8 Ethnographic Notes on the Ritual Context of the *koṭai* Festival of Paḻavūr Icakki

8.1 I Myself in the Field – Some Remarks

The experience in the field is different for each researcher, owing to individual personality and expectations. We are all aware of the subjectivity we as individuals bring to the experience of an event, and of the problem we as outsiders face when we arrive as a stranger in a community and have to negotiate the identity of an insider. I am no exception in this regard. Discovering, by great luck and more or less accidentally, that in Paḻavūr a *koṭai* festival[1] in honour of the goddess I was researching would soon be conducted, I immediately set off to visit one of the committee members, the treasurer Ca. Paḻaṇiyā Piḷḷai, a retired groundnut merchant of the Vēḷāḷa (or Piḷḷai) community, in the village. I was rewarded with a readiness to give me an on-the-spot interview and to provide me with a rough summary of the *Icakkiyammaṉ Katai* in the form known to me, and the local Icakki story of Paḻavūr as well. Regarding the latter, my host personally fetched Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai, who had one year earlier written a summary for the local newspaper *Tamiḻmuracu*.[2] At the end of my three-hour visit I was cordially invited to participate in the *koṭai* festival planned for a month later, and even to document it with all my equipment. Keeping in contact by letter and phone, Ca. Paḻaṇiyā Piḷḷai in one of our conversations disclosed his wish that a gift *(taṉkoṭai)* for the *koṭai* festival would be appreciated, a request I had already anticipated on my own. On the day of the *koṭai* festival I officially fulfilled it.

Koṭai festivals had, until then, been unfamiliar to me. When I arrived, I first faced the difficulty of placing myself, as a researcher conducting an ethnographic study of the Icakkiyammaṉ *koṭai,* into the new surroundings. I shall here devote some lines to my own experience, including my emotional responses. It was all very challenging, given my unfamiliarity with the overall context and with the particular village. I realised the difficulties of dealing with the individuals and groups interacting with me as a researcher. However, I tried not to create expectations for myself, but rather to be receptive to what I observed. Since I was familiar with the religion, had a grasp of family customs and kin relationships, and had known Tamilnadu and its village life for many years, I felt no sense of estrangement, but indeed felt quite at home within the religious atmosphere that enveloped me. Fortunately, then, no serious cause for unease was present to colour my observations and experiences. Nonetheless, two incidents occurred which took me aback. The first was when the treasurer of the committee, Ca. Paḻaṇiyā Piḷḷai, demurred at my wish to interview the eldest member of the pūjārī family, the embodiment of Icakki. The second was when the village elder decided that I should not film or make photographs of Icakkiyammaṉ during the peak rituals at 1:00 A.M., even though I had been

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[1] Hiltebeitel 1999:32, n.54 states: "Icakki [...] has many temples in the Bow Song area, but seems to receive mainly private offerings rather than festivals *(koṭai)* that would include Bow Song performance, although there is a Bow Song for her [...]." On my inspection tour to several of the Icakki temples in Tūttukuṭi, Tirunelvēli, and Kaṉṉiyākumari, I learnt that the contrary was in fact the case. At almost every temple I was told that there is a *koṭai* festival that includes the performance of the Icakki story.

[2] The edition is that of 18 February 2000.

promised, in person, that I could record the entire ritual on video. The explanation for the latter stance was that I might reduce the deity's power—similar to what I had been told in Muppantal at the Icakkiyamman̲ Tirukōyil (East). It would have been quite natural to have taken a different attitude, but I accepted this as a chance to go native and immerse myself in an emic view. Observing without a camcorder, it turned out, drew me physically and emotionally deeply into the atmosphere of the ritual, allowing me to enjoy its artistic mode of non-verbal communication. The most striking experience in my fieldwork was the sense of intimacy felt during the *māppil̲l̲ai mañcappil̲l̲ai* ritual—a sense of my own individuality and at the same time being a part of those around me. I had the impression that others experienced something similar. I was, then, both an insider and an outsider. For the rest of the night I left the ethnographic recording to the professional videographer I had engaged. By the time the *kot̲ai's* second ritual cycle had finished, I was personally at peace and set at ease by the smooth flow of the ongoing events and the enchanting music of the *nātasvaram,*[3] as were others who had been tense during the day and into the night, but whose beautiful smiles now were expressive of satisfaction.[4] As a believer in *ahiṁsā,* I found myself uncomfortable only with the sacrificial ritual acts performed on animals, which were difficult for me to look at and film.

My technical preparations for the documentation were satisfactorily. I had two video cameras (one operated by a professional local cameraman and fitted out with bright lights that proved invaluable in illuminating scenes whose lighting was poor; the other a digital camera I myself operated). In addition, there was a separate audio recording, and a photo camera as well. My task was not easy. I knew only the rough programme, not the full scenario of ritual to be performed at the two shrines, those of Icakki and Pūtattār. The turning points of the rituals often came unexpectedly, stopping at one shrine and starting at the other, so that the camera had to be rushed from one place to the next across a congested temple square. Yet the simple fact of being present with the camera helped me to become familiar with the ritual process and to sort out the sequence of the two days of events. The first day was devoted to the performance of the *Icakkiyamman̲ Katai* and the local Icakki story (which ended around 1:00 A.M.), and to various rituals oriented towards peak ritual moments during the dawn watch (2:00 A.M. to 4:30 A.M., the third *yāma* watch, when demons are active at crucial points during these watches). The second day was a mixture: it included a *villuppāt̲t̲u* performance (largely stories of other deities, e.g. Cut̲alaimāt̲an̲) and rituals, which concluded with both the *mañcal̲ nīrāt̲t̲u* (the highlight of the day) and extended animal sacrifices.

