

## 6 Notes on Major Themes in the *Icakkiamman Katai*

### 6.1 Preliminary Remarks

The major theme of the *Icakkiamman Katai* (*IK*) is the tensions between men and women and how these tensions affect their solidarity with one another. Another dominant focus of the story is the sister–brother bond, as I have attempted to show briefly in Section 4.7. It may be suggested that these two themes are reflected in the *kalḷi* and margosa plants, for a meaningful pattern can be seen to emerge from their roles in the narrative.

The dual sexuality of Icakki(-Nīli) within the bow-song tradition has been extensively discussed by Blackburn. He introduces Icakki(-Nīli) to the reader primarily as a “femme fatale” (1980:208), a type of female who uses her seductive sexuality to destroy the male, in response to prior violence by that sex against her:<sup>1</sup>

The Nīli story (as Icakki Amman) is the most widely spread of the type B goddess narratives in which a woman becomes an avenging Amman. She has come to represent the epitome of the female whose sexuality kills, and her name is used all over the Tamil country as a generic label for an [*sic*] mistrusted woman: Nīli means a “bad” woman. This femme fatale image of the goddess, however, is not restricted to Nīli: it is found in many type B narratives. In fact, it is so prominent that it is a common topic of discussion even within the tradition itself. (Blackburn 1980:208)

However, if I am to show that the issue at hand is the blocking of female fertility, we need to move away from the exclusive emphasis on sexuality and look at other elements, ones largely absent from Blackburn’s analysis cited above.<sup>2</sup> I shall deal with this in Section 6.2.

My main interest in the *IK* has been stirred by a theme that others have treated as insignificant: the bond between Icakki and her twin brother,<sup>3</sup> the importance of which has so far largely gone unrecognised.<sup>4</sup> However, I would argue that this bond is highly significant in the *IK*, for it leads to the death of the seventy Vēḷāḷas, and more importantly, to the extermination of their entire community, all hope of their biological continuity being wiped out.

Another point that I would like to highlight, again one that others have so far overlooked,<sup>5</sup> is the fact that no variants—neither those of the north (Tiruvālaṅkāṭu) nor of the south (*villuppāṭṭu*)—portray Icakki(-Nīli) as bearing a child that has been generated from a man’s seed. The contrary is the case. In all variants she is rendered with either the ontologically ambiguous *kalḷi*-turned-child (e.g. N1), or with

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<sup>1</sup> On this pattern, see also Brubaker 1978:139.

<sup>2</sup> I assume that Blackburn’s use of the term *sexuality* is based on modern Western notions. Whether Tamil culture subsumes the same set of ideas under this term is questionable.

<sup>3</sup> See also Sect. 4.7 above.

<sup>4</sup> Zvelebil (1989:300) is one exception. In a brief note, he refers to the importance of the elder brother. By contrast Blackburn (1980) treats the brother as only of marginal interest; see his synopsis of the (bow-song) story (ibid.:206–8).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Shulman 1980:194–5. In his synopsis of the northern variant (Tiruvālaṅkāṭu) of the Nīli story, he lets the fact that the child in the womb has been generated by Nīli herself go unnoticed: “[H]e coaxed her to come with him from her parent’s home to Kanci, and on the way killed her and the child in her womb [...]” In fact, the reason for her murder was her husband’s belief that she had been unfaithful, and his consequent fear of humiliation by the community.

a child produced through self-impregnation (e.g. N7, cf. N4). This self-induced engendering leads us on to other themes, including barrenness, adultery, and the anxiety of co-wives.

It should have become clear by now that my reading of the story is based on the entire collection of the *Nīli/Icakkiamman Katali* texts (N1-N10), which together provide the interpretive potential for the single version of the *IK* that I present here, in an edition and translation. I regard the cross-referencing between different versions as necessary for this kind of text, since the possible interpretations of themes only become fully apparent when all versions of the story have been considered in relation to each other. The distinctive meaning of certain themes, moreover, can only be tapped in the context of the ritual—for instance, the crucial themes of female fertility and biological continuity.

## 6.2 A World of Oaths and Honour, and the Anguish of Barren Women

Icakki responds directly to a wrong that has been inflicted upon her and her brother. But her claims go far beyond just this injury, a murder. The dominant feature of this reading is Icakki as a female avenger, ruled by a masculine impulse to recover, by means of her own, her personal honour and the honour of countless Tamil women. Hers is a demand for a social principle, an ethics of care. The *Icakkiamman Katali* is a story that conveys a sympathetic attitude towards women's domestic concerns. It portrays the anguish of barren<sup>6</sup> women and their anxiety of being shunted aside by co-wives.<sup>7</sup> Icakki takes up the cause of those women whose husbands have deserted them for another.<sup>8</sup> In a cultural context where women's rights have seldom been upheld by legal sanction, and where until 1955 it was acceptable for men to marry more than one wife, stories like this have a special poignancy for women unable to control their domestic fate.

Let us now turn to the events of the story. To succeed in accusing the Ceṭṭi of adultery and neglect, Icakki has chosen a daring disguise: that of an enticing Ceṭṭi wife. She masquerades thus, and the Karaiyāḷars/Vēḷāḷas, the elders of the village, despite their wisdom, are duped. Icakki ensnares them with many cunning words, her speech being full of calculated deceit. She has her curse and the *kaḷḷi* plant-turned-baby going for her. She claims to be the Ceṭṭi's legitimate wife and persuades the

<sup>6</sup> O'Flaherty (1973:178) terms *barrenness* “the female counterpart of [...] castration [...]”

