

## **Organic Growth of Folk Epics: Ownership and Contestation of Tamil Folk Epic *AnnanmarKathai* (Elder Brothers' Story)**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper makes an attempt to establish the fact that it is only the singers and performers of the folk epic who provide validity and acceptance to it because they are the ones who pass on what they have received from the earlier generation to the future generation. To prove this fact, it gives an account of the way in which the three texts of the Tamil folk epic AnnanmarKathai were formed and gives the details of the people who helped the formation of these texts. It identifies women, myths and performance process as the undying elements of folk epics and folk religion. The paper records the ownerships that have been made on the epics and tests their veracity. The contestations made on the epic also go through the same process. The way folk epic and folk religion appropriate the Vedic and classical elements are referred to and the universal elements compared with another Finnish folk epic Kalevala. The experiences of the audio-recording of the folk epic AnnanmarKathai are shared to draw certain conclusions like the singers and performers are the real guardian angels of folk epic and folk religion. The paper also makes certain recommendations.*

**KEYWORDS** -*AnnanmarKathai, folk epic, folk religion, Kalevala*

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### **I. Introduction**

Originating during the medieval period, the Tamil folk epic *AnnanmarKathai* (hereinafter AMK) has been part of folk cultural tradition in the Kongu region of Tamilnadu, South India. The first printed version full version of AMK was edited by Sakthikkanal from a palm-leaf manuscript in 1971. With about 10,050 lines and 389 printed pages, it has seen multiple editions since then and created another version of epic community quite different from the earlier one of village audience. While the audience is directly involved in the narration and takes part in the sharing of cultural information, the experience of the reader is restricted to the literary text. The contribution of the singers/performers makes all the difference. It has about 21-30 days of performance text and four shrines located in different parts of the epic region are involved in the ritual text which is witnessed by several thousands of people.

The epic has the following story line. While Eswara performs pooja to the 1008 idols in the celestial world, one of the idols falls down in a forest on earth and is swallowed by a five-headed cobra in search of food. A child, Periakandi Amman (Parvathi), daughter of Brahma, comes out of the cobra. While Periakandi wonders what has befallen her, Lord Eswara appears, pacifies her and offers means of expiation for the curse that has befallen her "There will be two valiant heroes from the Gounder (Farmer) caste who will rule their territory in compliance with Dharmic rules. They will meet a sudden but heroic death in this very forest. Their virtuous sister will come in search of them. Her tears will fall upon your feet and you will be redeemed of the curse. Till then, this forest will be your abode". Parvathi prays to Mayavar (Vishnu) to appear. Mayavar hears her prayers and comes down to earth and consoles her. Mayavar promises to end her penance by sending the sister to the forest after the death of her brothers.

### **II. Surrogate Ownership and Real Ownership**

Though the literary text of *AnnanmarKathai* became popular in academic circles, it became popular all along the epic region of Kongu Nadu (North Western part of South India) after the broadcasting of a few episodes by the lead singer Poolavadi Ponnusamy during a four week programme in All India Radio in October 1977. Poolavadi Ponnusamy became popular after the programme was aired and offers came pouring in to give performances all over Kongu Nadu (Personal communication from Sakthikkanal, 6 April 2012). Years later when the novel version was made into a popular film with gross distortions of the story, the political outfit of the Kongu Vellalar community protested saying that both the novel and the film 'hurt our sentiments as our deities PonnarSangar (also called AnnamarSwamy) have been wrongly depicted in the movie' (Indian Express, 24 March 2012). Here the epic is directly linked with the religious practices of the community and the Brothers are worshipped as clan deities by a section of the community. The major objection to the film version was a shot

which depicted the hero flirting with two heroines whilst in the story they take a vow not to touch them. The epic is seen as part of the caste history and the heroes are considered to be symbols of caste pride. This caste pride makes a certain section of the community possessive about the epic and assert the supremacy of the caste. A prominent leader from an oppressed caste (*Dalit*), Thirumavalavan, out of sheer ignorance wrongly referred to the Brothers as members belonging to his caste and this angered the KonguVellala community. The student wing of this caste outfit filed a case against Thirumavalavan for having 'insulted' the community. (*Dinamalar*, Tamil newspaper, 2 June 2011). This goes against the very spirit of the epic which has a noble message of following the righteous path till the end of life however long or short it is. Fortunately the performers had no knowledge of this episode and carried on with their performance (Personal Interview, D.Mylsamy, 28 December 2012).

