4 An Introduction to the Story of Icakkiyamma<u>n</u>

4.1 The Genre: Epic or Ballad?

The publications on oral tradition by Honko (1998:20ff. and 2000:217ff.), Hiltebeitel (1999:11ff.), and Blackburn (1989) have spawned a complex discussion about questions of genre. Their discourse leads us to ask whether the *Icakkiyamma<u>n</u> Katai (IK)* is an epic or a ballad.[1] The text we are focusing on could be considered as a ritualised performative[2] narrative poem of epic length.[3] However, I prefer to stick to the emic Tamil term for this type of narrative, namely *katai,* which connotes both the sung style (ballad nature) of the text and its length (epic nature).

4.2 The Story Type

The *IK* is the story of a goddess (Amma<u>n</u>) who is considered to be independent, in that she is not paired with some male god (e.g. Śiva).[4] The story type is what Blackburn (1986:169) labels as "violation-death-deification-revenge."[5] It incorporates, in its first stage, birth, youth, murder / untimely death, and in its second stage, deification and the sojourn on Mt. Kailāsa, with a return to earth as an avenger. As Blackburn states, "[t]he Tamil bow-song is one of the folk traditions in which the story-type (violation-death-deification-revenge) is prominent" (ibid.:171), and even seen as the "heart" of the tradition (172). As the story is about a human being, the nature of this type of story is "historical and tragic" (ibid.:172).

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[1] It is not the purpose of this study to contribute to an analytic discussion of genres or to suggest new avenues of approach.

[2] An invocation and the like are marks of a performative text.

[3] I follow Honko 2000:223: "[...] an extended format of, say, over a thousand lines, [...] will entitle us to use the term 'epic' in the proper sense of the word."

[4] Blackburn names this category of goddess a "type B Amma<u>n</u>": "The type B Amma<u>n</u> in the vil pāṭṭu tradition [... is] outside all three categories, based on the connection of the goddess to the god, since she is independent of men altogether" (1980:395, n. 34).

[5] This story type belongs to the *Cilappatikāram* type; see Blackburn (1986:169, n. 2) who, referring to Ramanujan (1970), states: "The classical Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* also contains the pattern in an altered form: violation-revenge-death-deification." See also Zvelebil 1989:302. – For similar story types in Western ballads, see Atkinson (1999:23), who draws attention to "[t]he two important narrative formulas described by [Anne B.] Cohen (1973:102–3)" in her work *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl! The Murdered-Girl Stereotype in Ballad and Newspaper,* Publication of the American Folklore Society, Memoir Series, vol. 58, Austin: University of Texas Press for the American Folklore Society. However, these do not fully fit the *katai* pattern. The two formulas are: the "murdered-girl" formula ("wooing of trustful girl by artful man; luring of girl to lonely spot; murder of girl who offers little resistance; abandonment of girl's body"), and the "criminal-brought-to-justice" formula ("youth, upbringing, or past deeds of criminal; crucial crime and events leading to it; pursuit, capture, and trial; execution") (Atkinson 1999:23).

The *IK* is in Blackburn's categorisation a "death story" *(iṟanta katai),*[6] with the violent death event as the generative point from which the *katai* evolved.

4.3 The Title of the Text

The story is referred to and circulates under various names, which makes for great confusion. Generally, the two titles that are in use (interchangeably) today are *Nīli Katai (Paḻaiyaṉūr Nīli Katai, Paḻakanallūr Nīli Katai*[7]*)* and *Icakkiyammaṉ Katai,* both named after the heroine, who goes by two different names. The latter occurs exclusively in the texts of the southern line,[8] that is to say, in texts of the (devadāsī–)margosa leaf–plough type.[9] Yet, as pointed out by Blackburn (1980:206), "[a]lthough Icakki Ammaṉ, by name, is unique to the vil pāṭṭu region, her story is a variant of the Nīli story known throughout the Tamil country." The question of the change of names, in my opinion, can only be answered when the *katai* is seen against the backdrop of the worship of the goddess in her *koṭai* rituals, a context that the text of the northern branch never called for. This much can be stated with certainty: the name Nīli alludes to the angry and vengeful aspect of the figure and is restricted to the story, while the name Icakkiyammaṉ mirrors both aspects, her taking *and* giving of life, the latter being highlighted and re-enforced in the context of the *koṭai* festival. The name Icakkiyammaṉ is, as far as the *katai* is concerned, an unambiguous statement of her essential role within the cult: *icakki/iyakki* (Ta.) – *yakṣī* (Skt.).[10] (For a detailed consideration of the terms I refer to the discussion in Section 7.3; for a synopsis of the story, to Section 2.2.1.)