<sup>7</sup> I use the term *polygyny* to denote the privilege enjoyed by men of marrying more than one wife. One classic portrayal of polygyny in Tamil literature is the *Civakacintāmaṇi*, a *kāppiyam* (tenth century?; see Zvelebil 1995:169) that tells the life of Cīvakaṇ, who married eight women. Kohli (2000:185) remarks that “Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 12.11 is the first authoritative reference to polygamy [i.e. polygyny].” Though polygyny is now prohibited by law, in Tamilnadu it is still practised. – While I agree with Madhavan 2002 that “women's experiences with polygyny can only be understood within particular sociocultural and personal contexts” (ibid.:69), a cross-cultural perspective can be confirmative of what Kohli (2000:189) cites relating to India, namely that “[p]olygamy [...] leads to constant frictions.” For cases of the disapproval felt by co-wives for having to share resources, see Meekers and Franklin 1995, where polygyny is examined from the woman's viewpoint in an African context. Interestingly, their data show that “women who had been in polygynous unions and those who had never been in a polygynous union have similar opinions regarding polygyny” (ibid.:319). Yet there seems to be a group of women who consider polygyny to be a gain, for “it allow[s] them to share the burden of an unsatisfactory marriage with another woman” (ibid.:321) or else to share their work load. According to Madhavan 2002:70, “[t]he relative force of competition or collaboration among co-wives depends on factors such as cultural attitudes about self-assertion versus consensus, sexual jealousy, reproductive competition, individual personalities, and life circumstances.” Madhavan who, like Meekers and Franklin, was doing research in an African context (where childbearing is equally as important for a woman's status as in India), confirms that co-wives “become competitive once there is talk of childbirth, desires for children, and one's sex life” (2002:72). According to M. Farell (“Measuring Maternity,” in V. Miner and H.E. Longino [eds.], *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?* New York, 1987, 141–51), as cited by Madhavan (2002:72), “the conflict that arises between women is rooted in a competition for maternal recognition.”

<sup>8</sup> See N1.2021-2: “Because of the love-potion of that Mūtevi, that misfortune-bringing (other) woman—only because of that did (my) previous fury not disappear.” – The theme of polygyny and the problems it generates for the multiple wives is taken up in various genres, among them in *kāppiyam* literature (see *Cilappatikāram* and *Civakacintāmaṇi*), and also in *pirapantam* literature, e.g. in the *Kurukūrpallu* (alias *Parāṅkucappallu*) of Caṭakōpappulavar (ca. 1700; see Zvelebil 1995:385), a work belonging to the *pallu* genre, in which the senior *palli* accuses “her co-wife of having administered a potion prepared according to the rules of black magic to keep the *paḷḷaṅ* under her thumb” (A.V. Subramanian 1993:284). For an example of the treatment of polygyny in Nevar rice plantation songs in Nepal, see Lienhard's (1984:56f., No. 59) collection of such songs.

Karaiyāḷars that her identity has been destroyed and that she has been deprived of honour.<sup>9</sup> She plays the part of a suffering wife so convincingly that the Karaiyāḷars take up her case. When we listen to Icakki defending herself in front of the Karaiyāḷars, we hear only non-sexual motives. She defines the injury that has angered her not in terms of an unfulfilled sexual life, but rather of the Ceṭṭi having broken his oath of alliance,<sup>10</sup> an oath involving an ethics of care. Marriage, it may be suggested, does not matter here for reasons of pleasure, but because of the resulting maternity, which endows a woman with the status of the lady of the house.<sup>11</sup> The point is not that the husband enjoys another woman, but that by taking a co-wife, he simultaneously enters a new kin group, within which new heirs will be spawned. This would seem to hold equally for adultery, since adultery leads to the wife being deserted. It ends cohabitation, and so reduces the chances of bearing a child to null.<sup>12</sup> The husband, then, does not allow his wife to be a woman who is “fully female.”<sup>13</sup> This is Icakki’s version of her anger. However, this accusation goes somewhat further. It denounces the husband for being not only an enemy of his wife and of their common household, but an enemy of the Tamil social order as well.

The taking of oaths, it may be suggested, is fundamental to the maintenance of order, yet breaking them carries no secular penalty, because such promises are religious acts, not legal ones. Oaths thus are of cosmic concern. In Tamil society, respecting oaths is considered primarily a manly virtue. The seventy Karaiyāḷars/Vēḷāḷas (landowning peasant-farmers) who kept their word stand for this virtue.<sup>14</sup> They stand in stark contrast to the Ceṭṭi (merchant), who is accused of having wilfully betrayed his oath to honour his wife by making her the mother of his children. Breaking this oath moves the woman who wished to become a mother to extreme rage, with devastating consequences.

Icakki could simply have killed the Ceṭṭi, but her real desire is for carefully designed revenge. The Ceṭṭi asked her to kill him quickly, but she prefers a slow, refined death. She creates an atmosphere of intimacy by singing a lullaby full of double entendre, thus lulling the Ceṭṭi into a deep sleep. In her subsequent murder of the Ceṭṭi and her planting of the *kaḷḷi* plant (the punitive agent, which set in motion the forest’s curse) into his chest,<sup>15</sup> she enacts, I propose, an inverse sexual union, an act “opposite [to] normal, life-producing, sexual intercourse,”<sup>16</sup> and performs a ceremonial esoteric exchange: the *kaḷḷi* plant (with all its connotations)<sup>17</sup> for the child that was denied to her. Against this backdrop it is not surprising that a woman in Tamil society should be forced to take measures to engender offspring herself, fertilise herself by a miraculous transfer process (explicit in N4), and impregnate herself by magical means, as in the case of Aṅṅatāṭci in N7 (see Section 2.4). The dilemma for a Tamil woman, to whom fertility and mothering is of paramount importance,<sup>18</sup> becomes very clear. It is thus not surprising that in some versions Icakki, after killing the Ceṭṭi, flies away with her brother to escape from a society that tolerates polygynists and adulterers, men who deny their wives’ legitimate

<sup>9</sup> See N1.2034: “I become the object of public ridicule.”