8.2 Introductory Notes on the Approach: What Does Ritual Do and How Does It Do It?

The aim of this section is to outline a series of issues relevant to my discussion of the ritual practice in Chapter 9.

First, as remarked by Don Handelman, rituals are "practiced" and real.[5] Rituals, therefore, should not be seen as *symbolising* or *standing for* realities.[6] Bruce Kapferer (2000:28f., n. 2) in this context speaks of "[...] thoroughgoing realities which act on experience, reorienting it or transforming it. [...] External realities are introduced within the dynamic field of rite and changed or transformed." In order to be able

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[3] A larger version of the oboe played at temples and on auspicious occasions.

[4] One of them was Ca. Pal̲an̲iyā Pil̲l̲ai, the treasurer of the temple committee. His satisfaction was most visible. As G. Gopikriṣṇan̲ and G. Muttulet̲cumi, the bow-song singer of the *kot̲ai* stated: "They will worry that the public might be dissatisfied and the pūjārī could become angry. Afterwards, if the festival earns a good name, the patron will be happy (204). The man who is most tense is the patron" (K-L.02.A.207).

[5] Handelman 1999:65.

[6] It is Victor Turner's enduring contribution to the analysis of ritual that he shifted the scholarly focus from ritual as representation to one of process.

to ascribe a comprehensive meaning to a ritual practice, an analysis of it must begin with this fact.

Kapferer's definition allows one to assume that rituals can change each time they are performed. Handelman supports and develops this approach further. In a recent publication, he has introduced the notion of a dynamic "Möbius framing,"[7] or "interweaving in which the content and elements of ritual constantly interact with the various socio-cultural environments involved."[8] In Handelman's view, the internal (content of the ritual) and external (social order) intertwine dynamically.[9] Handelman is critical of the lineal framing approach, since it is static. He argues: Whereas "[l]ineal framing [... is] premised on criteria of hierarchical ordering and of the clear-cut separation between outside and inside" (Handelman 2004a:19) the concept of dynamic framing has "no longer any hard-and-fast lineal separation between 'frame' and 'content' on the one hand, and between realities external to and internal to ritual, on the other" (15). Rather, "this framing is inherently dynamic, continuously relating exterior to interior, interior to exterior" (15). This notion of frame is "that of a mover, a shifter, a transformer between inside and outside and back" (15f.). Handelman's theoretical tools prove useful when analysing the *koṭai* ritual under discussion.[10]

Within this scope of inquiry, a series of questions will be posed. I shall ask: How is the ritual organised within itself and how does it relate to realities outside itself?[11] How does it work? What is its outcome, and how does it attain efficacy? It should be clear that I am not focusing on the question of what ritual is. Rather, I focus on the inner logic of the ritual and the ritual's practical results, and so ask what the ritual does and how it does what it does.

Second, I assume a modular organisation within ritual. Given the application of modules within ritual, it is reasonable to assume that these modules are selectively chosen and carefully arranged in order to create a certain kind of cosmos for specific purposes—a cosmos within which certain kinds of actions and relationships are activated, and others are not. The ritual practice on which I shall focus, therefore, is basically concerned neither with the absolute totality of the goddess's cosmos nor with the totality of what the goddess can be. Rather, the ritual seems designed to show one version of the goddess's cosmos—one that in some sense presents itself as a totality.[12]

Third, we generally presume that in ritual culture, teleological structuring is obligatory. In the case of the rituals performed at the Icakki *koṭai* festival, we have to ask whether there is a sequential hierarchy, and if so, to what extent it is crucial for the analysis. For such an investigation, one must look for markers that are indicative of a sequence. However, it is not inevitable that the climax comes at the end.

Fourth, from the point of view of function, two types of rituals are performed within the ritual practice we are discussing here: first, rituals that are arranged for those who seek the goddess's help (i.e. for childlessness; see below, the *māppiḷḷai mañcappiḷḷai* ritual); and second, the ritual of thanksgiving, performed if the *koṭai* of the previous year has proven successful (see below, the *pūjā* for the newly

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[7] Handelman (2004a:15) applies the scientific concept of the Möbius strip to rituals. Möbius topology has been exploited by scholars with diverse orientations and disciplinary backgrounds. For example, O'Flaherty (1984:240ff.) uses the Möbius metaphor to describe Indian dreams. Referring to Martin Gardner, "The World of the Möbius Strip: Endless, Edgeless, and One-Sided," *Scientific American* (December 1968): 112–5, she applies the concept to the Hindu universe, describing it as "finite, but unbounded" (241), "in which the inside is the outside" (242). She also refers (ibid.:258) to A.K. Ramanujan, "Indian Poetics," in *The Literature of India: An Introduction,* ed. Edward C. Dimock et al., Chicago, 1974, 115–43, where the Möbius strip serves to describe Indian poetics.

