

10 The Relationship between Text and Ritual

My purpose here will be to discuss the relationship between text and ritual, more precisely between the bow-song performance of the two texts (the translocal *IK* and the local Icakki story) and the ritual system I have described above. We have noted that there is a narrative incongruity between the translocal *IK* text and the ritual. Certain themes are restricted to the *IK*,¹ while others are assigned to the ritual. Moreover, we have seen that the climactic moments of the *IK* performance and the nodal points of the ritual do not coincide. It seems that the *IK* text and the ritual system are separable to such an extent that their interaction, and in particular whether the bow-song is able to bring the goddess into the gathering's presence, must be called into question.

There is only one long moment where this stand-off breaks down and the text and ritual converge. This is the part of the ritual occurring at midnight (Sections 9.2.2, 9.3.4), when the physical violence being sung of in the bow-song text is synchronised with the emergence of the goddess to the accompaniment of the drum. This is the only time that the bow-song and the ritual meet and their events concur. However, interestingly enough, it is not the translocal *IK* which brings about this conjunction, marked by liminal frenzy,² but rather the moment of transition from the translocal to the local story (the latter a direct sequel to the former). Certainly this fact requires attention, since it is of particular importance for understanding the relationship between the ritual and the two texts.

Part of the problem of the narrative incongruity between the epic *IK* and the ritual is that the *IK*, a somewhat altered form of the classical *Cilappatikāram*,³ which narrates a story of karmic revenge and deification, has infiltrated the local Icakki cult. This cult, which originally developed out of the tradition of honouring powerful female spirits of the dead, namely virgins and pregnant women who died untimely deaths (see Section 7.4.1, *cumaitāñki kal*),⁴ is focused on transformative moments in the annual cycle of the goddess Icakki (the *bhakti*sised composite of such women), with a view to rendering her fecund, and through her, childless women and everybody else. The concept of death in a childless state is, of course, also present in the *IK*, but it is significant that, unlike with the local story, no such passage in the *IK* is enacted in the ritual. In other words, although the *IK* exhibits thematic parallels with the ritual practice and the local Icakki story, it is not possible to conclude that the *IK* and the ritual are isomorphic.⁵ The disparate marriage of the *IK* and the ritual might be explained by assuming that the text has been superimposed on the ritual. Although both develop analogous themes that obviously resonate with one another throughout, each seems a distinct entity. Hence the odd sense of disjuncture when we try to make the narration of the *IK* conform to the inner logic of the ritual.⁶ The underlying

¹ For example, the sister–brother theme, specific to the *IK*.

² It is a state out of time.

³ See Sect. 4.2.

⁴ There is reason to assume that the worship of Icakki in Paḷavūr is only one stage removed from its origin, that is to say, from the tradition of honouring women who have died childless. In comparison, we might describe the Icakki worship in Muppantal as being two stages removed.

⁵ Although some themes are found in both the *IK* and the ritual, others have no part in the ritual reality, as, for instance, the sister–brother theme (unless the ritual community itself is regarded as displaying what might be called the “brother traits”).

⁶ A similar line of argument has been developed with respect to the names Nili and Icakki; see Sect. 7.3.2.

autonomy of each is probably also part of the reason why the *IK* gives rise to a different interpretation when part of the ritual.⁷ In any case, although there is reason to assume that the translocal *IK* is not the text that is central to the ritual practice, but rather a kind of ‘prefix’ to the local story (its aim being to bring karmic revenge as a way to attain *mokṣa* into play, and make male–female tensions public), there is still every reason to consider the bow-song performance, as such, successful in what it sets out to achieve. This is evidenced by the fusion, the moment when ritual and text (albeit that of the local story) meet and synchronise, thereby letting the goddess emerge.