<sup>10</sup> For the connection between oaths and the right hand, and Icakki’s iconographically depicted erect right hand as challenging those who have wilfully betrayed their oaths, see Sect. 7.6.

<sup>11</sup> See N1.2037-8: “If he who married me by tying the *tāli* ruins [our] married state, who else will give me that status?”

<sup>12</sup> On adultery and the desertion of wives in the Indian context, see Kohli 2000. The author, referring to a ruling by the Supreme Court, points out that abandonment signifies “the intention to bring cohabitation permanently to an end” (ibid.:406).

<sup>13</sup> The expression, coined on the basis of Tamil beliefs, is Blackburn’s (1980:213). Cf. Hart (1999:165), who points out this conception in early Caṅkam poetry: “[T]he fulfillment of the wife comes when she is impregnated and conceives.”

<sup>14</sup> I propose a link between the Vēḷāḷas’ moral obligation (righteousness), seemingly a superior male virtue among the peasantry, and the superior female virtue of modesty (*kaṟpu*). Honour and faithfulness to oaths fall under the Tamil concept of *nāṇ* (sense of honour), which includes a person’s “self-control, dignified behaviour, firmness of mind, fulfilling commitments, living up to social expectations” (Hardy 1988:130). On this norm, see also Kailasapathy 1968:87–93.

<sup>15</sup> On the equation of the chest with the heart, see Beck (1979:32), who points to the heart as “[...] the center of suffering. [...] Falseness and deception also issue from this important organ. [...] It is also a secret place.”

<sup>16</sup> The expression is Marglin’s (1985:237), descriptive of the goddess Kālī.

<sup>17</sup> The *kaḷḷi* plant is the ontologically ambiguous child, the embodiment of a curse, the witness to a murder, and, in brief, the exteriorised expression of an angry and violent relationship.

<sup>18</sup> Note that it is customary for Tamil landowning communities to associate women “with the fertility of the soil” (Rao 1986:143).

claims of fertility, this being an aspect of womanhood that a Tamil woman must lay claim to if she is to enjoy her rightful status and recognition. Indeed, it is not a husband whom the disguised Icakki is seeking, but a man who will bring a woman the honour and status of maternity, and who will appreciate her for this.

It is in the light of these themes that we also must gauge the extent of the loss of her brother. The brother's role has been protection, empathy, and caring. These things have been denied by the husband who has deserted his wife. Their absence provides the stimulus for further action carried out in rage: she now wants to kill the Karaiyāḷars, too, for they are responsible for her brother's death. This theme will be taken up in the following section.

### 6.3 The Sister–Brother Bond and the Case of Retaliation

The importance of the sister–brother bond in the southern Indian kinship and marriage system<sup>19</sup> has been explored by various scholars, prominent among them being Peterson (1988),<sup>20</sup> Trawick (1990a:170ff.),<sup>21</sup> and, with respect to sister–brother incest in Tamil folk tales, also more recently Blackburn<sup>22</sup> (2001).

The significance of the bond between sister and brother in the *IK* has not yet received the attention it deserves.<sup>23</sup> In this section I make good this omission. I shall demonstrate that this bond is indeed a crucial one, for it sets in motion events that lead to the death of the seventy Vēḷāḷas, and even more relevantly, to the extinction of their entire community. I consider questionable the prevailing scholarly opinion of the Vēḷāḷas' death as being simply the aftereffect of their misjudgement, which led to the Ceṭṭi's death. Interpretations like this, in my opinion, could only apply to versions that depict the brother as unimportant, such as those of the northern line. There the forest scene is missing (see Section 2.4, N7)—and hence the logical inner link between the death of the *pēy* Nīlaṅ resulting from the Vēḷāḷas' felling a tree and his twin sister's (Nīli's) decision to pay back the Vēḷāḷas for this deed. Only against the backdrop of this missing scene, in my opinion, does the resurrection of the Vēḷāḷas by Śiva after they have entered the fire, and Śiva's pronouncement that Nīli(-Icakki)'s action against the Vēḷāḷas was not justified, become comprehensible.

Whereas the sister–brother bond is not a theme in the northern versions, the prominence it receives in the southern ones is made all the more explicit by the introduction of the devadāsī figure. This new character embodies two concepts: the devadāsī system on the one hand and the matrilineal marriage system (*marumakkattāyam*)<sup>24</sup> on the other. The sister–brother bond is of great significance in both systems. A study of the main characteristics of these two systems, then, is a worthwhile inquiry.

<sup>19</sup> See also Sect. 7.2.1.

<sup>20</sup> Blackburn (2001:290) refers to Peterson 1988:25–52, in *South Asian Social Scientist* 4 (1), an issue of the journal I unfortunately was unable to access.

<sup>21</sup> Trawick (1990a), in the chapter titled “The Bond between Brother and Sister Is Strong But Must Be Denied,” concurs with Peterson: “As Peterson observes, the brother–sister bond is ‘the central focus of the south Indian kinship system and marriage and no doubt influences the sister’s self-image and the brother’s image of the sister at all levels of the psyche’” (173).