[8] This definition of Handelman's term is part of a more extended explanation of it found in Kreinath et al. 2004:3.

[9] Handelman (2004a:15) postulates: "Through such framing, the outside is taken inside, through the frame, and integrated with the ritual."

[10] I make particular use of his scheme inside-out/outside-in, in Sects. 9.3.2 and 9.3.5, where I analyse respectively the role of the *alaṅkāram* moment and the drinking of a *tuvaḷai* kid goat's blood.

[11] I am drawing here upon questions that Handelman (2004a:9) considers relevant.

[12] I am greatly indebted to Professor Don Handelman, who generously discussed this matter with me in a personal communication in 2002.

made Icakki statue). The two types are intimately interwoven, with the second serving as an initiating and accelerating force in the ritual process to encourage the goddess's help in the first.

Fifth, the ritual practice in question proves the existence of two underlying assumptions: (1) *pēy*s (hungry spirits), known for being "attracted and drawn to everything that nourishes existence,"[13] have their place on the map of cultural explanations for disturbances in life;[14] and (2) ritual practice is a pragmatic agent for transformative processes.[15] I assume that the *koṭai* ritual is of a therapeutic nature (with a reordering and restructuring of psychic energy taking place when the sociopsychic world of the story[16] is reproduced and relived in sung form), and that this is what for the most part guarantees its efficacy.

Sixth, my discussion of ritual necessitates explaining the meaning of the notion of seduction, as I understand and use it. I assume, in accordance with Kapferer (2000:5), that a "rite engages seductive forces to break the destructive dynamic."[17] In my work, seduction can be understood as a strategy employed by the ritual specialists to make the demonic goddess emerge and to allure her into another version of herself.[18] Continuing along these lines, it is instructive to consider demons, in our terminology *pēy*s, to be "*par excellence* creatures of seduction, constantly open to being seduced and themselves seducers."[19] For an understanding of the ritual practice in question, therefore the following additional statement of Kapferer (2000:5) is essential: "Erotic and seductive forces are vital in the healing rites [...], and the understanding of the alleviative power of these rites [...] is considerably diminished unless one explores the dynamics of their erotic and seductive energies."[20]

Seventh, an emic concept of the existence of two different manifestations of the goddess[21] forms the basis in my discussion of the ritual. This view is intimately linked to conceptions of a self.[22] I understand "self" not as a kind of metaphysical entity, but along the lines defined by Thomas Csordas, Don Handelman, and A. Ferguson, "as a repertoire of capacities for orienting in and engaging the world" (Csordas 1996:100f.); as "interactive bundles or configurations of *qualities* of being"

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[13] I draw here upon Kapferer's (2000:6) insightful definition of demons; see also point 6 below.

[14] When I speak of demonic hungry beings, I am thinking of passions or emotions. The two terms are two different cultural ways to name the same source of imbalance. Cf. Kapferer 1997:223.

[15] On transformation, see Kapferer 1984:158; for the significance of transformation in the contemporary discussion of ritual, see Köpping and Rao (2000:7ff.), who coin the German term *performative Wende* (p. 1) in their introduction.

[16] In our case, the loss of women's well-being owing to their inability to bear children. On the ritual treatment of inner disturbances in a woman's sexual being, causing disruption to her social position, cf. Kapferer (2000), who describes women-centred rituals in a Sri Lankan context.

[17] For seduction "suppos[ing] a ritual order," see Baudrillard 1990:21. Baudrillard is a scholar who, according to Kapferer (2000:31, n. 18), is "strongly influenced by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche." Though I have drawn upon Baudrillard's language and, to some extent, his definitions, I would like to make clear that in my work I do not adopt his theory of seduction, but merely extract views of his that are in accordance with the perspective I have gained in the course of my participation in the *koṭai* ritual being discussed here.

[18] I would like to stress that the view I present is a result of my work with the goddess's story and ritual. The concept of seduction is, in my opinion, not superimposed on the ritual, but is rather one that underlies the emic view of the ritual specialists. I hope that the statements in the extended interviews and the description of the series of ritual succeed in showing this.

[19] I cite Kapferer 2000:6.

[20] Note that Kapferer's area of focus is Sri Lanka, whose shared cultural heritage with the southernmost part of India is particularly close.

[21] See Sects. 7.6 "The Split Goddess's Iconography" and 8.2, point 2, above.

[22] On the notion of self, see Shulman and Stroumsa 2002:131, where Shulman states: "Dravidian lacks any such lexeme, unless we wish to resort to various permutations of reflexive forms or to adapted Sanskrit usages. And yet Indian literature of all periods abounds in cases of extreme and even multiple transformations of something we might call a 'self'." On ideas of selfhood in an Indian context, cf. Marriott 1976:111 ("dividual"), Daniel 1987 ("fluidity"), Freeman 1999:150 ("multiplex and partible in their constitution"). For an overview of approaches to this subject, see Freeman 1999:149f. Compare in the Melanesian context Strathern's theory (1988:13) that calls for "the singular person [...] [to] be imagined as a social microcosm."

