

Final Conclusions

The present work has comprised basically three interlocking parts. Part One presented the *IK* story proper in the light of the manuscript material that was collected. Along with the edition of an unpublished palm-leaf manuscript (N1) and an accompanying annotated translation (Chapter 5), the story itself has been presented in the form of an encyclopaedic apparatus (Section 2.3 and Appendix C) which reveals the ‘complete’ story of Icakki, as preserved today in the *villuppāṭṭu* (bow-song) genre. The conspectus I have come up with demonstrates which portions of the text the performing bards and the tradition attempt to preserve intact and which are variable. The profile of a relatively fixed text embedded within a larger ‘complete’ text containing improvised variants thereby becomes clear. Such a profile is only natural for a text that is primarily performed orally. The apparatus yields a hidden mental text that underlies individual performances—a text which cannot, however, be performed, owing to restrictions imposed by the *koṭai* ritual frame. In addition, the apparatus offers a means of explaining non-linear and overlapping text segments, and identifying opportunities for potential creativity and innovation on the part of performing bards. At the same time, it indicates how certain more general questions concerning the evolution of epic texts might be answered.

While the earliest source of the heroine’s story necessarily remains vague (a seventh-century classical Tamil source, which alludes only to the core of the story), the picture becomes clearer around the early fourteenth century. From this time on a larger number of texts referring to the heroine exist, furnishing much more information about the narrative sequence. Having consulted these sources (Chapter 3), we can reasonably posit that there is a strong link between the heroine of the story and the renowned Saiva site in Tiruvāṅkāṭu of northern Tamilnadu. Hence this ancient story of the vengeful Nīli of Paḷaiyaṅṅūr-Tiruvāṅkāṭu must have branched off into northern and southern lines. The *villuppāṭṭu* (bow-song) tradition of the southernmost districts of Tamilnadu (Kaṅṅiyākumari, Tirunelvēli and Tūttukūṭi) took the *Nīli Katai* and endowed it with an integrity of its own as a sequel to the *Peṅṅaraciyar Katai* (Section 2.4, N4), the elder sister’s story, and in doing so made it the central text of the Icakkiyaṅṅu cult, which exists only in these three districts. I have sought to make clear that the *villuppāṭṭu* tradition is only one tradition among those that adopted the narrative core known of from as far back as the seventh century. This tradition not only adapted the narrative to cultic realities and a new regional context, but also institutionalised the Nīli figure as a representative of the region’s identity. Matrilineal descent was long an important aspect of the region. Hence, from the ethnographic point of view, the new formulation of the sister–brother bond and the heroine’s identity are quite compatible with the sociocultural environment. And while we may still not be able to provide a full explanation for the fundamental reconceptualisation of the heroine’s identity seen in the devadāsī motif, certain clues (see Parts Two and Three) have emerged from the analysis of the text and ritual. A common thread running through both of them is their concern with matters of female fertility. This may suggest a possible partial explanation of why the devadāsī motif was introduced into the story (*katai*). Paradoxically, this most auspicious and sexualised woman is, at the same time, not fully a woman at all. In one way, she is associated with notions of fertility; in another, though, she is separate from her own procreative powers. This seems to me the most obvious basis upon which to establish a link between the devadāsī motif (*IK*) and the

goddess (Section 7.3.2), whose proximity to the historical *yakṣī* concept of fertility (Section 7.3.1, points 2, 3, 6) is reflected in her name, Icakki.

My tabulating of the most important characteristics of a *yakṣī* (Sections 7.3.1 and 7.4.1) is not only descriptive of Icakki's own nature and actions, but also provides reason for assuming that Nīli and Icakki were originally two independent figures, each with her own distinctive traits (Section 7.3.2). We can assume that they converged at the textual level when the story of Nīli became linked to the worship of Icakkiyamman. This convergence with a cult and the constructing of a "southern" identity were dynamic processes that gave both form and content to the *IK* (Section 7.3.2).