<sup>22</sup> Blackburn (2001:289) is in agreement with Trawick (1990a) and Karin Kapadia (*Siva and her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995) that “cross-cousin marriage is a continuation of the powerful brother-sister bond in Tamil culture.” Some of his collected folk tales (such as the version of AT 450) support this argument.

<sup>23</sup> The strong sister–brother relationship in the *IK* comes to the fore in the episodes where 1) the brother dies in anguish over his sister's murder by the Brahmin lover, 2) the siblings are reborn as the twins Nīli and Nīlaṅ, 3) the sister and brother ascend to heaven in the brother's chariot after the sister has killed her lover of the previous birth. – Cf. the *pūtām* (Skt. *bhūta*) pairs of Tulunadu (in southern Kanara district) whose “relationship is that of elder brother – younger sister” (Nichter 1977:141). Nichter remarks that “[t]his relationship expresses an ideal of closeness which must be understood in light of the matrilineal kinship system prevalent in the district [...]” (ibid.:141).

<sup>24</sup> *Marumakkattāyam* is a “system of inheritance by which a man's sister's sons become heirs to his property instead of his sons” (TL:3095, s.v.). In other words, under this system sons inherit property from their mother's brothers rather than from their fathers. Neither the passing on of property directly from mother to daughter nor a female head of the household is necessarily implied by the matrilineal system.

Drawing on details provided by several scholars, I shall briefly describe their most basic elements.

I first quote Marglin (1990:215f.) with reference to the devadāsī system in Puri (Orissa), which differs from the devadāsīs' customs portrayed in the *IK* only insofar as it seems not to harbour any notion that devadāsīs are meant to conceive children:

[Devadāsīs are ...] married to the deity [...]. They should never marry a mortal man and raise a family, as other women do. [...] The *devadasis* are also known as courtesans or prostitutes [...], reflecting the fact that the *devadasis* are not chaste. [...] [T]hey were supported by land grants to the temple and lived in their own homes along with their mothers, sisters, brothers, brother's wives, and children, and their own adopted daughters [...]. They also were not supposed to have children [...] and they adopted their brothers' daughters [...].

Within the devadāsī system, then, brothers and daughters<sup>25</sup> are considered to be the primary persons in the kin nucleus.

How is the sister–brother relationship shaped in the matrilineal system? Referring to this system in the Kerala context, Caldwell (1999:196) writes:

This social system led to unusually strong ties between brothers and sisters, who resided together and made many joint decisions: husbands meanwhile lived in the households of their own sisters. The role of the father[/husband] was negligible from a social standpoint; in every respect except procreation, her brother was the more important partner in a woman's life.

Brothers are, however, not only important in the two systems described above. They rate high for Tamil women in general. This is clearly mirrored in women's rituals. Valli, a woman of the Vēḷāḷa community in Pāḷaiyamkōṭṭai, in whose house I stayed, told me about the Auvaiyār *nōṅpu*, a protection ritual performed by women for their brothers, in secret, with no men present. Sons and husbands are not allowed to hear the story that is told in connection with it. Trawick (1990a:174) mentions this story. I cite her synopsis and comments:

Auvaiyār was an unmarried woman poet of the Sangam era, celebrated for her didactic verse. In the story, Auvaiyār teaches a younger woman to bring posterity to her seven brothers "by ritually eating substances and objects symbolic of death and evil omen. She helps the brothers get married and herself marries a king. When the brothers are once again struck by poverty because of their wives' negligent behavior, the sister intervenes, teaches the *nōṅpu* to her sisters-in-law, and restores them to their prosperous condition." Here the priority of the brother-sister bond over the husband-wife bond is clear. Also evident is a tension between [...] sisters-in-law, sister and wife of the same man.

This story offers some insight into the sense of protection and tenderness inherent in the sister–brother bond.

Beck (1986:98) underscores these same characteristics of the sister–brother bond in her study of folk tales:

Forty percent of these [folk] stories (144 of 360) give prominence to sister–brother bonds [...]. Tender concern and protection is a major component of brother/sister relationships in these folktales.

It is thus clear that the sister–brother relationship is a highly relevant piece of the social fabric.<sup>26</sup> In a system where sisters and brothers are never separated and are considered to be the family nucleus, intimacy between them is great.<sup>27</sup> They share property and food, and spend a great deal of time together.

<sup>25</sup> The value of a female child within the devadāsī system is well demonstrated at the beginning of the N1 version of the *IK*, where the childless Sivakāmi asks for a daughter in order to have an heir. See also my note in the translation of N1.188-9 (Sect. 5.4).

<sup>26</sup> The importance of brothers can be seen in other cultures as well: Index No. P253.3: "Brother chosen rather than husband or son. Only one can be saved; he [the brother] alone is irreplaceable" (Thompson 1975, Vol 5:159); Aly 1921:109; see also Vielhauer 1979:19 regarding Sophocles's Greek tragedy *Antigone* and Herodot.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Trawick (1990a), who points out the "intense attachment between brother and sister" (172) and that "the first erotic partnership is formed with a sibling" (170); also *ibid.*:187: "[B]rother and sister share a womb, and share a home"; "the sibling bond is primordial. It comes before any bond with an outsider."