(Handelman 2002:249, n. 2); and as having "many aspects [...] some of which may be in conflict [...but each] developed by participating in specific social practices" (Ferguson)[23]. It needs to be emphasised that I do not draw a distinction between a psychological inner world and an outside social world, nor do I understand "self" entirely in social terms. But concentrating on the "sociality of the self"[24] and on the organisation of the self, I rather assume, following Handelman, "that the social exists in its own right within the constitution of psyche and selfness" (2002:237), and that in fact "the innerness of the person is probably no less social than is the social world" (ibid.:239).[25] However, I also treat the self—and here I follow A.J. Marsella (see Morris 1994:13)—as a process by which one comes to know oneself, a process that involves self-awareness and reflectivity.

Within these limits, a series of questions arise: How is the inner world of the goddess constituted and changed? How do the inner world and the outer world influence and affect one another?[26]

Eighth, until now little attention has been paid to the subject of *katai*[27] (narrative) in its relation to the *koṭai* ritual. In my reading, the translocal *IK* and the local Icakki story both provide a framework for the *koṭai* ritual practice, inasmuch as they portray a woman's world. The two stories provide the key to all the acts featured during the possession ritual. There is only one figure in the story by whom the ritual actors are ecstatically possessed: Icakki, first a human and then deified.

Ninth, for understanding how text and ritual are intertwined within the framework of the *koṭai* festival, categories that I owe to Don Handelman (1999:70) are valuable. Handelman distinguishes between "spaced, unspaced, and respaced" time. He postulates that "all rituals are spatialized in the first instance" and "organized to bring people together in space and to synchronize their activities through time (i.e. through space)" (ibid.:69). According to Handelman's definition, "spaced time" is a world that is "*in* time," with a "sequential organization of [...] tense" (70). When he speaks of "unspaced time," he is referring to "inner and concert time," to a "nonmediated immediacy" (70) that "shape[s] the emergence of the divine self" (67). Handelman notes that from unspaced time "narrating experience is then a prime way of returning to the social world" (70)—to what he terms the "respaced" world of the story. It is with this interplay among these three modes that I am concerned when observing the *villuppāṭṭu* (bow-song) performance. In doing so, I find that at least three performance styles are employed: first, a linear narration, when the birth stories are being related; second, a style of emphatic performance, when the goddess is being lured into active presence; and third, a "non-linear, non-narrative overlapping singing"[28] of single lines and exclamations (cf. Section 5.1.1), a time when long dialogues replace the monologue narration and story-line, heightening the emotions which have become actualised in possession (cf. Sections 9.2.2 [fusion], 9.3.4.1). The reason for the lack of linear narration after the possession has taken place is, as outlined above, a different concept of time. Here the switch from one performance style to another expresses the emergence and presence of the divine force.

Finally, my approach to the ritual is to treat it as a metaphor, namely as the indigenous commentary on the narrative text, while my own anthropological inquiry is an interpretation of that commentary.[29] I shall be speaking of this ritual here, then, not only as a transformative practice,[30] but also as the exegesis

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[23] A. Ferguson's definition is taken from Morris 1994:188.

[24] The term is Handelman's (2002:237).

[25] Don Handelman is chiefly responsible for having shifted the analytical focus on self from one in terms of psychological innerness and social outerness (which in his view stresses their separation, for all their interaction) to one in terms of the "interior sociality of self."

[26] I have taken these questions from Handelman (2002:248), who holds that they are far from having been answered.

[27] I frequently use the term *katai*. In doing so, I have in mind narrative as opposed to *koṭai* ritual.

[28] I have taken this fitting expression from Honko 2000:229–30.

[29] Just as the ritual can be interpreted as a commentary on the narrative text, the narrative text can be seen as reflections on the social reality.

[30] See point 5 above.

of a narrative text.[31] Ultimately, it is the interpretative potential of the ritual that illuminates and communicates the essential message of the texts. From my research it has become clear that even if a text's ritual context is unknown, the text can be read in its own right, although, to be sure, only a limited interpretation will be possible.[32] Conversely, a ritual for which the text is not available remains for an outsider relatively unintelligible.[33] Thus my approach follows the maxim: Not the text, but "the ritual [...] is the structure."[34]

With these tools in hand, I would like to look at the cult of Icakkiyammaṉ as practised in the village of Paḻavūr. First I shall provide a brief sketch of Paḻavūr and its Icakki shrine in order to introduce the locality, the social roles of the various groups and their interrelations, and finally, the object of worship. Then I shall provide a detailed account of the particular complex ritual practice conducted in Paḻavūr,[35] as an example of the Icakki cult found in one centre. It is, to be sure, a unique[36] version, not immediately comparable to other sites of Icakki worship in the *villuppāṭṭu* area.

