/sister (Pārvatī)–brother (Viṣṇu)]. He advised her to place the souls of both Anṇatāṭci and Nīlakaṇṭaṇ into the womb of Nīlāmpāḷ, the wife of a Veḷḷāḷaṇ [cf. Cōḷa king in N1], Cantiracēkaraṇ of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu by name. When they had been delivered as twins, Nīli and Nīlaṇ (first the boy, then the girl [see N1]), Pārvatī caught hold of their spirits, handed over Nīli’s spirit to Viṣṇu, and entered into Nīli’s body. She roamed about Tiruvālaṅkāṭu in the bodies of Nīli and Nīlaṇ, killing cattle and swallowing them [see N1]. Cantiracēkaraṇ heard the complaints of the people and took action, ordering the headmen to catch the thieves. When they told him all they had come to know, he threw them in prison until he realised the truth of what they had said. The headmen were ordered to bring the children to the northern side of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, into the forest [see N1]. Abandoned under a banyan tree [cf. margosa tree in N1] and surrounded by a group of devils, they built a *maṇṭapam* with a seven-layered *gopuram* and there produced food grains, dresses, and jewels for sale.

Āticēṣaṇ the murderer, reborn to Āṇantaṇ Ceṭṭiyār and Ampujam, and equipped with a magical sword [cf. margosa leaf in N1], was now named Tiṇakaraṇ. At the age of five he began his education, and at 16 he was married [see N1]. Soon after, his parents died and left him their business, which flourished. His wife Peṇṇaṇaṅkai gave birth to a boy. When Tiṇakaraṇ, living in Kāñcīpuram, showed signs of wanting to do business in Tiruvālaṅkāṭu (he had come to know of a woman selling one *kalam* of paddy for one *kācu*, and one sari for one *tutti* coin), his wife reminded him of her mother-in-law’s warning not to go in the northern direction. Tiṇakaraṇ, annoyed at this interference on the part of his wife, remarked that a man should not follow the advice of a woman and that what is destined will happen [see N1]. In the end he was unable to hold her back from accompanying him. Soon afterwards, while they were resting under a banyan tree on the bank of a river at Takkōlampēṇṇampākkam, his wife fell asleep and he slipped away, after heaping some sand and placing his wife’s head on it [see N1].

Nīli, who resided in Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, appeared before the Ceṭṭi’s wife as she sat dissolved in tears. She appeared in the form of a Vēḷāḷa woman, and inquired what had happened. Forced by Nīli, the wife reported all her troubles, including details of the marriage, and the names of her husband, child, and in-laws. Later this information would be skillfully used against the Ceṭṭi. After Nīli guided Peṇṇaṇaṅkai back to Kāñcīpuram, she assumed Peṇṇaṇaṅkai’s form, and with the help of Viṣṇu (who knew of Nīlakaṇṭaṇ’s vow) took the child that had once been turned into a *kaḷḷi* plant and approached the Ceṭṭi as he sat at the edge of a pool of water. Not doubting that she was his wife, and listening to her complaints of being left alone under the banyan tree, he invited her to eat some food. She left the child in Tiṇakaraṇ’s arm and took the opportunity to bathe in the pool. As she repeated a mantra, the child leapt high and pressed the Ceṭṭi’s chest in order to kill him. Only his sword saved him, showing him his previous birth and the bogus woman. Angrily he resisted, threatening Nīli with the sword, and ran towards Tiruvālaṅkāṭu.

Again Nīli appeared as the wife, using the information given to her in order to convince the Ceṭṭi. At first suspicious, he finally believed her and again took the child in his arms, only to see it turning into a *rākṣasa* threatening his life again. He escaped with the help of his sword, and ran into seventy assembled Vēḷāḷas. They asked his name, native place, and other details, and were consoling him when Nīli appeared in search of her husband [see N1]. The Ceṭṭi, in great fear, told them not to believe her, but to ask her specific questions only his wife could answer. Nīli answered them with perfect cunning and confused the Vēḷāḷas, who let the matter rest until the next morning, proposing to lock them up in the Kālī temple [cf. *ilaṅkam* in N1]. Nīli did not agree unless the sword was taken away from the Ceṭṭi. Noticing the Ceṭṭi's increasing fear, they promised to take responsibility for both, and gave him a written document [cf. the *paral* token in N1] with all their names and the signature of one of them. Once locked up in the temple, Nīli took on various horrible forms, plucked out the Ceṭṭi's intestines, garlanded her neck with them, and disappeared through the roof [cf. the lullaby in N1].

The Vēḷāḷas, at first unable to unlock the door of the Kālī temple, prayed, and eventually succeeded, but with one look into the temple immediately regretted having pitied the Ceṭṭi's wife and not having believed the Ceṭṭi, whom they found dead.