But regardless of the level of intimacy, brothers and sisters are not thrust into the intimate sexual contact required by a marriage. There are ways for them to maintain their distance, and to reduce vulnerability and intrusion. Thus it is not surprising that emphasis is put on the bond between brother and sister at the expense of the husband–wife relationship, which is seen from the beginning as a conflict-laden bond<sup>28</sup> based on money (see *IK*, N9.61<sup>29</sup>).<sup>30</sup>

After this brief excursus I turn to the events of the story. I shall seek to underpin my main argument that the brother is a major part of the entire retaliatory process, an argument supported by the fact that the story ends with the reunion of the twin siblings<sup>31</sup> (see Section 4.7). I strongly argue that the *IK* primarily focuses upon the retaliation for the twin brother’s murder. The murder of the Ceṭṭi must, in the first place, be considered to be an instrumental part of a strategy for taking vengeance on the Vēlāḷas/Karaiyāḷars who were responsible for the twin brother’s death (see N10.172a, N8.59ab, N2.97d). Only in the second place should the Ceṭṭi’s death be regarded as a retaliatory act for Nīli-Icakki’s own violent death. Ziegenbalg’s retelling (1711) of the *Nīli Nāṭakam* offers explicit support for my thesis:

Alsdann nimmt sie ihre vorige Teufelsgestalt an, und spricht: Ich habe nicht in willens gehabt, dich zu tödten, du bist ein schöner und schicklicher Mensch, aber ümb meines Bruders Todt an den 70 *Wellaren* zu rächen, tödte ich dich anietzo. Darauf tödtet sie ihn und verschwindet. (See above, Chapter 3, No. 17).

Then she takes her previous form of a *pēy* (demoness) and says, “I had no intention of killing you. You are a beautiful and handsome person. But in order to take revenge on the seventy Vēlāḷas who caused my brother’s death, I now shall kill you.” Then she kills him and disappears. (My translation)

I shall go into this important utterance of Nīli-Icakki in somewhat greater detail by providing a brief interpretation of the relationship of sister and brother in their second birth. In their second birth the sister and brother share one and the same identity, as reflected by the names Nīli (f) and Nīlaṅ (m).<sup>32</sup> There is an underlying peculiarity in the *IK*: the two beings of the first birth become one in their second birth, and this presumably single being again splits into two. It is with the felling of the margosa tree, the twin siblings’ abode, that the intimate interweaving of female and male identity—mirroring the complementary aspects of the cosmos—is destroyed. A brother and sister, who were an integral part of each other are brutally separated. It stands to reason that this must have grave consequences.

Writing of a South American context, Alès (2000:136) states: “The objective goal of revenge is to inflict at least an equivalent pain or amount of suffering [...] on the adversary. This is a principle that applies equally to all types of retaliatory situations [...]” The *IK* is true to this principle. Icakki is enraged because her brother has been killed. To ease her loss, she takes action that is proportionate to the offence. She continues with her retribution until she feels that she is free of rage. One may gauge the degree of social bondedness between persons by the means and severity of retaliation used in such situations. In the case of the devadāsī murder, it is an equivalent tit for tat; the murder of Icakki’s twin brother, however, is avenged by the death of seventy Vēlāḷas/Karaiyāḷars, including women and children. Only in this way can the sister’s fury be stilled. Tamils can be described as a very affectionate and sensitive people, deeply attached to those who are close to them.<sup>33</sup> In a society that encourages

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Trawick 1990a:178ff.

<sup>29</sup> Version N9.61 states: “Only money is a husband.”

<sup>30</sup> The husband–wife relationship among Tamils is fraught with emotional uncertainty, for marriages are arranged and require a dowry; see also Trawick 1990a:182.

<sup>31</sup> For similar concepts in cross-cultural contexts, see Diduk 2001. Of African Kedjom society Diduk writes: “The surviving sibling longs to be with his or her departed twin” (ibid.:33).

<sup>32</sup> A similar shared identity between twin sister and brother is that between Yamī and Yama; see Ṛgveda 10.10.7, 9, 11 (Grassmann 1877:297). Concerning demons, Reiniche (1975 [Purusharta 2]:183) notes that they often have a female counterpart; in the case of Madan it is Madatti. What is striking is that this counterpart is not a wife but a sister. For further remarks on sister–brother *pūtām* (demon) pairs, see Nichter (1977:141).

<sup>33</sup> See Trawick 1990a and 1990b.

strong passions and feelings, an excess of *aṅṅu* (love) and *pācam* (attachment) is necessarily inseparable from the diametrically opposite excess of rage and violence that ensues when one's kinfolk are assaulted. Herein lies the explanation for the severity of retaliation involved.<sup>34</sup>

The retaliatory pattern can be viewed from still another angle, namely the significance that numbers have in India. In certain religious popular beliefs of the southern Indian Irulars, the number seven does not express single individual entities, but a totality.<sup>35</sup> By looking at the *IK* in terms of such religious beliefs, the number seventy, the number of *Vēḷāḷas*/*Karaiyāḷars* who die, becomes meaningful. One may infer that the number seventy expresses not so much single individuals, but rather the totality of a social group. Following up my earlier line of argumentation, this strongly suggests that the retaliatory action taken against the seventy *Karaiyāḷars* is indeed proportionate to the destruction of the “mystical two-in-one quality”<sup>36</sup> of the sister–brother bond. Each, the seventy *Karaiyāḷars* and the sister–brother twins, is perceived as a single unit.