The research undertaken in this work is neither an exhaustive inquiry into the background of the *IK* (also known as the *Nīli Katai*), nor has it pursued the north-to-south migration of the story; rather, it has sought out the tradition's socioreligious motivation for transmitting the text and keeping it alive as part of a cult. It needs to be emphasised that the cult was not in search of a story, but rather vice versa: the *Nīli Katai*, a text obviously of great importance for Tamils, was in search of a cult, in order to deify a human female who had died childless and was burdened by the violence of her death. At first glance, it is not clear why this story has remained so widely spread among Tamils down through the ages. The fact that the lesson embedded in this story is a consistent one should, in any event, arouse our attention, and suggests that the story's socioreligious meaning is deeply rooted. There are a number of indications that the story's force is perceived in its concern with fundamental processes that pose challenges to human existence and its continuance. Central to such a judgement is the Tamil view of female ambivalence, as enunciated in the earlier cited proverb *āvatum peṇṇālē alivatum peṇṇālē*, "Becoming is through the female, destruction is through the female." Its touching on the fragile nature of humans' existential being may indeed be the key to the longevity and popularity of the story. I deviate here from the usual modern reductionistic interpretations of the narrative, which seem fixated on the sexual innuendo in the story.

I have also looked at the text in its ritual context. The approach followed here has had as its working basis three performative 'texts': first, the goddess's translocal legend, the *Icakkiyamman Katai*; second, a local story of Icakki; and third, the *koṭai* ritual, a 'text' in a language of its own. By situating the two stories within the context of their living ritual performance, my ethnographic analysis has revealed the different ways in which they each interact with the ritual. One thing is certain: the translocal *IK* lacks a clear one-to-one correspondence with the ritual—an isomorphic fit. By contrast, the local Icakki story and the ritual fuse with one another in a most direct way. This congruity is such that the local story can be viewed as indivisible from the ritual, which cannot be said in the case of the translocal *IK*. Hence the *IK*, a variation on the classical karmic revenge plot, must be seen as superimposed on the local ritual system. However, for all the narrative incongruity and the odd sense of disjuncture when we look at the *IK* within the framework of the ritual, the *IK* is certainly not irrelevant. Its place within the ritual is prefatory in nature and constitutive of identities (Section 8.5 and Chapter 10).

There is a final point I may add to the discussion of the relationship between ritual and story. My ethnographic and textual analyses have revealed that the ritual strives for harmony and a culture of consensus, while the narrative portrays an individualistic culture, grounded in mutual tension and argument. In one sense, the ritual rewrites the two fatally tragic stories of Icakki in positive terms and towards practical ends. This shows that the aim of the ritual is to master the future rather than the past.¹ Whereas the texts offer us a cultural understanding of instability (N1.2027-44), rage storage (Section 6.2), and control mechanisms (Section 9.3.4.2), and plainly also of *memoria*, the ritual creates an alternative reality in response to the texts. It carries us from death to human fertility. This makes it all the more clear that the ritual practice is meant to assist human reproduction. When ritual intervention to solve problems of human reproduction is viewed from the textual perspective, something else is revealed, namely, the intimate relation among human existential continuity, stability, and identity.

¹ Coming to terms with the past is clearly a concern of the text.

Human reproduction is a prerequisite for continuity, and continuity is supported by stability.² As the *IK* has shown, relative stability must be present. Instability leads to extremes in behaviour.

I have all along treated this ritual not only as a ‘text’, but also as a transformative practice focused on a split goddess so as to render her fertile—and childless couples and everybody else through her. By exploring the inner logic of the ritual system at hand, I have shown that it reflects a culture that is inherently therapeutic,³ the therapeutic process being also a religious one. It commands forces which can transform rage, alienation, and blockage into fulfilment, cohesion, and growth. The fact that the practice builds on a concept of positive emotionality and intimacy (Section 9.3) suggests a basic underlying belief that negative emotionality is involved in reproductive disorder. Viewing the ritual as a motivational system that establishes a set of coordinates upon which to map out identity throws some light on the properties that make it fit for reordering experience. Such a perspective would entail a processing of emotion over a series of specialised adaptive modules, which function as a kind of input system, that is, as processors tasked specifically with administering proximal emotive stimuli (Section 9.4).