Nīli reappeared in the form of the Ceṭṭi's mother to inquire about her son. Having ascertained her identity, they stood by their word, and in front of the old woman they dug a pit, lit a fire, and jumped into it [cf. the destruction of all wives and children in N1].

Śiva, being of the opinion that only the revenge taken on the Ceṭṭi had been justified, not that on the Vēḷāḷas, restored the seventy Vēḷāḷas to life and brought the atrocities of Nīli under control. (My synopsis of the Tamil text)

Nīli8:

Apart from N10, the only existing edition close to the base text is the one prepared by Ku. Ārumukapperumāl Nāṭār (of Akastīcuvaram).⁴⁶ Though N8 has many virtues, it does not reproduce the manuscript of N1 with the fullness and accuracy necessary for resolving its problems. It is only half the length of N10, and has been altered a good deal, apparently by the editor. This can be seen from the arrangement of lines according to the poetic style of *etukai* rhyming, something not found in N2 (its twin version) or in the other texts. I did discover, however, this version to be of considerable use where the base text was defective. Its title is *Icakkīyamman Virkavitai*, published by Nāgarcoil Krishna Accakam on 4 December 1978 (18 Kārttikai 1154). The text consists of 59 pages and 2,025 lines, including the invocation of the gods (*kāppu*), and belongs undoubtedly to the bow-song (*villuppāṭṭu*) tradition.

The text is largely identical with—and in cases where not, at least close to—N10 and N1 (see the encyclopaedic apparatus, Appendix C), the exception being 272 lines containing additional text that appears neither in N10 nor in N1,⁴⁷ and nor, therefore, in the encyclopaedic apparatus based on the longest (N10) version. In concrete terms these are, apart from lines of irrelevant text, the following passages: N8.6c–7b.135-55, which describes the relationship between the Brahmin and the devadāsī Lakṣmī in greater detail than other versions. Of particular interest from an anthropological point of view is line N8.22d.720, which mentions that Āṇantaṅ Ceṭṭi had been given in (cross-cousin) marriage to his uncle's daughter. N8.23b–24a.731-59 (except for 737) adds to the list of instructions given by Āṇantaṅ's father before his death. Lines N8.24c.780-6 enlarge our picture of a Ceṭṭi's life in former days: a bull has to be sent to Paḷakai with a load of goods (782, 4). Lines N8.24d–25ab.791-803 slightly deviate from corresponding ones in listing various other bad omens. Lines N8.28c–29b.921-54 are valuable because of the light they shed on the views of Nīli, who complains at not being cared for as a woman, either by her companion (sexually/socially: N8.28c,d, 29a,b.921-4, 932, 941, 950, 953) or,

⁴⁶ Ku. Ārumukapperumāl Nāṭār, born in 1909, was part of the bardic tradition. Although he himself did not belong to any of the old bardic families in Akastīcuvaram, he did compose texts. Much credit goes to him for having maintained the tradition by collecting manuscripts and preserving them; see Blackburn 1980:109.

⁴⁷ It is not attested elsewhere either.

interestingly enough, by the king (*araṇmaṇaiyār*), who failed to inquire into her murder (N8.29a.943). Lines N8.42a.1399-1405 draw out these complaints of a woman whose companion is enjoying the pleasures of love with someone else. All this holds true for N2, the twin version.

Nīli9:

The edition by Cu. Caṇmukacuntaram is a version of 25 pages in length with the title *Paḷaiyaṇūr Nīli eṇṇa Paḷakanallūr Nīli*; it was published by Koṭumuṭi Caṇmukap Pirakatam on 1 January 1978 (1st ed. 1934;⁴⁸ repr. 1984, Madras: Pumpukar, title: *Paḷaiyaṇūr Nīli Katai*). The text, here called N9, consists of 586 lines and is divided into 63 chapters. It is, in comparison with the versions performed at the *koṭai* festival, a simple text, and one probably not in use within the bow-song (*villuppāṭṭu*) tradition. I do not consider the text titled *Paḷakanallūr Nīli Katai* (of the sword–fire type) to be among the versions native to either Tiruvāṅkāṭu–Kāñcipuram in the north or to Kaṇṇiyākumari district in the far south, but rather very probably to have come from Tirunelvēli district.⁴⁹ The story starts off with a description of the beautiful Cantaṇa Naṅkai, the *vēcai* (harlot) at the Ammaiappar temple of Paḷakainallūr who is entitled to light the lamps and to dance to the beat of the drum (*mattaḷam*)—a devadāsī desired by Nampi, the pūjārī of the rich temple.⁵⁰

Perumāḷ (1990:54ff./2002:24f.) deserves credit for comparing this Nellai version, which he suggests is a nineteenth-century text, with the version circulating in Kaṇṇiyākumari district:

- The Iyakki Ammaṇ story as told in Kumari district states that the town of Paḷakai is situated on the island of Campu surrounded by the salt sea. There a Brahmin, Cīvapārpaṇ by name, is the pūjārī of the Ammaiappar temple. His son, Vēlavaṇ, is bewitched by the beauty of Lakṣmī, the dāsī of Paḷakainallūr.⁵¹ The story as told in Nellai district states that Nampi, the pūjārī of the Ammaiappar temple at Paḷakainallūr, is spellbound by the beauty of the dāsī Cantaṇamaṅkai.
- The story as told in Kumari district mentions that the dāsī Lakṣmī has an elder brother whose name is Tirukaṇṭa Naṭṭuvaṇ. The Nellai story mentions neither the name of the brother of the dāsī nor the name of her mother.
- The Paḷakainallūr dāsī followed the Brahmin. Becoming tired, she lay down to sleep in the middle of the forest. The Brahmin heaped sand as a pillow for her head. Seeing her jewels, he forgot himself. He removed all the jewels, bundled them together in his upper garment, and departed. While walking along, he had the idea of killing her, so he returned. He took a heavy stone and smashed her head. This is the Nīli story as found in Nellai district. According to the story circulating in Kumari district, the Brahmin laid the young woman’s head on his lap. After she fell asleep, he removed her jewels and immediately smashed her head with the stone.
- In the Nellai district story, the old mother requested the elder brother to go in search of her daughter, after the latter had set off after the Brahmin. However, in the Kumari district story the elder brother, Tirukaṇṭa Naṭṭuvaṇ, went on his own initiative in search of his younger sister.
- The Kumari district story mentions that the dāsī Lakṣmī and her elder brother Tirukaṇṭa Naṭṭuvaṇ were reborn after their death as children of the Cōḷa king Cēmpiyaṇ. This fact is also mentioned in the Nellai story, but without the name of that Cōḷa king.
- The Kumari district story records that the dead Brahmin was reborn as the son of Mānāykkaṇ Ceṭṭi in Kāviriṇṇipāṭṭiṇam, and was called Āṇantaṇ Ceṭṭi. The Nellai district story mentions the name of Āṇantaṇ’s father as being Navakōṭi Nārāyaṇaṇ.
- The Nellai district story tells of the astrologer who predicts that Āṇantaṇ Ceṭṭi will face danger because of Nīli, and advises him, therefore, to carry a magical sword. The magical sword is not mentioned in the story from Kumari district. (Revised edition by Perumāḷ and Śrīkumār 2002:24f.)⁵²

⁴⁸ The first publication by Koṭumuṭi Caṇmukam in 1934 is, according to the edition available in the British Library (shelf mark Tam.B.11570), entitled *Icakkiammaṇ Katai* (as noted by David Shulman on the copy received from the British Library), but Caṇmukacuntaram (1978:32) writes that the title of the 1934 manuscript and published text is *Palaka Nallūr Nīli Katai*.

⁴⁹ See the discussion of Caṇmukacuntaram’s publication in Perumāḷ 1990:54. Perumāḷ states there that Caṇmukacuntaram’s palm-leaf manuscript comes from Nellai (=Tirunelvēli) district.

⁵⁰ See also below Chap. 3, No. 29.

⁵¹ Note that Caṇmukacuntaram’s text edition contains slightly different spellings of both personal names and localities.

⁵² The two publications 1990 and 2002 differ slightly, above all in numbering, which changed after point 3 of the 1990 edition was deleted (for indeed it contains a statement that is inaccurate).

Nīlī10:

The unpublished palm-leaf manuscript of the Icakki temple at Paṇaṅkoṭṭāviḷai⁵³—discovered during the fieldwork I conducted from March to May 2002, and made available to me in the form of a hand-written copy by the bow-song bard T. Muthucami Pulavar (in the following, referred to by his initials T.M.P.) of Svayambulingapuram (adjacent to Nagercoil)—consists of 177 pages of an A4-size handbook, in large, clear handwriting, with a total of 4,382 lines of text. N10 is a very fine manuscript. No other version distantly compares in length with this one. It is on the whole a homogeneous text, and obvious mistakes are reasonably rare. The text uses the local conversational idiom (a regional Tamil dialect influenced by Malayalam and the caste dialect of the Nāṭārs). The version, titled “Paḷakainallūr Icakki Ammankataiyiṅ Varalāru,” is rooted in the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition, and is the one performed by T.M.P. and his students. The text is reproduced in my encyclopaedic apparatus (Appendix C), which uses this manuscript as its basis.

I arranged a performance of the entire text of this version for 29 and 30 November 2002. The performance by T.M.P. and his group of four members was recorded by me in full-length audio and video, in collaboration with the FRRC in Pālaiyamkōṭṭai. A copy of the audio-video recording has been made available to the archive of the FRRC.