## 6.4 Humans and Plants

The special significance of plants in the life of Tamils, documented as far back as the *Caṅkam* age, has been pointed out by Hart (1999) and Vacek and Knotková-Čapková (1999). Not unexpectedly, then, plants are assigned a similarly distinctive role in the *IK* and in the *koṭai* ritual we are discussing here. Indeed, in the *IK* we find a close identification being made between humans and plants. Plants are anthropomorphised. The margosa tree, for instance, is portrayed as the home<sup>37</sup> of *Nīli* and *Nīlaṅ*, the *pēy* twins. When the tree is felled, *Nīlaṅ* in effect loses his home<sup>38</sup> (N1, N2, N8, N10), and in some versions, even worse, is bodily injured<sup>39</sup> (N5, N6, N9). Evidence relating to this and similar ideas is provided by Coomaraswamy (1993) in his work on *yakṣas*. Referring to ancient thought, the author remarks:

[A]ny designated tree [can] be regarded as the visible form of its indwelling *yakṣa*, who may or may not upon occasion also assume another and human form within or beside the Tree itself. [...] The Tree itself [...] is the likeness of the *yakṣa*, and honour paid to it is honour paid to the *yakṣa* (11) [...] God and men alike are trees (12).

<sup>34</sup> Her response is similar to that of *Kaṅṅaki* in the *Cilappatikāram*.

<sup>35</sup> See Kulke 1970:56, n. 61: “Bolle kommt in einer Arbeit: ‘Die Göttin und die Ritualbewegung’, in: Antaios, 1962, S. 272ff., in der er sich auf ethnologisches Material von den südindischen Irulars stützt, zu dem Schluß: ‘Die Zahl sieben drückt dabei [bei den ‘Saptakanyās’ genannten Göttinnen] nicht so sehr einzeln unterscheidbare Persönlichkeiten aus, als vielmehr die Gesamtheit göttlicher Präsenz’” (the brackets are the author’s).

<sup>36</sup> This expression is Masquelier’s (2001:47). Cf. Nichter (1977:141), who points out the “androgynous status” of *pūtam*/*bhūtas* in Tulu Nadu (southern Kanara district).

<sup>37</sup> The belief that *vēmpu* (margosa; Hi. *nīm*) trees are inhabited by deities can already be found in the *Caṅkam* period, as attested in *Akanānūru* 309.4; see Dvořák 1999:55. In the *IK*, the margosa tree assumes the features of a self-sufficient cosmos that nourishes its inhabitants well (cf. Section 6.3, p. 226, where I characterise the tree as a cosmos with both female and male aspects to it).

<sup>38</sup> The versions which offer this particular view of the tree as being rather an abode (than a body) are nevertheless very clear in regarding the felling of the tree as the primary cause of the death of the *pēy*. It is ostensibly because the *pēy* is deprived of his home that he angrily attacks the first person he comes across, who unfortunately is the *pūjārī* of the forest deity *Cāstā*. The latter, coming to the *pūjārī*’s aid, orders the attacker to be killed by *Kuṅṅōtarāṅ*. See Appendix B, Topic 2. – Note that the tree spirits depicted in these versions dwell in trees, but are not confined to trees.

<sup>39</sup> In the versions in which *Nīlaṅ*’s leg is severed when the tree is felled (see Appendix B, Topic 2), the relationship between *Nīlaṅ* and the tree is apparently very close; indeed the tree can be viewed as the *pēy*’s body. Compare the tale of *Brahmadatta*, king of Banaras, which relates the felling of a tree. When the tree’s deity hears about this plan, he remarks that he will be destroyed when his home is destroyed; see *Bhaddasāla Jātaka* (No. 465) in *Jātaka*, Vol. 4, 144ff., especially 153ff. (tr. Cowell 1901 [Vol. 4]:91ff., especially 97). In these *Jātaka gāthās* (note that the *Jātaka* verses were generally adopted from non-Buddhist sources; see Hinüber 1998:190f.) the tree deity calls the tree his body (Schmithausen 1991:15). On trees as having all five senses: *śrotra*, *ghrāṇa*, *rasa*, *sparśa*, *dṛṣṭi*, “hearing, smell, taste, touch, look,” see the *Mokṣadharmā*, *Mahābhārata* (12.177.10-17 in the Poona critical edition, 1971ff.; tr. Deussen 1922:151f.); also *Manusmṛti* 1.49 (ed. Olivelle 2006:391; tr. 89): *antaḥsamjñā bhavantyete sukhaduḥkhasamanvitāḥ*, “[the seed plants] come into being with inner awareness, able to feel pleasure and pain.”

I offer a second example from the *IK* that expresses this crucially important close identification even more clearly: the *kaḷḷi* plant. The *kaḷḷi* plant (*Euphorbia tirucalli*),<sup>40</sup> a thorny milkweed-like plant related to the spurges,<sup>41</sup> is supernaturally turned into a child by Icakki as part of her strategy of revenge. In the lullaby sung by Icakki prior to her murder of the Ceṭṭi, the *kaḷḷi* plant is imagined as a baby boy (N1.2052ff.):

Are you a [true] son, as (beautiful) as a statue, or are you offspring born to the *kaḷḷi* plant? (2052)  
 Are you green? Does your body drip milk? (2055)  
 You aren't a boy with roots, are you? (2057)  
 You have milk, you have cooked rice (2068).  
 Sleep, my darling boy! (2073)

These lines, full of double meaning, are illustrative, I think, of a basic cultural understanding of the relation between plants, humans, and supernatural beings, namely one in which each is continuously transforming into the other.