8.3 Icakki's Locations in Paḻavūr and Her Association with the Hottest Season and Dry Land

The places linked with Icakki in Paḻavūr are both inside and outside the village. Inside the village she is found twice. Outside the village, her place is what people call *naṭukāṭu* (in our context perhaps best translated as "forest of the middle space"[37]). There the goddess, in an anthropomorphic form, resides alone with her male guardian deities on a barren piece of land *(kiṭaṅku)*,[38] a place *(nilam)* which correlates with the classical landscape of *pālai*[39]—"the most extreme embodiment of separation"[40]—where dryness (in a social sense) can be identified with infertility and sterility. It is a wilderness and wasteland associated with the hot season *(vēṉil)*,[41] the season of desire, regarded as the goddess's favourite time *(kālam)* of year.

By way of comparison, inside the village she lives in a non-anthropomorphic form among nearly 2,500 inhabitants, 50% of whom are Vēḷāḷas (a community that is not only the most populous, but also

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[31] This approach leads to the result of viewing ritual as commentary.

[32] Its meaning will vary depending on the context. Cf. Kapferer 2000:29, n. 5 on the link between myth and ritual in Sri Lanka. He remarks: "The meaning [of the myth] awaits [...] often a specific ritual context. In Sri Lanka the same myth will achieve distinctive meaning dependent on the ritual context in which it is used."

[33] The perspective I have gained in my fieldwork accords with the view of the English myth and ritual school of S.H. Hook of the 1930s; see Waardenburg 1986:132.

[34] I have taken this expression from Kapferer 2000:29, n. 5. This scholar's ethnographic work in Sri Lanka leads to a similar result of viewing ritual.

[35] I am aware that no account of a ritual can avoid interpreting it to some extent. – Note that I consciously use an artificial ethnographic present tense to describe the ritual in Sect. 9.2 below. I shall dispense with this usage when referring to the interviews held with my sources.

[36] It seems that each temple performs its own unique version of the ritual. Compare the *koṭai* ritual practice at Muppantal Śrī Ālamūṭu Ammaṉ temple. A video documentation of one particular *koṭai* festival held at this temple is available at the FRRC. Whereas the flowerbed segment is an integral part of the *koṭai* in the Paḻavūr temple (overseen by a Vēḷāḷa-Ceṭṭiyar family) and in the Muppantal Śrī Ālamūṭu Ammaṉ temple (overseen by a barber's family), this specific module is, to my knowledge, absent in temples that are overseen by the Nāṭār community, with the exception of one in Muppantal.

[37] For the concept of "middleness," see Handelman and Shulman 2004:43f.

[38] *Kiṭaṅku,* literally "a ditch-like low-lying area," similar to a *pallam.*

[39] On the "*pālai* region, also called [...] *kāṭu,*" see Dubianski 2000:16. The following *karu-p poruḷ* (natural and human features, lit. "things born/native") are attributed to the *pālai tiṇai:* dryness, cactus plants, birds of prey (eagles etc.), and robbery/murder. According to Zvelebil (1973:99f.), the *Tolkāppiyam* says that no divinity is associated with the *pālai,* but others see Koṟṟavai (Bhagavatī/Durgā) as being so. Recall that in the *Piṅkala Nikaṇṭu* (p. 456.3734) Nīli is called the *pālaik kiḻatti,* "mistress of the *pālai* land" (see above, Sect. 7.3, point 3).

[40] As stated in Shulman 2001:333. On separation as the opposite of union, see Trawick 1978:87. Union and separation in early Caṅkam poetry are associated respectively with the landscapes of *kuṟiñci* (hilly tract) and *pālai.*

[41] The hottest Tamil month is Cittirai, mid-April to mid-May.

socioeconomically the dominant one), 30% members of the Scheduled Castes (Sc), 15% Tēvars, and 5% others, including Nāṭārs, Ācāris, Kōṉārs, Reddiyars, Ceṭṭiyārs, and Brahmins (there is no *agrahāram*). Here she is to be found firstly at her *mūlasthāna* next to the Ammaiyappar temple, and secondly within the courtyard of the house of Icakki's *pūjārī*.

Map 3: The village of Paḻavūr
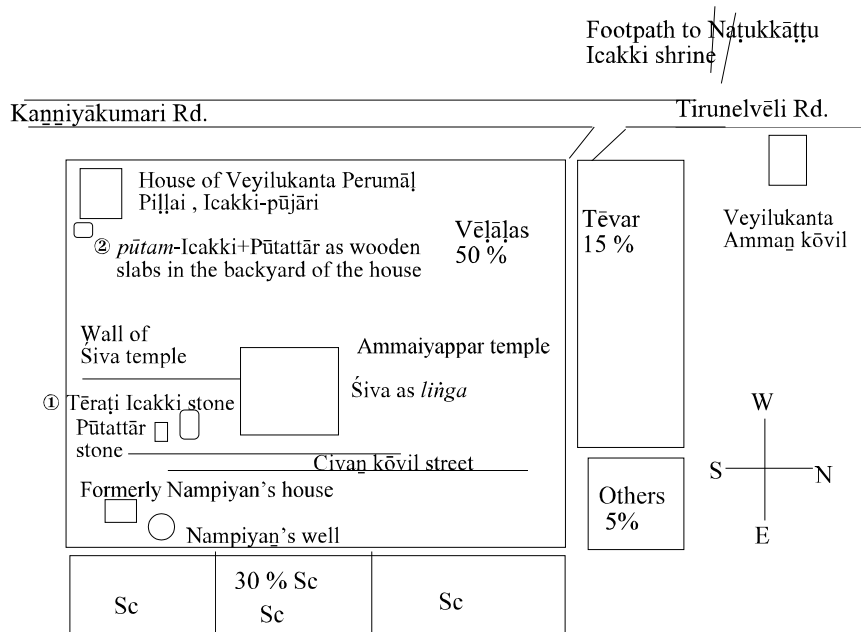
8.4 The Proprietor of the Naṭukāṭṭu Icakkiyammaṉ Temple