Both literary and performance versions of *AnnanmarKathai*(AMK) do not show any influence of the Indian classical epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Strictly speaking, they cannot even be called heroic epics. The performers out of the need to please the audience, glorify the community but neither the text nor the characters are concerned about any caste pride. The story has a universal appeal of pointing out the ultimate realities of life and the course of narration deals with rites of passage and life cycle ceremonies. Ownership of the epic by any community does not mean that they understand the spirit of the epic and in most cases their actions go against the very spirit. It is only the performers who are the real owners of the epic and under no circumstances will they allow any encroachment.

### **III. Contestation: Folk epic through the Rationalist's Eyes**

Being an open religious society, religious symbols are found everywhere in India, but as in any other society there is also a tradition of atheism and rationalism. Religion had always been patronized by imperial powers and occupied a large space in the public psyche. When democracy entered India through British colonialism in a big way, the spirit of egalitarianism paved the way for an open revolt against hierarchical, caste based society. The Dravidian movement born in the early part of the twentieth century identified blind beliefs to be the blocks in social progress. When *AnnanmarKathai*(AMK) moved from the small community space to a wider public space, it was seen as a glorification of one particular caste against another. All myths, legends, ballads, rituals, festivals and fairs were seen as tools to perpetuate this unjust society. Though there is mention of a conflict between farmers and hunters in AMK, a close observation will reveal that the message of the epic goes much beyond that. But the descendants of this community of hunters called *Vettuvars*, having achieved a considerable economic mobility now, cannot stand the ignominy of being placed next to the farmers, the *KonguVellalas* in the social hierarchy. This has made them commission a writer to bring about all the 'negative' aspects of the epic which assert that a) there is no historical basis to the story (Paranan 2010: 13) b) hunters were the original settlers and the farmers encroached upon their territory (p.322) c) it is a ploy of the Telugu invaders to create a division in the society with the help of crafty Brahmins(p.323) d) the story shows the artisans in a bad light to continue to exploit their labour (341) e) the story creates too many myths which are nothing but blind superstitions which make people insensitive to certain social realities (p.341). The argument tries to establish that the whole *raison d'être* of the epic is to exploit people's irrational fears and to impede their progress. In fact when the epic moved into the public sphere after publication of its literary text, it was used by many people to serve their community, political and commercial interests. But the epic has many inherent qualities in it to appropriate and continues to occupy the aesthetic and spiritual space of the folk epic community. Paranan has underestimated the power of 'mythopoeia' which has helped modern society to understand the culture and civilization of the past and to add meaning to the present. The reason why the exploiters of the epic failed to make any impact and the reason why the singers continue to maintain the influence on the folk epic community is their ability to sustain the interest in the old myths and the imagination to create new myths.

### **IV. Organic growth: Stages and Forms**

Organic growth of an oral epic includes the variations that occur in the structure of the story, its narration and the impact it creates in the minds of the readers and viewers. As understood originally in the field of business expansion, it does not care for any of the extraneous influences caused by scientific, technological and socio-cultural changes. The growth is observed only on the narration and performance of the bards/singers and the way it is received by the epic community. In real terms it is the kind of changes that the epic, with all its texts, undergoes when it moves through time and space. There are many players involved in the process. Women play a major role in the growth process of oral epics and they define the spiritual value of a community. When a part of the epic community, not necessarily the audience of the performance, undergoes the mobility from the status of a farming community to a mixed identity of traders and intelligentsia, their search for cultural nationalism begins. They either make changes in the old nationalism or invent a new nationalism with both of them having romantic elements. When television entered the drawing rooms of middle class Indians in the late eighties of the

last century, the classical epic *Ramayana* made a re-entry as an electronic version and it made an impact on the younger generation too. It is a different story that the experience of the viewers is quite different from the one of the spectators of the folk version of the story. But this division of latent existence and vibrant existence is applicable to both classical and folk epics. The latent existence is triggered off to a vibrant existence caused mostly by a wrong interpretation of the story or when the story is used to achieve political or commercial ends.