4.4 The Opening of the Story

There are generally three steps to beginning a *katai:* an invocation, a song in praise of the gods, and a statement of the subject, within a passage praising the land and its people in idealised terms. The N1 version of the *IK* commences with a short introduction identifying the scribe (Poṉṉiliṅkam Nāṭār) and the time and place of his writing the text down, verses in praise of the land and rain, followed by an invocation containing verses in praise of Gaṇeśa and the goddesses, an introduction to the subject of the composition and the name of the person (Kōvintaṉ Mārttāṇṭaṉ Kuṭṭi) who gave it its shape, and an apologia *(avaiyaṭakkam)* that asks the reader to overlook the flaws in the work. Then the actual story gets under way with yet another brief passage in praise of the land, the setting, and Brahmins. It is the Brahmin and not Lakṣmī, the dēvadāsī, who is introduced first. This suggests that the Brahmin will have a greater role to play in the story than Lakṣmī, but this is not so.

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[6] Blackburn (1981:211–5; 1988:31–32) classifies *cāmi katai*s ("god stories") under two categories: gods and goddesses of "divine descent" *(teyva vamcam)* or "divine birth" *(teyva piṟavi),* who are told of in "birth stories" *(piṟanta katai),* and "spirits who were killed" *(iṟantuppaṭṭa vātai)* or "cut-up spirits" *(veṭṭupaṭṭa vātai),* who are treated in "death stories." Nīli-Icakki falls under the latter, while Cuṭalaimāṭaṉ and Muttār Ammaṉ fall under the birth stories.

[7] As remarked by Caṉmukacuntaram (1978:32), "in literature the name is only mentioned as *Paḻaiyaṉūr Nīli.*" However, he adds, "in the Nīli story published in 1934 [see N9] the title Paḻakainallūr Nīli Katai was given," பழையனூர் நீலி என்று இலக்கிய வழக்கில் குறிப்புள்ளது. ஆனால் 1934 இல் அச்சான நீலிகதை பழகை நல்லூர் [பழக நல்லூர்] நீலிகதை என்று பெயர் பெற்றுள்ளது.

[8] She is also called Icakkiyammaṉ in the *kaṇiyāṉ pāṭṭu* genre, found within the same region.

[9] It should be clear by now, as the preceding discussion of references to Nīli has shown, that Tamil literature only refers to the northern variant, that is, to the one that tells of a murdered pregnant wife and is distinguished by the two motifs sword and fire.

[10] Interestingly enough, in her first birth the heroine's name was Lakṣmī, meaning wealth and beauty, which are, according to Coomaraswamy (1993:97), characteristics of *yakṣī*s as well; see Sect. 7.3.1 point 2.

4.5 The Narrative Style

A few words about the narrative style of the *katai* are in order.[11] For a reader who is not looking at the performative text with the eye of a literary critic, the *katai* for the most part is composed in a powerful and very vivid style, more so than some other versions of the corpus. In the dialogues there are often touches of dramatic life situations. In lines N1.1378-80, 1411-23, 1421-52, 1477-1503, 1516-25, 1550-6, 1598-1641, 1741-1835, 2021-44, for instance, I venture to say that not a few readers will share my appreciation of such stirring scenes as the dialogue between Icakki and the Cet̠t̠i. The descriptive passages of the three *alaṅkāram* (beautification) scenes evoke a similar response (N1.1039-96, 1460-76, 1683-95). The lullaby (lines N1.2047-78), descriptive in its double entendre of both the baby boy and the *kal̠l̠i* plant, contains pleasing lines, too, of imaginative creativity. One compositional technique is the use of Tamil proverbs (lines N1.154-5, 1204, 1209f., 1417f., 1488, 1913-4). Finally, a few terms of rare occurrence are found in lines N1.415-6, 1589.

4.6 The Performance Style

The performance style of *villuppāt̠t̠u katai*s has been extensively studied by Blackburn.[12] Therefore a few words on this topic will suffice here. Blackburn observed that the *villuppāt̠t̠u* (bow-song) is marked by five performance signifiers.[13] The first of the five is the performance style that distinguishes between *pāt̠t̠u* (song) and *vacan̠am* ("narration in rhythmic prose"[14]),[15] with the *pāt̠t̠u* style marking "any event which raises dramatic tension" (1986:188). The second signifier operates on the linguistic level. All "major events" are signalled by the "emphatic particle 'ē'" (ibid.:188). The third and fourth performance markers are the *kuravai* sound (an ululation) and the *mēl̠am* (drum), only occurring at points in the narrative concerned with such life-cycle events as birth, marriage, and death (ibid.:188). The *kuravai* sound is mainly produced by the female members of the audience. The fifth and final signifier, which Blackburn labels as *tut̠ukku,* marks "death and conflicts leading to death," that is to say, the climax of dramatic tension in the story, on the one hand, and the ritually deepest phase of possession, on the other (ibid.:188). Digressions and jokes are interwoven into the text performance, but only in its earlier stages. Once the *kot̠ai* has reached a state of greater "ritual depth" (ibid.:176), both in the rituals and in the performance of the story, the lead singer is restricted to the text, which s/he delivers line by line as long as there is no interruption by temple officials or the audience. It is important to note that the performance of the *katai* must guarantee an accurate rendering of the text. Therefore the text being performed bears a close resemblance to that of the palm-leaf manuscript or notebook used by the singer, even when the latter is forced to adjust to the needs of the ritual process.