I have shown that there is an underlying disjuncture between the epic *IK* text and the ritual system. Nevertheless, one must not lose sight of the complex ways in which text and ritual do interact and how such interaction is constitutive in itself. As Kapferer (1997) postulates, the act of borrowing and the constructing of identity are dynamic processes that give to rituals both form and content. Our ritual specialists confirmed this when they asserted that their use of certain ritual markers and segments is due to their occurrence in the *IK* text. In this regard they mentioned, for instance, the ritual application of red *mañcaṇai* paste and the second day’s ritual of *mañcaḷ nīrāṭṭu* (bathing in the turmeric water).⁸ And, although they did not explicitly point this out, there are three *alaṅkāram* scenes in the *IK* text, similarly to the *koṭai* ritual, in which there are also three *alaṅkāram* moments. It is quite clear that the two draw on each other and experiment with the borrowed material.⁹

When it comes to the forming of identity, the translocal *IK* again plays a significant role. The text links the ritual practice not only to a wider—that is, regional—context, but also to a social group, the *Vēḷāḷas* (the patrons of the *koṭai* festival).¹⁰ This community figures prominently in the *IK*, but, interestingly enough, they are not mentioned in the local story.¹¹ This may offer a partial answer to the question of why, according to Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai (a *Vēḷāḷa*), the *IK* is indispensable. “The bow-song performance of *Palaiyaṇūr Icakki Katai* is a must in our *koṭai* festival,” he said.¹² The performance of the translocal story of *Icakki (IK)* obviously gives not only a special platform to women to make their mistreatment by men public, but also to *Vēḷāḷas* to recall their community’s fame, values, and social order.

To sum up, the way in which the ritual and the translocal *IK* interact seems to be an indirect one. In contrast, the ritual and the local story interact quite directly. Their fusion—at the ritual’s only juncture point with the texts—generates a dynamic moment of challenge that lays bare a crisis: the blocking of human reproduction by a powerful female spirit of the dead. This crisis is what is being dealt with in the ritual. Hence it is here that the ritual and the text (i.e. the local story) attain their full measure of profundity.

⁷ Another way to look at this issue is, of course, in terms of the problem of the ethnographical present versus the past of the epic text. With regard to the Sri Lankan legend of *Kalukumāra*, Vogt Fryba (1991:172) describes how much individual indigenous interpretations of a text may vary during its enactment in a ritual: “Während laut den historischen Aufzeichnungen von Nevill (1954) im frühen legendigen [*Kalukumāra*-]Mythos offenbar die inzestuöse Beziehung des *Kalukumāra* mit seiner Schwester fokussiert wurde, wird in der heutigen Form in Heilritualen des Kandy Hochlands sein Werdegang von einem meditierenden Asketen zu einem *Yaka* [*yakṣa*] dramatisiert. In Heilritualen im Süden wiederum liegt der Schwerpunkt der Legende bei den sieben Königinnen, die der Gott *Sakka* dem *Kalukumāra-Yaka* als Ehefrauen gab.”

⁸ I may refer to an interview held on 9 May 2002 with the main pūjārī (see Sect. 9.2.3, p. 317).

⁹ Other segments of the ritual, again, receive their inspiration either from the contents of the local story, as attested in the food-offering (*poṅkal pariṭṭu paṭaiṭṭu*), or from religious beliefs, as seen in the kid goat sacrifice and the use of the protective *pirampu*. The latter is an expression of female fertility problems and the subtle link these have with spirit affliction.

¹⁰ On the strong link of the *Vēḷāḷas* with the narrative core of the *IK*, see Chap. 3, conclusion.

¹¹ Although the local story is the text that lays the foundation for *Icakki* worship in *Paḷavūr*, constituting thus the identity of the village, the *Vēḷāḷas*, the patrons of the *koṭai* festival, are not mentioned in this text. – For (religious) centres whose founding is based on legends, see Remensnyder 2002:196f. The author discusses this phenomenon in the context of the Middle Ages in France.

¹² The interview was held in the courtyard of *Paḷaṇiyā Piḷḷai*, the treasurer of the *Icakki* shrine trust, on 27 March 2002. The importance of the *IK* for the patrons of the *koṭai* ritual is also attested by the following: first, Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai, when asked to tell the story of *Icakki*, recited the *IK* to me rather than the local *Icakki* story; second, in the local newspaper *Tamilmuracu* (18 February 2000), Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai not only published a summary of the local *Icakki* story, as one would expect, but also brought the reader’s attention to the translocal *IK*.

To conclude, leaving aside the fact that they exhibit two different schemes as far as the narrative of the *IK* is concerned, the text and the ritual in tandem reveal the fundamental process at work in the destruction and creation of human realities. Both recognise the taking of life and giving of life as the capacity of the female to respectively break with and create realities in life. Both text and ritual display the dimension of these capacities. This is a recognisable feature of the iconography as well.