Kiṭaṅkaṭi Naṭukāṭṭu Icakkiyammaṉ temple, an independent temple, belongs to and is maintained by a family group within the community of Śaiva Vēḷāḷa Ceṭṭiyārs.[42] As I earlier pointed out, the latter are a hybrid community of landed peasants (a right-hand caste) and merchants (a left-hand caste).

8.5 The Goddess's Links with People: Who Are Her People?

Though everybody can participate in the *koṭai* festival,[43] the *koṭai* rituals are attended, whether coincidentally or not, exclusively by the social groups associated with the *Icakkiyammaṉ Katai (IK)* and the local Icakki story. Among the members of the ritual gathering are:
1. A Brahmin, namely the single one affiliated to the Ammaiyappar Śiva temple of the village (local story).
2. Kōṉārs, small landowners and traditionally herders who live by grazing and breeding livestock, and are therefore a mobile social group. One family of this community has hereditary rights relating to one of the most important rituals, for which services they are accorded preferential treatment. Moreover, in the year 2000 E. Vaṭivēl Kōṉār sponsored the renovation of the Icakki shrine.[44] This is the social group

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[42] Personal communication with Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai of Paḻavūr on 27 March 2002. For the Śaiva Vēḷāḷa Ceṭṭiyārs, see n. 47 in Sect. 7.2, p. 238 above.

[43] Kōṉārs and Iṭaiyārs of the neighbouring villages also come to attend the festival (personal communication with Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai on 27 March 2002).

[44] Personal communication with the informant Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai on 27 March 2002. There is a signboard at the Icakki shrine

that in the *IK* suffered unprovoked atrocities at the hands of the demonic Nīli(-Icakki) and her twin brother, two hungry spirits who had been born as children of the Cōḻa king in their second, royal birth. 3. Tēvars/Maṟavars,[45] who traditionally were the guardians of villages.[46] This is the social group that appears as watchmen in the *IK* story, engaged by the king and the shepherds to track down those believed to have stolen cattle and sheep. They are the ones who take the culprits (Icakki and her twin brother) into the dense forest and leave them under a margosa tree. The Tēvar community is visibly present at the Naṭukāṭṭu Icakki temple in the role of Cuṭalaimāṭaṉ as a guardian deity. During the *koṭai* festival, their traditional function has been to behead sacrificial cocks and goats. It is the one social group that still follows a predominantly martial ideology, and therefore upholds martial virtues best. For the *koṭai* festival I researched, a female bow-song singer of the Tēvar community was hired to sing the story of Icakki.

4. Śaiva Ceṭṭiyārs.[47] This is the community from which come the ritual specialist (Icakki's pūjārī) and his extended family of high-ranking Vēḷāḷa/Piḷḷai Ceṭṭiyārs, who enjoy hereditary rights over the temple. In the context of the *IK* it is the social group to which Āṉantaṉ Ceṭṭi belongs—the merchant who murdered Icakki in his first birth, and who in turn was murdered by Icakki in a later birth.

5. Finally, the Vēḷāḷas, the high-ranking landed peasantry who in the *IK* appear as Karaiyāḷars. This again, is the community from which come the ritual specialists (Icakki's pūjārī and her embodiment in the ritual, Kantappiḷḷai). In the Icakki story, this group is entirely destroyed by Icakki in revenge for the death of her brother, a death that the Karaiyāḷars had caused by cutting down the margosa tree he resided in. This group are the main sponsors of the *koṭai* festival.

8.6 The Goddess's Links with Other Deities

The goddess's relationships with other deities are made abundantly clear in the *koṭai* festival. Icakki has ties to:

— the Ammaiyappar Śiva temple in the village (Map 3), a link that has its roots in her own life story (the local story).

— Veyilukanta Ammaṉ at the northern outskirts of the village (Map 3). She is yet another female deity considered to be Icakki's elder sister,[48] but she does not appear in the story.

Furthermore, she mixes at her temple complex (Map 4) with:

— Pūtattār (Māṭaṉ), her primary guardian deity,[49] who is considered to be her father.[50] Pūtattār,

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commemorating the renovation. – The Kōṉārs' link with Icakki is also in evidence at the Naṉkuṉēri Icakki temple (see Sect. 7.7.2).