My quest for a recording of the full text of this version of the *IK*, so far the longest one known to me, was shared by the bow-song bard T.M.P. This led to a contract with him to perform it in its entirety in a neutral setting without the limitations normally posed by a *koṭṭai* festival, namely special requests by patrons, ritual-related requirements, and so forth. It was the first time in his active career of forty years as a bow-song bard that T.M.P. sang the whole *IK*—his own “mental text”⁵⁴ (Honko 1998:92), so to speak, free from compromise and limitations.⁵⁵ It became clear that T.M.P. is capable of performing both the entire story (a session of two days)—the “long format,” as Honko (2000:223) labels it—and the abridged text (“compromised text”) in the ritual context of a *koṭṭai* festival, in spite of all the differences involved, including the dramatic mode of performance.

I list three other publications that, for various reasons, could not be exploited within the editorial decision-making process:

Nīlī11:

This book, edited by A.Ka. Perumāḷ and S. Śrīkumār, and titled *Iyakkiyamman Kattaiyum Valipāṭum*, was published in 2002, too late to be included in my encyclopaedic apparatus and the editorial work on the base text. It contains 136 pages, the edition of the *IK* being on pages 34–106. This edition appears to be based on N8.

Nīlī12:

This *yaṭcakāṇam* (*yakṣagaṇam*)⁵⁶ text, edited by Pū. Cuppiramaṇiyam in 1994 in the IAS series (Chennai) under the title *Nīlī Yaṭcakāṇam*, bears no direct relation to N1 or the other versions. Apart from the basic story-line, there are no individual parts of the text that are shared with N1. The text, which does not derive from the versions I focus on, belongs to the northern branch, a fact that is made

⁵³ T.M.P. in an interview held on 21 January 2003 told me that Paṇaṅkoṭṭāviḷai Icakki originally comes from Tevakuḷam not far from Kottāram. The family who looked after the goddess shifted to Paṇaṅkoṭṭāviḷai, taking her along from a place in the middle of the countryside to the village.

⁵⁴ It was interesting to see how fully present the text was in the bard’s mind the day after completing the recording. After delivering the most detailed performance ever of his mental text, T.M.P. helped me with defective passages of my base text (N1) with great success. He pieced together the most problematic lines and words in this version by recollecting and singing his mental text without looking into his notebook—a feat I never witnessed again in later sittings, when the full mental text had vanished, and was replaced by a fragmented one.

⁵⁵ I followed closely the advice of Lauri Honko, who has described a recording in an induced context (see Honko 2000:231f.) as allowing the singer (among other things) the freedom to segment the text and make pauses at will.

⁵⁶ As Subramaniam ([English/Tamil version] 1996:iv) remarks, “[s]tarting as a mode of singing, *Yaṭcakāṇam* has today become verily ‘a medley of song, dance and drama[.]’”

clear by the text itself, which (like N7) mentions Tiruvālaṅkāṭu as one of the settings. However, the episode of the foetus being flung on the *kaḷḷi* plant appears, remarkably, in another variation in the *Nīli Yaṭcakāṇam*. Unlike in version N7 (another northern version, so far the only one to supply us with this episode), here it is the murderous husband rather than the elder brother who tears open the pregnant wife's womb and discards the foetus on the *kaḷḷi* plant.⁵⁷

The *yaṭcakāṇam* text, of the sword–fire type, derives from the *Toṅṭaimaṅṭala Catakam* of Paṭikkācu Pulavar (late seventeenth to early eighteenth century), as is evident from the identical names it assigns to characters and localities. It is interesting to see that the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition was not alone in seizing upon the Nīli story; the *yaṭcakāṇam* tradition did so as well. The historical memory of the core events thus also filtered up to the semi-courtly environment of the *yaṭcakāṇam* tradition favoured in Andhra and Karnataka.⁵⁸

I list in brief the core events that interlink the places Kāñcipuram, Avināci, Kāci, Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, Perampākkam (near Tiruvālaṅkāṭu), Paḷayaṅūr, Teruvampai (between Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and Paḷayaṅūr), and Tirucceṅkāṭu:

The story gets under way with the married Brahmin Puvanaṅpati, son of Nānātipaṅ of Kāñcipuram, on his way to Kāci. When he stops in Avināci he meets Meykkiyāṅi, the latter's son Civakkiyāṅi and daughter Navakkiyāṅi. Meykkiyāṅi, being fond of Puvanaṅpati, gives his daughter in marriage to him. On the way back to Kāñcipuram, when Puvanaṅpati, his pregnant second wife Navakkiyāṅi, and her brother are passing Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, the Brahmin decides to kill his second wife. Having done so, he tears open her womb and flings the male foetus on a *kaḷḷi* plant [cf. N7]. Seeing the slaughter, Civakkiyāṅi follows his sister into death, while the Brahmin returns to his first wife. The siblings are reborn as twins to Puricaikkiḷāṅ and his wife Nācciyār. They are abandoned in the forest under a margosa tree after being accused of committing atrocities in town.