### **V. The Sustaining Factors: Women and Myths**

KonguVellalar community, historically the chief patrons of the epic engaged in agriculture and cattle farming moved out of their villages in large numbers from the 70s and settled in big cities like Madras (now renamed as Chennai). During one of the social get-togethers on 14 October 1979 there was a quiz programme on the folk epic AMK, covering literary, ritual and performance texts of the epic. Though it was a mixed crowd, it was women who answered all the questions. (Personal communication from Sakthikkanal, 6 April 2012). It presupposes the fact that women not only watch the performances with keen interest but also have a good knowledge of all the three texts of the epic. There are reasons for this.

Two situations in the epic narration draw women into the course of the narration all through the ages. Of all the roles played by women in life - daughter, sister, wife and mother, the expressions of a sister and wife in a specific cultural context make an everlasting impact. One is the lament by the wives of the Brothers. Though they were married, they never enjoyed the bliss of married life as the Brothers were busy avenging the injustice done to their parents. So the complaints of the wives to their sister-in-law are genuine

*They built a mansion  
and imprisoned a peacock,  
your brothers;  
In a golden cage,  
they had a quail,  
your Brothers;*

*Follow you, we will not* (Sakthikkanal, 1971, p.316)

After the death of her dear parents sister Thangal feels lonely and asks for a pet to forget the loss. Making a review of her life, she bemoans -

*Never have I seen the rain or cloud  
Nor been to a tank;  
Never have I crossed the canal  
Nor stepped out of the usual path;  
I now seek refuge*

*In summer thunder* (Anonymous version, 1996 p.52)

Her dependence on her brothers and her feeling of helplessness in their absence is expressed in the lament-

*In the palace where you ruled  
Like an elephant.  
Look brother,  
I am wailing like a cat;  
Our land's full of coconuts,  
And our streets filled with flowers  
The coconut palms have swayed over,  
But here I am, wailing alone,  
Oh brother  
The turmeric stalks have grown,  
The fields are golden with paddy,  
But here I am, withering alone,  
Oh brother!*

(Sakthikkanal, 1971, p.319)

Sakthikkanal's literary text was copied from a palm-leaf manuscript collected from the Manapparai area. These versions were used for the narration at houses and public places before the print versions appeared and the sequences mentioned above naturally drew the attention of women.

### **VI. Invention and Re-interpretation of Myths in the Folk Epic Process**

There is a reference to the tangible and intangible presence of religion in Indian culture from the beginning of the twentieth century. 'All the affairs of the Hindus are directly or indirectly connected with religion. He feels no interest and cannot induce himself to any work that does not seem to him to possess any religious merit.' (Binoy Kumar Sarkar, 1916, p.3) Tracing the development of Shaiva-cum-Shakta cult, Sircar also put the worship of these pantheons under 1. Theory of philosophy of the socio-religious institution 2.