[45] On Maṟavas, see Ludden 1989:49f.: "Renowned from Sangam times as fierce hunters, highway robbers, and soldiers, the Maravas hail from Ramanathapuram, just northeast of Tirunelveli. Slowly they converted to settled agriculturists over the centuries, but they never lost their attachment to martial skills and virtues [...]. Maravas migrated into Tirunelveli with increasing regularity after 1300 [...] (49). But they also moved south [...] from this primary zone of concentration to become specialists in the sale of protection both locally and subregionally [...;] they had most success in the southwest [...] at Nanguneri [...] where they could muster the power to protect something really big [i.e. the great Vaishnava temple] [...and] became rich [...]. The bulk of the Marava population settled in [...] the [...] mixed [i.e. dry-wet] zone" (50). Succeeding in their search for land, water, and power, "the Marava peasant-warriors [...] commanded the dry zone and its resources" (ibid.:94). As Ludden (1989:157) goes on to remark, in the nineteenth century "[d]roughts and famines hit the mixed zone very hard. Many Maravas suffered serious economic problems under these circumstances."

[46] See Ludden 1989:83: "Maravas everywhere monopolized the position of watchman, and built thereby caste networks as specialists in protection."

[47] See Sect. 8.4 above.

[48] It is a convention to establish a kinship between local goddesses. Cf. Caldwell 1999:62, n. 45.

[49] Personal communication with Paḻaṉiyā Piḷḷai on 27 March 2002 in Paḻavūr.

[50] Pūtattār is found as a subordinate deity at many Icakki temples, among them the Icakki temple of Tāḻakkuṭi, where Muppiṭāri Ammaṉ resides. This latter is another name for the elder Icakki, Puruṣā Tēvi, the apotheosised heroine of the *Peṇṇaraciyar Katai*. Here, interestingly enough, Pūtattār is identified with Icakki–Puruṣā Tēvi's former enemy, the neighbouring king

according to Blackburn's classification (1980:409, Appendix A) a "type A Madan," is a greatly respected deity of the Vēḷāḷas.

— Cuṭalaimāṭaṉ,[51] yet another male attendant, who is known for having pursued Icakki in a cotton field.[52] It is not really clear what his relation to Icakki is. Some say that he is her brother; others, that he is her son. Unlike Icakki, he is of divine birth. Being a Śaiva figure, he is the ruler of cremation grounds. It is said in his *villuppāṭṭu* story that he asked Śiva for diverse boons *(varam),* including the right to kill and to conquer, and also to control the fate of pregnant women (mainly involving his punishment of women in the seventh month of pregnancy), young children, and barren women.[53] Cuṭalaimāṭaṉ's actions are excessive and transgressive: lust, rape, and other forms of extreme molestation and violation. Cuṭalaimāṭaṉ, as noted above, is a deity highly respected among the Maṟavar/Tēvar community. He is also worshipped by Dalits (former Harijans). His story is, alongside that of Muttār Ammaṉ, the most important one in the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition.

— Vairavaṉ alias Bhairava, another form of Śiva, who goes begging with the severed head of the creator god Brahmā, a god who did not want to recognise Śiva as the supreme god. As remarked by Blackburn (1980:149), Vairavaṉ of Nāñcilnāṭu is "a son and a protector of the vil pāṭṭu Ammaṉ."

— Cāstā (Skt. Śāstṛ) alias Aiyaṉār, a deity of mountains and forests,[54] and traditionally the family deity *(kulateyvam)* of the Vēḷāḷas,[55] is said to be invisibly present at the Kiṭaṅkaṭi Naṭukāṭṭu Icakki temple complex. Interestingly enough, in the *IK* he is in a strict sense the real murderer of Icakki's brother, Nīlaṉ, but being a god, he is, of course, never punished. It is imperative to perform the story of this deity born from the love-union of Śiva and Viṣṇu-Mohinī (a female form)[56] during the *koṭai* festival.[57]

— Nāga, the divine serpent in the termite hills, the coiled snake who represents fertility. The *nāga*s are regarded as the providers (or withholders) of rain.

— Finally, the margosa tree, decorated with cradles and considered to be the haunt of hungry spirits and *yakṣī*s.

Cempaṉmuṭi (see Jeyakumār et al. 1996:xxvi), with whom the princess Puruṣā Tēvi fought a battle and at whose feet she threw her nine-month-old foetus before committing suicide (see my synopsis of N4).

[51] Cuṭalaimāṭaṉ, along with his female counterpart Muttār Ammaṉ, is considered the most important deity of the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition, and in a sense defines its borders (no further north than present-day Ramnad district). For further details relating to the borders of the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition and the link to Cuṭalaimāṭaṉ, see Blackburn 1980:85f.

[52] See Sect. 5.4, footnote to N1.1429.