The forest episode well known from the southern versions (N1, N10) follows: Sexually matured, Nīli leaves her brother and proceeds to Tirucceṅkāṭu. The Vēḷāḷa Mutaliyārs cut down the margosa tree for the purpose of erecting a flagpole at the Paḷayaṅūr Śiva temple. Nīlaṅ, enraged at being made homeless, attempts to take revenge on an innocent Brahmin. However, the Brahmin is saved by Śiva's emissary Kuṅṭōtaraṅ, who beheads Nīlaṅ with his disc and removes his intestines. Nīli is informed of her brother's death. The description of the furious Nīli reminds us of Kaṅṅaki's setting Maturai on fire (in the *Cilappatikāram*).

Puvanaṅpati, too, is reborn, as Taricaṅaṅ, son of Nākantai Ceṭṭi of the Tēcika clan in Kāñcipuram, and is equipped with a sword produced in a sacrificial fire for protection against the vengeful Nīli. After he has been married to Pūṅkōtai, daughter of Kottantai, at the age of sixteen, and gifted with a male child, he once visits relatives in Perampākkam. There he slips away, leaving his wife Pūṅkōtai behind, in order to visit the Nīlakaṅṭaṅ temple in Paḷayaṅūr–Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. On his way Nīli, the spirit of his murdered second wife, approaches him in an enticing shape in the suburbs of Perampākkam near Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. Taricaṅaṅ flees, seeking help from a Vēḷāḷa whom he meets at a Śiva temple in Teruvampai, between Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and Paḷayaṅūr.

The story, making use of flashback and non-chronological narration, tells of the foul play on the part of Nīli, now disguised as the Ceṭṭi's wife Pūṅkōtai; of her collecting the child that had once been flung on the *kaḷḷi* plant by her murderer; of the trial before the assembly, in which she with an authentic touch forces the child to seek its father's lap; of the Ceṭṭi's parting with the magical sword; of the locking up of the Ceṭṭi with Nīli in the Śiva temple [in N7: Kālī temple]; of Nīli's brutal killing of the Ceṭṭi; and of the death of sixty-nine Vēḷāḷas who entered the fire in order to remain true to their word. The story ends with the death of the seventieth Vēḷāḷa in a lunge against the sharp end of a ploughshare.

⁵⁷ Cuppiramaṅiyam 1994:148 / Subramaniam 1996.155: *maṅaiyāḷaic cūriyāl vayirrinaip pūrit / taṅaiyaṅaik kaḷḷimēl tāṅeṭuttu eṅintāṅ*.

⁵⁸ Misra (1981:163) states that “[t]he history of *yakshagāna* goes back to the 15th century [...]. It is said that *yaksha-gānas* should be performed at the places of those persons who wanted children.”

Nīlī13:

The *kaṇiyāṇ pāṭṭu* text of Icakkīyamman's story, edited by S.M. Mahāleṭcumi in 2003 under the title *Muppantal Icakkīyamman Kaṇiyāṇ Pāṭṭu*, is not part of the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition. It belongs rather to the genre of *kaṇiyāṇ pāṭṭu* (Kaṇiyāṇ song) performed by members of the Kaṇiyār community, who also worship Icakki in the southernmost parts of India, as I have noted in Section 7.2. The edition, which runs to 1,093 lines, has no direct relation to N1 and the other versions. Apart from the basic story-line there are no parts of text that are shared with N1. Yet the text is seemingly one belonging to the very south of Tamilnadu, a fact made clear in the text itself, which centres the story on “Paḷacanallūr,” a place that the editor has identified as present-day Paḷavūr, Tirunelvēli district, Rātāpuram taluk. In Paḷavūr, I hasten to note, this version of the *katai* is not sung at the *koṭai* festival patronised by the locally dominant social group of Vēḷāḷas.⁵⁹

2.5 The Background of the Text

It can be stated with some certainty, on the basis of historical topography, that the origins of the *Nīlī/Icakki Katai* lie in Paḷaiyaṇūr-Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu,⁶⁰ a famous Śaiva site near today's Arkkōṇam⁶¹ in the north of Tamilnadu. It is the only place offering any architectural evidence.⁶² That the *IK* (or *Nīlī Katai*)⁶³ is an account with a basis in fact is clear from the material evidence still available for us to explore: a small Śiva temple⁶⁴ facing a memorial⁶⁵ where seventy Vēḷāḷas committed suicide (see Photo 2);⁶⁶ further, a stone in memory of Nīlī;⁶⁷ and finally, the ancient shrine of Kālī⁶⁸ (-Nīlī-Nīlakēci),⁶⁹ the scene, it is said, of our heroine's retaliation against the Ceṭṭi.⁷⁰ Shulman's remarks on Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu are as follows:

⁵⁹ See Chap. 9 below.