Geography or ethnography of the institution 3. History of the institution; and 4. The institution as an instrument of national culture. This classification paved the way for the comprehensive understanding of Indian religiosity in which both vedic and non-vedic ritual practices play an equal role complementing each other. Historical roots of this mythical consciousness are being traced now. Eugenina Vanina takes this historical consciousness to medieval India and sees this continuation of the 'mental programme' of this medieval man about the space, his sense of time and history, his location in society and his sense of individuality. (Kothiyal, 2013) Perhaps Lauri Honko's 'mental text' and 'multiform' are the continuation of this. Vanina sees these elements enmeshed in each other and difficult to extricate. The oral tradition offers more scope to identify and understand this mythical consciousness as they are formed, preserved and practiced by the 'mute majority of peasants'. The complex bhakti tradition reaching them through partial readings and with family and community interactions made them act both independently and collectively but never breaking away from the norms set by the community or the region. This collectivism makes a marked contrast with the individualism of popular culture. Folk epic community is distinct in this respect as they never lost the collectivity in the faith system they follow and their connectivity with the mainstream is also intact at a broader level. Exclusive traditions always assert themselves while aligning with mainstream traditions breaking the myth of 'great tradition' and 'little tradition' which are watertight compartments. Any study of folk religion has to take note of these conflicts and assimilations. It is also to be noted that this texture has not been disturbed by colonial interventions as much as the other forms of culture and art have been. This can be attributed to the complete vernacular expressions which have been carried even to the metropolitan cities of India where we find folk deities and *jathres* (festivals) observed for them. Most of the scholars making studies on contemporary Indian literature admit the 'emptiness of modernity' and expose the craving for 'nativism' without knowing where to find it. (Satchidanandan, 2010) Dynamics of religion and contemporary expressions of spirituality hardly found space in academic forums as there was a near total absence of documented oral tradition. So much so, even monographs on Indian myths and legends centre around classical philosophy and literature (Manoj Das, 2009). Folkloristic in Indian public sphere is still confined to seeing folk elements in contemporary literature or observing the belief systems of the tribes located far away from the 'civilization' (Nandini Sahu, 2012) In the absence of open dialogue on religion, caste and other social institutions, mapping of dynamics of religion becomes difficult. Studies on surface reality may not reveal the whole truth. Understanding deeper reality was never possible for lack of authentic, publicly made statements. This 'exclusion from knowledge transactions' has led to the marginalization of the indigenous communities who now realize the decline of their socio-cultural status. Scholarly attempts outside academic circles go beyond the impact of colonialism on these communities and 'looked for lessons of environmental balance and social regeneration in their own literatures, knowledge systems and cultural traditions' (G N Devy, et al, 2011). Histories of conflict and annihilation are given enough focus in these studies. Though aesthetic tradition is traced upon, there is a lack of enough empirical, oral sources, to construct the religious history through legends, ballads, folk epics and faith systems. India has not reached a stage, perhaps will never reach, to discuss issues of post-secular religious practices, digital religion or the status of pilgrimages and there is no institution like Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History in sight either.

Commenting on the controversy that arose during the release of the film version of the epic *Annamar Kathai*, K N Muthukkumaraswamy who made the first doctoral study on the epic said, "The content of the story will create social tension in whichever way it is filmed. Women's organizations might object to certain sequences in the story where women are shown to be too submissive. If changes are made in the characterization or in the narration of events, it will be a compromise and appear as a diluted version very different from the original oral version". (Personal mail to Sakthikkanal 2 April 2011) Muthukkumaraswamy further states, "In terms of social institutions, the beliefs and public morality of the period in which the Brothers lived was quite different from the present one. Ordinary people without any socio-historical consciousness cannot understand the period and the society". Muthukkumaraswamy has a kind of particular community in mind. This community is rationalistic, pragmatic and without any sense of mythical consciousness. It is this consciousness which characterizes the epic community much more than the socio-historical consciousness which Muthukkumaraswamy referred to. Mythical consciousness is the basic trait of the epic community and this epic community is one of the sub-communities that exist within a community. I do not see any change in the level of mythical consciousness in the epic communities I observed during my field work in 1990s and in 2013. The mythic consciousness got reinforced now perhaps because of the threat posed by globalization and the alienation it has caused. This sense of insecurity accounts for the increasing number of devotees to the shrines associated with the story.

India has a tradition of inventing and sustaining this mythical consciousness through its literary and oral forms including tribal expressions. It is also acknowledged that Indian mythology is not static but dynamic (Pandurangi, in Suryanath Kamath, 1993, p.ii). Indian mythology concerns itself with the origin of the universe, man and woman, all the natural forces and human emotions. The spiritual route which the myths undertake from the literary and oral sources is also traced. The major difference between spiritual routes formed