In the Caṅkam work titled *Puraṇānūru*, a *kaḷḷi* plant is inhabited by a deity (*kaḷḷi nīḷar kaṭavuḷ vāḷtti*; *Pura* 260.5; ed. U.V.C., p. 434) and referred to as growing in the dry *pālai* wasteland and on cremation grounds (*Pura* 245.3; 356.1). This close connection of the *kaḷḷi* (milkweed-like) plant with infertility and death is expressed in the Nīli story as well. N7, the version of the northern branch in which the murdered woman is a pregnant wife, is most explicit in its depiction of the *kaḷḷi* plant as an abode for unborn life. N7.274-5; 279-81 tells of how the brother, upon finding his murdered pregnant sister (in the *kāṭu* wilderness), tears open her womb and throws the unborn child onto a nearby *kaḷḷi* plant, which becomes its temporary dwelling up until the time of revenge.<sup>42</sup>

The fact that the *kaḷḷi* plant becomes a weapon of revenge suggests that this bristly plant is not only intimately connected with children and pregnant (N7) or virginal women (N1) (who died untimely deaths), but also with women's socio-juridical concerns. How these concerns are revealed to us in the structure of the text may be set forth as follows:

1. The *kaḷḷi* plant in the forest: a passive witness<sup>43</sup> to a murder – socio-juridical concerns (*puram*)
2. The *kaḷḷi*-turned-child in Icakki's arms: an emblem of motherhood and a means of revenge – domestic concerns (*akam*)
3. The *kaḷḷi*-turned-child climbs onto the lap of the Ceṭṭi: a confirmation of fatherhood – domestic concerns (*akam*)
4. The *kaḷḷi* on the chest of the killed Ceṭṭi: an emblem of justice done – socio-juridical concerns (*puram*)

The figurative significance of plants, to be sure, is not confined within the borders of India. This applies in particular to the milkweed-like plant, which occupies an important place, for instance, in the ritual practices of the Ndembu of Zambia, as reported in Hicks 1999:183. It is interesting that the concepts embedded in the *IK* find ample support in cross-cultural contexts and that Victor Turner's analysis<sup>44</sup> manages to capture one important aspect of the meaning similarly inherent in the *kaḷḷi* plant of the *IK*, namely its connection with motherhood.

<sup>40</sup> On the *kaḷḷi* plant in early Tamil poetry, see Dubianski 2000:141, 173.

<sup>41</sup> A *kaḷḷi* plant grows both in arid and wet regions.

<sup>42</sup> See also Sect. 5.4, footnote to N1.1429. – *Kāṭu* and *pālai* are often used interchangeably to designate the same type of wilderness.

<sup>43</sup> Shrubs and trees in literature to serve as witnesses is not uncommon; see, for instance, Zvelebil 1995:700, *Tiruvīḷaiyāṭarapurāṇam* s.v., where, with reference to the sixty-fourth sport of Śiva, a tree is said to do just that.

<sup>44</sup> See Hicks (1999) who quotes V.W. Turner: “[A] milky white sap oozes out [from the *mudyi* tree]. For the Ndembu [of Zambia], this sap is the tree's most important physical property, and on it they base an everwidening network of symbols. [...] The sap's immediate referent is human milk, which itself symbolizes the female breast from which the milk flows. The breast in turn symbolizes the suckling of infants, which symbolizes the mother-child bond. The mother-child bond symbolizes the family, a social group basic to Ndembu society, and the family, finally, symbolizes the whole of Ndembu society” (183).



To conclude this section I delineate the *IK*'s structure of plants and humans. Two categories, (a) human beings (male and female) and (b) plants (margosa and *kaḷḷi*), interact, each figuring as a pole in a series of binary oppositions. The analogies are as follows:

Men : Women :: Plants : Plants

Ceṭṭi : Icakki :: margosa leaf (cooling)<sup>45</sup> : *kaḷḷi* plant (bristly)

Men : Plants :: Women : Plants

Ceṭṭi : margosa (protective weapon)<sup>46</sup> :: Icakki : *kaḷḷi* (passive witness, child [instrument of revenge], emblem of justice)

The story with the Ceṭṭi ends as follows:

Men : Plants :: Women : Men

The dead Ceṭṭi : *kaḷḷi* :: Icakki : her brother

What do these dichotomies mean? It seems that a social and juridical principle is being adumbrated. An ethics of care (the “promise of non-violence,”<sup>47</sup> nourishment) and justice<sup>48</sup> for women and children is being formulated around the margosa and *kaḷḷi* plants, respectively. The *kaḷḷi* as a metonymic embodiment of infertility, abandonment, and injustice is probably best expressed in a line of the lullaby found in N1.2058-9: “You [*kaḷḷi*] stood as a new guard for humanity in this world.” As seen in the parallel reading of version N8, the demand for justice is a major theme. There Icakki complains that the king (*araṇmaṇaiyār*) did not investigate her real-life murder case (N8.29a.943)—seemingly a failure of the sovereign, the holder of the *daṇḍa*. The final word, however, is reserved for Pārvatī, who with an all-seeing eye decides, in the northern N7 version: “Nobody took care of Anṇatāṭci [Nīli]. I shall take revenge for her.”

To summarise the role of plants in the *IK*: I argue that the two plants, the *vēmpu* (margosa) and *kaḷḷi* (milkweed-like plant), are intimately associated with the overall tragic mood of the story and the human cosmos it describes. Both plants become the dwelling place of those who have died a premature, violent death: the angry and hungry spirits.<sup>49</sup> They would seem to temper these spirits' hot character<sup>50</sup> (protecting them from themselves) and to nourish their existence. More particularly, the *kaḷḷi* plant appears to be reserved for the unborn (as a marker of infertility and the tension between men and women), while the margosa tree's intimate interweaving of female and male identity (a wholeness of self and cosmos) brings the tree-like fertility of the brother and sister into sharp focus.

<sup>45</sup> Hildebeitel 1991:72.

<sup>46</sup> For the effect of margosa leaves, see Syed 1990:374: “Die [Margosa-]Blätter werden in einem Zauber verwendet, um Feinden zu schaden. [...] Gleichzeitig haben [die ...] Blätter magische Abwehrkraft.” See also Sect. 5.4, N1.957-8 above.