⁶⁰ The names Paḷaiyaṇūr and Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu are confirmed in inscriptions of the Cōḷa king Rajendra I. As Stein (1985:120, n. 83), referring to the *South Indian Inscriptions*, Archaeological Survey of India, Madras/Delhi, 1890–, vol. 3, p. 427, notes, Paḷaiyaṇūr was a *brahmadeya* (Brahmin village). The text of the plates “[...] is addressed to the *nattar* and other locality groups in *mēlmalai paḷaiyaṇūr-nāḍu* and directs that the village of Paḷaiyanur [...] was now to become a village subject to regular dues from cultivators (*veḷḷān-vagai*) and these were to be granted to the [Śiva] temple of Tiruvalangadu as *dēvadāna*” (ibid.; the brackets are mine). See also *Kāraikkālammaiṅār Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu Mūṭṭaṭṭiruppatikam* (ed. Karavelane 1982:98).

⁶¹ As the districts in Tamilnadu have repeatedly been redivided, I leave the question of which district Arkkōṇam belongs to up in the air. Some say that it belongs to North Arcot, others to Chinglepet (*Vāḷviyaṅ Kaḷaṅciyam*, Vol. 12:212), and again others to Tiruvalluvar district. The town is approximately 50 KM from Chennai.

⁶² See Cuppiramaṇiyam 1994:168, 170, 178 / Subramaniam 1996:178-180, 188 and introduction.

⁶³ *Vāḷviyaṅ Kaḷaṅciyam*, Vol. 12:212, s.v. “Paḷaiyaṇūr Nīlī,” states: *nīlikatai tenpāṅṅi nāṭṭin icakki valipāṭṭōṭu inaituḷḷatu*.

⁶⁴ The temple is dedicated to Cāṭcipūtēcurar, the god as witness. See Cuppiramaṇiyam 1994:170.

⁶⁵ See Cuppiramaṇiyam 1994:168. – The memorial for the Vēḷāḷas was opened on 25 July 1966 (see Caṅmukacuntaram 1978:27=1984:62). The inscription at the memorial reads 1 May 1966.

⁶⁶ For photos, see Appendix A, pp. 354ff.

⁶⁷ I am referring here to Nīlī of the *Nīlī Katai*, who died a cruel death. The memorial is made of two erect stone plates forming an angle of approximately 120 degrees, with a single stone plate laid on top. See the illustration in Cuppiramaṇiyam 1994:178 / Subramaniam 1996:188. According to Subramaniam 1996:xviii “[n]o pūja is ever done.”

⁶⁸ Ta. Kālī.

⁶⁹ This goddess (Kālī-Nīlī-Nīlakēci) and her sacred place are linked at different times with different myths, legends, and stories: in the first place with Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār, Nīlakēci, and a dance contest. Presumably, this is the fierce goddess Nīlī mentioned in *Cil.* 12.21.3. As Chakravarti (1936:13) states: “The author of this Sthalamāhātmya [of Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu] in his introduction calls this Kālī as Neeli. From this it is clear that the Kālī of Pazhayanur was also known by the name Neeli.” See also *Kāraikkālammaiṅār Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu Mūṭṭaṭṭiruppatikam* (ed. Karavelane [Avant-Propos] 1982:18, n. 7): “L'antique déesse locale de PaLaNam était une Kālī dénommée Nīlī, la terrible.” – Furthermore, the anonymous author of the Jain poem *Nīlakēci* also identifies his heroine Nīlakēci with Kālī-Nīlī, “the ancient goddess of Paḷaiyaṇūr near Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu” (Shulman 1980:196 with n. 18).

⁷⁰ See text version N7.

There is yet another shrine to Kālī at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, outside the main shrine, at the edge of the Muktitīrtha (which, we may recall, is the venue of the dance contest according to the purāṇa). Here Kālī is worshiped alone. The priests of the Śiva temple still refer to this shrine as the *mūlasthāna* of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, the oldest cult center on this site.⁷¹ This, presumably, is the scene of the Nīli story with its theme of the slain husband and locked doors.⁷² (Shulman 1980:218).

The association this place has with the vengeful Nīli-Icakki of our *katai* goes at least back to the seventh century. The Śaiva *bhakti* text *Tēvāram* is, to my knowledge, the earliest extant record that directly alludes to the Nīli figure of the *katai*, and the earliest work that links her with a particular place.⁷³ The Paḷaiyaṅṅūr-Tiruvālaṅkāṭu of the seventh-century text is a place where Vēḷāḷas lived. Thus the background shaping of the *Nīli Katai* must presumably be sought in circles of the socioreligiously dominant landed community of the Vēḷāḷas of that place and time.⁷⁴ Assuming that traditional elements will be preserved longest in places most distant from their origin, the very fact that worship for Nīli is not established at Paḷaiyaṅṅūr-Tiruvālaṅkāṭu⁷⁵ but rather in the southernmost region of Tamilnadu would additionally favour this location being the original seat.