A ritual understanding of the flowerbed, foremost among the supportive elements relevant to the transformative process, rests on such a view. My analysis of its nature provides reason for assuming that the flowerbed is a generative space or body out of which the split goddess procreates herself (Section 9.3.3). Noteworthy, the performing of this act of self-procreation is seen as a form of play or amusement (*viḷaiyāṭal*) on the part of the goddess. A sensuous experiencing of the body’s vital potential seems basic to the goddess’s *viḷaiyāṭal* mode. (We may point out here the notion that the sensuous is part of the sacred.) That the *viḷaiyāṭal* experience (and the *alankāram* moment as well) is repeated three times is indicative of how the ritual goes about creating reality.

If we look at the *koṭai* as a whole, the intention of the ritual is clearly to bring cure and change, not only to the goddess herself but also to participants. My analysis has made clear that the self-procreation of the goddess and her reacquiring her potency are decisive factors influencing conception in participating women who have had a history of reproductive failure and long-term infertility. When the goddess is transformed, she becomes a creator who visibly transfers her creative power to the wombs of these (likewise transformed) women. The pregnancies achieved by the women seem to attest to the efficacy of the ritual.⁴ We can see here a ritual dynamic at work that opens itself up to childless couples, and to domestic life more generally (Section 9.5). That this ritual practice accomplishes something that the goddess or the infertile women could not have achieved on their own indeed attests to a high degree of inner dynamic and a clear programme to bring about change.

No one would deny that a well-organised ritual is highly conducive to a successful outcome. However, one will not do full justice to this ritual system if its rich underlying understanding of the interaction of body and mind, and how this positively affects the reproductive success of the ritual, is also not duly recognised. To appreciate the full efficacy of the ritual it is necessary to note still further aspects of it that surfaced in the course of the *koṭai*. There is, for instance, the intimate relation between recognition and procreation, and the way erotic and violent forces are ritually engaged; these features have occupied us above and deserve remention here. The stress the ritual places on exteriority as being operative upon interiority, and the recursive structure of the whole (similar to an *antāti*), with the end of the story feeding back into the beginning of the ritual, lead one to regard these as two more patterns of this ritual system. It remains for us lastly to assert the significance of the underlying notion of ritual

² This points up the value of the earlier matrilineal marriage system, which was conducive to both procreation and dynamic stability. One may recall that the Nāñcilnāṭu Vēḷāḷas followed a matrilineal marriage system (*marumakkaṭṭāyam*) for 826 years, returning to a patrilineal tradition (*makkaṭṭāyam*) only in 1926; see Sect. 7.2.1 above.

³ It is striking that in the ritual system we have been discussing here, the goddess is not transformed by marriage—submission to marriage is one well-known pattern of domesticating violent goddesses in India—, but by dealing with the two poles of herself and by curing her rage.

⁴ The Icakki *koṭai* festival I have been discussing here was highly successful. According to the *pūjārī*, whom I visited six months later, all the married women who had participated in order to overcome childlessness, with the exception of one, had in the interim conceived.

depth—a phase of being in-between,⁵ when the fundamental processes of making and breaking of realities can be observed simultaneously. That the potential for radical inner reorientation lies in such ritual depth has hopefully been shown by this work.

The *koṭai* ritual reveals society's expectations for reproduction, the specific requirements for reproduction to function, and the sort of intervention undertaken in case it does not function as expected. It is a long way from the *koṭai* ritual, where the power of deceased virginal females (*iyakkis*) is accessed to enhance fertility, to fertility clinics that practise in vitro fertilisation in India's mega-cities. Yet they can be seen as merely two different ways of intervention for acquiring control over the fertility process.

In no way do I claim to have exhausted the potential readings of the ritual and the story. They are still open to other equally plausible interpretations.

⁵ Note that the site of the ritual called *naṭukāṭu*, a place of cultivated forest that encompasses both the village and the “village's other” (Malamoud's term 1996:76) also falls under this notion of in-between.