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[11] The *IK* has not been universally appreciated. Often it has been criticised for its supposed vulgar and licentious imagery.

[12] See Blackburn's (1980) dissertation, and Blackburn 1986:177ff.

[13] Blackburn 1986:177.

[14] Blackburn 1986:177, n. 8.

[15] The technique of interweaving *pāt̠t̠u* and *vacan̠am* is precisely described by Blackburn (1986:176): "As soon as a line is read, the lead singer translates it into song; and then he is read another line as the chorus repeats the first. When the chorus has finished, the lead singer sings the second line, and the process is repeated until the performance is complete."

4.7 The Structure of the Story

Figure 2: The structure of the *Icakkiyamman Katai*

1st BIRTH	2nd BIRTH (royal)		DEIFIED	
Birth of the Brahmin, Lakṣmī, and her brother	The sister–brother pair reborn as the hungry spirits (*pēy* twins) Nīli and Nīlan	PLACE: forest PLANT: margosa tree = the home of the abandoned *pēy* twins	PLACE: forest 1st ALAṄKĀRAM (1040ff.): Icakki (with a *tāli,* yet without a baby) waits for the Brahmin (her murderer of the 1st birth), now reborn as a Ceṭṭi. She expects him to recognise her as his lover/wife (but he puts her off).	RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT: revenge, physical violence on the part of the female PLACE: village 3rd ALAṄKĀRAM (1683ff.): In order to deceive the Vēḷāḷas (by convincing them of the Ceṭṭi's adultery and demanding justice) Icakki appears in front of them with a baby.
CONFLICT: physical violence by male PLANT: a *kaḷḷi* is eyewitness PLACE: forest	CONFLICT: the twins devour cattle PLACE: pasture land of Kōnārs	Nīli matures sexually: spatial separation of sister–brother pair; socialisation		
UNTIMELY DEATH: - Lakṣmī: killed by the Brahmin - brother: suicide - the Brahmin: death by snake-bite	Abandonment of the twins under a margosa tree	DEATH: of Nīlan due to the felling of the margosa tree (he lived in) by Vēḷāḷas	2nd ALAṄKĀRAM (1461ff.): Icakki with a *kaḷḷi*-turned-baby (1435f.) in her arm expects her murderer to recognise her as a wife and mother.	DEATH: Icakki kills the Ceṭṭi PLANT: the *kaḷḷi* provides evidence of the woman's revenge
		Final separation of sister and brother: the twinship is broken		DEATH: of the seventy Vēḷāḷas = the revenge for the brother's death. Their death brings to an end the Vēḷāḷa community's biological continuity. Icakki unites with her brother

The story starts off with a sequence of events that reaffirms a gender stereotype: males kill, females bear babies. But with the act of violence (the tragic murder of a virgin by her lover), the story pattern is inverted, without being subverted, and follows a different course. The female who is killed becomes the 'seductive'[16] avenger who will kill. The female turns men's weapons against the male. This suggests that female memory has become a killer.

The story takes up a second issue, the sister–brother bond, insisting now on a happy ending: The sister who is killed and the brother who follows suit by suicide are reunited as twins in a second birth. But with an act of violence (the murder of the brother), they are separated once again. The story follows here a different pattern: the sister (turning her weapons against both male and female) becomes the avenger of her brother's murder and reunites with him, leaving behind a scene of blood. This suggests that the twins' memory functions as a caretaker. This second line of the story results, on the one hand, in the extinction of an entire community—wiping out all hope of biological continuity—and on the other, in the reunion of sister and brother, who free their spirits in this drama of deliverance.

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[16] My usage of the term *seduction* draws upon its Latin meaning: *se-ducere*, "to draw (a person) aside, to lead astray, entice" (*Oxford Latin Dictionary,* s.v., p. 1726) and upon Baudrillard's gloss of the term: "Seduction [is ...] on the side of the appearances and the Devil [...]" (1990:116). He defines it as playful (7) and a "strategy of finery" (90). In his understanding, "[t]o seduce is to appear weak. [... Seduction] never [operates] with strong signs of powers" (83).

The story, which is governed by the principle of vengeance,[17] can be read as a socioreligious statement.[18] It deals with key aspects of popular religion, such as rebirth and fate,[19] along with illustrating a belief in the hungry spirits of those who have suffered an untimely death and must seek revenge in order to be freed.

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[17] Cf. the thorough study of Blackburn (2001) on Tamil folk tales and his remarks on "retribution" (278).

[18] Blackburn (2001:277), who studies "the line between fiction and social reality" in folk tales, considers folk tales as "statements which register the moral concerns of the narrative community." In his words, "the cruelty and disfigurement within them are imaginary but not inventions."

[19] For some reflections on the concept of fate, see Sect. 6.5.