[53] The features of this deity seem to be parallelled in Sri Lanka in the figure of Kalukumāra; see Vogt Fryba 1991:224: "*Kalukumāra* ist der schwarze Prinz, ein Dämon, der junge Mädchen verführt und schwangere Frauen belästigt."
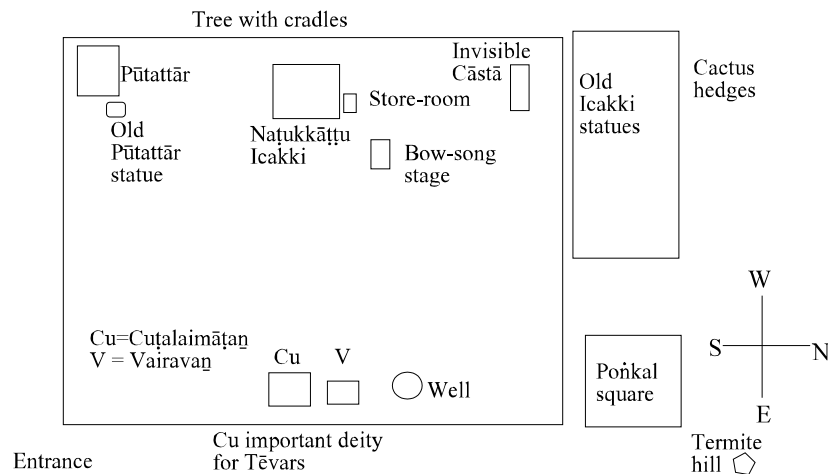
[54] Reiniche (1975:180) classifies Cāstā as a territorial god. See also Sect. 5.4, footnote to N1.828.

[55] Cf. Sect. 5.4, N1.855-6.

[56] On Aiyaṉār, see Shulman 1980:307f. with references; also ibid.:421, n. 94. As noted by Clothey (1982:35ff.), this deity becomes more visible in the South "between the sixth and eighth centuries" (37) and "emerges to relative significance in the South during the seventh to tenth centuries, building [...] on a protohistory which seems to include Buddhist and Jaina motifs and remnants drawn from hunting societies. During the early part of his emergence, the god is presented as Śaiva; somewhat later—perhaps two or three centuries—he is linked with Vaiṣṇava motifs. In Kerala, he has persisted through the centuries as an embodiment of rapprochement between Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, as a symbol of royal patronage and as a deity of many low and out caste groups. In Tamil Nadu he remained village guardian and family deity for land-holders of several castes" (35). Clothey (ibid.:36ff.) suggests that Cāstā-Aiyaṉār has historical ties to Cāttaṉ, a name of a divinity that appears, as he remarks, in the Caṅkam literature in *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 395, in the epic *Cil.* 9.15, in *Periyapurāṇam* 4285, and in *Tēvāram* 4475 (alluded to by the Nāyaṉar saint Appar).

[57] For further remarks on the importance of performing Cāstā's story during *koṭai* festivals, see Blackburn 1980:154.

Map 4: Kiṭaṅkaṭi Naṭukāṭṭu Icakkiyamman̠ shrine, Paḻavūr

Tree with cradles

Pūtattār

Old
Pūtattār
statue

Naṭukkāṭṭu
Icakki

Store-room

Invisible
Cāstā

Bow-song
stage

Old
Icakki
statues

Cactus
hedges

Cu=Cuṭalaimāṭan̠
V = Vairavan̠

Cu   V

Well

Poṅkal
square

W

S ——┼—— N

E

Entrance

Cu important deity
for Tēvars

Termite
hill

8.7 The Iconic and Aniconic Representations of the Goddess in Paḻavūr[58]

The focus of worship in Paḻavūr is Icakki in the role of the younger sister, generally referred to as Paḻavūr Icakki. The younger sister, a sacrifice-demanding, meat-eating goddess, who prominently represents the psychological aspect of malevolence, is present in various forms. To begin with, she is present as a stone, at her *mūlasthāna* in the village. In a sense this lifeless form, in which the goddess is consigned to utter interiority, is of no harm. After all, it is situated at a public place in the middle of the village. By contrast, her presence in a slab of wood and silver bangles (*kaṭakam*s) in the backyard of the house of the ritual specialist, Icakki's pūjārī, must be viewed differently. Though she is still within the limits of the village, she is considered to be a *pūtam* (Skt. *bhūta*)—ferocious, and even harmful. However, she is located in a place that is sealed off and accessible only to the family members who pamper her.

In order to meet the goddess in her anthropomorphic form we are forced to leave the village and proceed to the *pālai* wilderness, the place of separation that is imbued with desire.[59] Here is the only place we encounter her iconographically in the form of a blackened terra-cotta figure, as described previously, with two baby boys, one crunched in her fangs, and the other held in her left arm,[60] and additionally equipped with a knife resting in her erect bud-shaped[61] right hand—these two latter gestures apparently indicative of an interplay between two aspects of her, her dangerousness and eroticism.[62]

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[58] On Icakki's iconographical representation in general, see Sect. 7.6.

[59] See Sect. 8.3 above. – Note the transformative progression found here: from a stone (non-sentient) at a public place in the village, to a slab of wood (trees are sentient beings) in the pūjārī's backyard, to finally the anthropomorphous being present in a statue placed in the wilderness.

[60] For an interpretation of the babies, see the explanations of the main pūjārī (15 December 2002) in Sect. 9.2, p. 282.

[61] On this *mudrā* (gesture) of *mukula*, see Sect. 7.6 above. – The *muṣṭi mudrā* (gesture of a fist), which we also sometimes come across in representations of the goddess, stands in contrast to it.

[62] That violence and eroticism do not exclude one another in Tamil culture is seen in the testimonial descriptions of love-making. Tamil medieval literature (e.g. Kampan̠'s great twelfth-century epic, the *Irāmāvatāram*) teaches us that love-making, for a Tamil, calls for biting and scratching.