<sup>47</sup> I quote Tambiah (1990:100) who refers to Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.

<sup>48</sup> For an interesting discussion of this issue, see P.A. Meyers, “The ‘Ethics of Care’ and the Problem of Power,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 6(2): 142–70, 1998; L. Cannold et al., “What Is the Justice-Care Debate Really About?,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20: 357–77, 1995; O. Flanagan and K. Jackson, “Justice, Care, and Gender: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Debate Revisited,” *Ethics* 97: 622–37, 1987; S.M. Okin, “Reason and Feeling in Thinking about Justice,” *Ethics* 99: 229–49, 1989.

<sup>49</sup> The margosa tree is the abode of hungry spirits who have died an untimely death, in general, and the home of Icakki's brother, in particular. The *kaḷḷi* plant is the abode of the unborn child and the witness to the murder of (depending on the version) a pregnant woman or a virgin.

<sup>50</sup> The demons' attraction to the margosa tree may be explained by the cooling effect it has on their hot character. For the effect of margosa leaves, see Syed 1990: “Im alten Indien galt der *nimba* [margosa] zum einen als zu meidender Baum, dessen Holz etc. man im Opfer nicht verwenden durfte, zum anderen galt er als heilkräftig und negative Kräfte bannend” (377).

## 6.5 The Question of Fate

The role that fate plays in the *IK* needs to be briefly addressed. The story makes it clear that the Ceṭṭi runs blindly towards his preordained end. He has sought his own death. Not only he but also all other men in the *IK* bring about their own destruction. Āṇantaṅ Ceṭṭi has an appointment, as it were, with Icakki, his death. There have been enough signs and bad omens warning the Ceṭṭi not to go to the forest of Paḷakai, but his own fate and the demands of the story lead him there. However, the story allows him the freedom of choice till the very end. His lack of knowledge of his past crime is his true tragedy. The Ceṭṭi, as seen in all the left-hand caste stories, is completely passive,<sup>51</sup> probably because he senses that his fate awaits him and will impel him (N8.794/N6.336-7) onto a path of no return. When he begins his ‘final’ journey, Āṇantaṅ Ceṭṭi has already been told by the gecko that Nīli awaits his arrival in order to exact her revenge. Āṇantaṅ Ceṭṭi is prepared:

“[...] the astrologer predicted that you would be killed by a very bad female demon. Don’t ever ignore the powerful margosa leaves on [your] mountain-strong, gem-studded chest! (N1.951, 954-8) The result of an evil deed [done] by sorcery awaits you. Icakki is waiting to kill you. You will be killed,” (the gecko) is saying. “She will claim with certainty that you are her (dear) husband.” (N1.1027-30)

Yet, as stated in N2.746/N6.336-7/N8.794, “[his] previous ill fate put its hand on the back of his neck and pushed him.” He is driven from within to meet the fate that comes from without. Murder will out.<sup>52</sup> There is a price to pay for his past, yet he is burdened with a loss of memory. He is helplessly exposed to the allegations of Icakki(-Nīli). In N12 he pleads with her, “Speak out at this critical moment the serious lapse I am guilty of!”<sup>53</sup> He obviously desires to know the past, but is incapable of remembering it (“you stand [there], having forgotten all of the past,” Icakki says; N10.83c). His inability to remember his previous self is mirrored in his failure to recognise Icakki when she appears in divine form in front of him in her first *alaṅkāram* (N1.1039, 1096ff.).<sup>54</sup> Insistently, she asks him twice, “When you see (me)—don’t you recognise this woman?” (N1.1128-9). He fails to do so, and therefore has to die. The question remains open whether the Ceṭṭi could have escaped death had he entered into a true dialogue with Icakki and come to recognise her. Since such a turn of events would have circumvented the role of fate, which so clearly is a central driving force behind the Ceṭṭi’s reaction, the answer is probably negative.

Here we touch on a second aspect of the question of fate: the Ceṭṭi’s refusal to accept responsibility. When the *kallī*-turned-child—the eyewitness to his crime—climbs onto his lap, he pushes it away as if to push his past away. He does not ask himself whether some forgotten facet of himself exists within him.<sup>55</sup> Instead, he clings to his lost memory.<sup>56</sup> He shuts the past out of his life—ignores and negates it. In order to escape from it, he plunges into a fit in front of the Karaiyāḷars. In a panic, he rolls on the ground in search of a mental refuge, but is unable to find any. This illustrates nicely what O’Flaherty in her work *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* has pointed out, namely:

[I]f one cannot feel responsibility for what one has done in a previous life because one cannot remember that life [...], one cannot feel the justice in being punished for a crime that someone else did (the [...] previous self, lost to one’s present memory). One can be *told* about it [...], but that is something else [...].<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> On men’s passiveness in left-hand epics, see Sect. 7.2, last paragraph, below.

<sup>52</sup> On this ballad theme (N271, “Murder will out”), see Atkinson 1999:1.

<sup>53</sup> Subramaniam (English/Tamil edition of the *Nīli Yaṭcākāṇam*) 1996:154, first two lines.

<sup>54</sup> For a deeper treatment of recognition, memory, and forgetting, see Shulman 1998:309ff.

<sup>55</sup> For a deeper treatment of self-recognition and the fragmented self, see Shulman 2001:146f.

<sup>56</sup> It seems that here “[f]orgetfulness is [...] an act,” to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s (1962:162) expression.

<sup>57</sup> O’Flaherty 1984:224.