The *katai*'s place of origin became effaced in the text of the southern branch, where the scene of events is either Paḷakai (N1, N2, N5, N10), Paḷakainakar (N1, N2, N5, N8, N10), or Paḷakainallūr (N1, N2 in the story title, N6, N9).⁷⁶ The modification of the name in the southern line is presumably due to the fact that the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition of the southernmost districts of present-day Tamilnadu adopted the story of Nīli and placed it within a ritualised context. The southern text N1, unlike the N7 version of the northern branch, is a performative text. It is therefore very likely that the *villuppāṭṭu* bards who sing the text at the *koṭai* festivals construct identities; that is, they change the name so as to situate it in their own region and locality.⁷⁷ The reader immediately notices that we have moved into a domain of worship. This is natural for the southern text, which comes alive through the cult of the goddess. This may be the reason why some people are convinced that Paḷakai of the *IK* is identical with Paḷavūr⁷⁸ (a prominent site of Icakki worship) in the area bordering Tirunelvēli and Kaṅṅiyākumari districts, and indeed, people take earth from Paḷavūr in order to establish new Icakki shrines in their own localities. Other people equate it with Paḷaiyaṅṅūr adjacent to Tiruppuvaṅam, south of the river Vaikai, and still others with Nīlitanallūr in Tirunelvēli district,⁷⁹ or with a site near Vaṅṅiyūrppaṭṭaṅam on the way to Ceṅkuṅṅam.⁸⁰ I think it a mistake, in the absence of reliable information from inscriptions, to trust to popular speculation about where Paḷakai is situated, and see no reason to assume any but Paḷaiyaṅṅūr-

⁷¹ As Shulman (1980:218) remarks, “beside her shrine [...], not in her place: the goddess [Kālī] has been excluded through the creation of a new shrine, which in the course of time has become the main temple at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu.”

⁷² Shulman is referring to the *Nīli Katai* (pregnant wife–sword–fire type).

⁷³ See my detailed discussion in Chap. 3, No. 4.

⁷⁴ The translocal *IK* is still held in high esteem by the social group of Vēḷāḷas who patronised the *koṭai* festival of Paḷavūr that I document in Chap. 9. However, the fieldwork shows that the story of this heroine was gradually absorbed by other communities than the Vēḷāḷas.

⁷⁵ See Subramaniam (English/Tamil version) 1996:xviii.

⁷⁶ All three names occur in the base text N1: Paḷavai [ST] = Paḷakai [LT] (in the first lines of the invocation N1.4 and in N1.1032), Paḷakainallūr (N1.40) and Paḷaka Nakar [ST] = Paḷakainakar [LT] (N1.1556).

⁷⁷ That the name is interchangeable in performative texts became clear to me at the *koṭai* festival of Paḷavūr. When the lead singer of the *villuppāṭṭu* group sang of Paḷaiyanallūr, she was instantly pressed by a notable festival committee member to use “Paḷavūr” instead, presumably with the idea of establishing a setting the village of the *koṭai* festival could more easily identify with.

⁷⁸ According to Caṅmukacuntaram 1978:32, the people of Tirunelvēli and Kaṅṅiyākumari districts used to call the story *Paḷavūr Nīli Katai*. However, Zvelebil (1995:495, s.v. Nīlakēci) sees Paḷavūr as undoubtedly equated with the village of Paḷaiyaṅṅūr in the north: “[...] folk balladic narrative known as Paḷaiyaṅṅūr Nīli alias Paḷavūr Nīli alias Ālaṅkāṭṭu Nīli.”

⁷⁹ See my discussion in Chap. 3, No. 5. See also Subramaniam (English/Tamil version) 1996:xvii.

⁸⁰ The bow-song bard T.M.P. is of this opinion.

Tiruvālaṅkāṭu as the place where the core events occurred. The fact that a local Icakki story is generally added to the well-known *IK* as a direct sequel and at a most significant point in the *koṭai* rituals is one argument in support of this view.⁸¹

Nevertheless, I admit that the oral tradition of the southernmost region assumes that the events took place in that region. This is clear from another source. The “Nīlacāmi Katai,” a later narrative⁸² (*kollam* year 950=1775 C.E.),⁸³ yet still connected with the *IK*, seemingly knew where Paḷakai is situated. When Nīlacāmi (Nīli-Icakki’s brother) in his next birth returned to the south of India, after receiving a boon from Śiva at Mt. Kailāsa, he is said to have travelled from the Cōḷa country southwards to the river Kāviri, then to Paḷakainakar, where he remembers the past events shared with his sister Icakki in the forest of Paḷakainakar, before proceeding via Tiruccentūr⁸⁴ to Nāñcilnāṭu and further via Patmanāpapuram to Tiruvaṇantapuram (Trivandrum, in present-day Kerala).⁸⁵ It must suffice here to have drawn attention to the elusiveness of this area of research.

2.6 The Dating of the Text

The *IK* text edited and translated in this thesis was written down on a Monday morning, the 27th of Vaikāci (May–June) in the *kollam* year 1134 (=1959 C.E.).⁸⁶ The fact that the manuscript bears a date in the fairly recent past says little about the date of the story’s origin. In fact, there is strong evidence that the *IK* is not a modern narrative but simply remained unnoticed for many centuries within the oral tradition of the Tamils,⁸⁷ and only sporadically came to the surface. What we can say with some certainty is that the earliest extant allusion to the narrative of Nīli (later known as Icakkiammaṅ in the far south) is found in the first half of the seventh century,⁸⁸ in the Śaiva text titled *Tēvāram*. This seventh-century text can thus be treated as a *terminus post quem*. However, the main narrative sequence in a relatively complete shape, and with the heroine’s name mentioned, is attested only from the early fourteenth century on (at the latest).⁸⁹ I hasten to add that all this refers to the text versions of the northern line.

When it comes to the text of the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition of the southernmost region (the one edited and translated here), things become more complicated. There is no clear evidence for dating this southern variant, since we know fairly little about the period of the text’s migration towards the south. It is quite certain, however, that the southern text, distinguished by its devadāsī motif, must have existed before 1775. This date, Perumāḷ notes, is attested in a palm-leaf manuscript containing the narrative “Nīlacāmi Katai,” a text found in Eṇṇupukkāṭu that recalls the past events of the *IK*.⁹⁰ The year 1775 can thus be treated as a *terminus ante quem* for dating the southern text. Although a detailed investigation of the late-fourteenth-century work *Uṇṇunīlisandēśam* (a Kerala *sandēśa-kāvya* in Maṇipravāla) is not possible here, one cannot but wonder whether this text of the elite social strata, which obviously depicts

⁸¹ For the local Icakki story, see Sects. 7.5 and 9.2.2 (midnight session, p. 303f.).

⁸² The “Nīlacāmi Katai” and the *IK* are two stories interwoven with each other, the story of Nīli-Icakki’s brother (Nīlaṅ) being continued in the “Nīlacāmi Katai” (a similar narrative relationship exists between the *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*). For details, see the footnote to my translation of N1.71-72, Sect. 5.4.

⁸³ Perumāḷ (1990:49) dates a palm-leaf manuscript of the “Nīlacāmi Katai” found in Eṇṇupukkāṭu back to 1775 C.E.

⁸⁴ This is the site of probably the most famous Murukaṅ temple in the Tamil country.

⁸⁵ See the synopsis of the “Nīlacāmi Katai” in Perumāḷ and Śrīkumār 2002:126f.

⁸⁶ Note that generally, in cases where he does not have the story at hand, a bow-song bard, when ordered to perform a particular *katai* at a *koṭai* festival, goes in search of palm leaves and copies the story, or else writes his own version according to the data collected by him. This is the way T.M.P. works.

⁸⁷ It should be borne in mind that in an oral tradition a narrative is constantly reshaped in its retelling.

⁸⁸ See Chap. 3, No. 4.

⁸⁹ See Chap. 3, No. 9.

⁹⁰ See also the footnote to N1.71-72, Sect. 5.4.

the erotic culture of devadāsīs in great detail,⁹¹ is not an early index of a theme (i.e. explicit eroticism) that also inspired composers of texts in contexts well outside the elite milieu.⁹² If this could be verified, we perhaps could infer that the story of Nīli had transformed itself (under the influence of a new cultural environment in the southernmost region) much earlier than supposed.⁹³ We may add that Aruṅakiri Nātar in his fifteenth-century *Tiruppukal* has referred to Nīli associating her with the seductive world of harlots.⁹⁴ To conclude, the picture necessarily remains incomplete. For the time being it is impossible to settle on a date for the southern line.

⁹¹ I rely here on secondary sources; see for more details Chap. 3, No. 10.

⁹² Note that the localities mentioned in the *Uṇṇunīlisandēśam* belonged to kingdoms in what is today known as one of the regions of the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition, namely southern Kerala or western Nāñcilnāṭu.

⁹³ Such an early dating of the southern text would be perfectly in keeping with the record of recently rediscovered thirteenth- or fourteenth-century(?) performative texts in neighbouring Kerala. I refer to new findings relating to the work *Payyannūr Pāṭṭu*, which, as remarked by Freeman (2004:452), is “a devotional ballad to a local goddess.” The same scholar (ibid.) characterises the text as a “composition in highly nonstandard conventions of inscription [...] many features look like the transcription of an oral recitation [...], suggesting that this was a performance text, probably used for a festival celebrating as a goddess the narrative’s apparently apotheosized heroine.”

⁹⁴ See for more details Chap. 3, No. 11.