through literary and scriptural sources and through oral sources is that the former becomes static but the later goes on inventing new myths depending upon the geographical location of the shrines associated with the myths and the socio-economic background of the people who invent them. Myths sprouting from oral sources with multiple texts have a longer life and have the capacity to produce more myths. Within the colonial context, as a part of colonial modernity, several invasive processes such as deforestation, displacement of people, development of urban slums etc. disrupted the traditional knowledge systems of India. The Indian knowledge systems were a part of the eco-systems in which the holistic knowledge systems had formulated thought and action of the people. (Satyanath, 2011, 450-468) Whereas the indigenous knowledge systems favored a maintenance paradigm, supporting the possibility of a pluralistic epistemology, the western modernist approach advocated a paradigm of eradication of alternatives using a conflict model and a war-sensitive vocabulary of campaign. Seen in the light of Satyanath's argument, *AnnanmarKathai* (AMK) acts as a neutralizing factor making the audience come to terms with the inevitabilities of life. All living beings are treated in the same just manner in the story by the singers. Sin and expiation play a big role in all their actions. All along the three texts of the epic, literary, performance and ritual, this ordinariness is reinforced. This goes against the monolithic forms of religion and other social institutions. This folk philosophy is also extended to the multiple role played by goddess Shakti which is exemplified through folk epics like *AnnanmarKathai* (AMK). The epic begins with Shakti's problems and ends with a solution to it. The problem of the goddess is the problem of the human kind. That is the reason why she is both fierce and benevolent. Shakti 'is dynamically tied to the land and Earth Mother rather than to ancient texts and Laws (Donna Jordan, 2012, p. 388). Jordan is categorical that ancient laws and texts will not comprehend this. It is quite difficult to find parallels for *AnnanmarKathai* (AMK) because of its asymmetrical nature. Honko wanted to abolish this cultural asymmetries but they are the real strength of living epics (Honko, 1998 p.12). All living oral epics survive with the sheer strength of their 'mystery and poetic idea .... to a varying degree from one another' (Honko, 1998, p.10) It is not only seeing the multiform but the multipurpose the epics serve, 'something beyond their text ....and symbolic structures of history and mythology' (Honko, 1996, pp.18-36). A total experience of all these is possible only through an understanding of generic intertextuality (LotteTarkka 1996: 50-84) to know the 'depths of the epic universe'. Honko's overview of Tuluva cultural heritage rightly observes the main aspects: 1. Absence of Sanskrit Brahma and a Tuluvised *Bermeru*, a symbol of exclusive tradition 2. Serpent worship 3. Mother Goddess worship 4. Poetically elaborated oral epics like *Siri Paddana* (Honko 1998: xxvii-xxix) It may not be very difficult to study oral epic on these lines because these are pan-South Indian characteristics indicating a distinct cultural identity. But there are still certain features which differentiate one regional culture from another. Animal sacrifice can be cited as one difference between the regions of Kongu and Tuluva regions of South India. It is Honko's conviction that 'textual ethnography' – 'the accurate documentation of oral text in performance, through audio-visual means, which would create the base for all reviewing and analysis' (Honko 1998: 594-597). Myths are created during the course of the performance. The very same myths get reinvented in a different milieu with a different meaning but they are the real expressions of human situations. Without the myths, folk epics will be as barren as the globalized living.

## VII. Organic Growth: New Actors and New Believers

*Padugalam* (mock death) is the final sequence in the story and it is an important ritual at the temple where the spirits of Ponnar-Sangar are propitiated. This 'spirit belief' is the core of the folk epic AMK. When the death of the Brothers is narrated and sung, the audience goes into a trance and when the singers with all their poetic and singing mite 'revive' them, they are spiritually regenerated. It is also an ordeal by fire to the singers. 'We know whether we are following the traditional norms of narrating, singing and performing only on that day when we sing in a high pitch to revive the devotees who undergo this *Padugalam* (mock death) experience. If we are not able to revive them or if the revival is prolonged then it means that we have violated the professional ethics of proper narration and proper observance of rituals' (Mylsamy, 28 December 2012). The troupe completely controls the situation and there is absolute silence during the midnight and early morning performance. It perfectly matches with any other spiritual experiment for regeneration, cutting across time and space. Honko's interpretation of memorates and the study of folk beliefs match this experience. 'In ritual behavior the basic situation is different; contact with the spirit is sought by means of ritual; the person is the subject of the action, the spirit the object. The expectations directed toward the spirit are positive...' (Honko, 2013) This *Padugalam* (mock death) is the culmination of a month long narration and singing in the village. All the rites of passage and life cycle ceremonies are performed during the performance. The performance follows its own paradigm. Ethnopoetics and ethnography play an important role in the paradigm (John Foley quoted in Honko, 2013). Organic variations are noticed in all the elements of this paradigm keeping the corpus of the story intact. With all the socio-political interventions, commercial exploitation and the onslaught of globalization, this 'ecology of tradition' is still preserved. This can be attributed to the sincerity and commitment of the singers/performers.

### VIII. Study of Folk Epic and Folk Religion in India

Though approached from an anthropological perspective in the beginning, the study of Indian folklore by western scholars later changed its course to understand the culture of the region. Before the entry of the western scholars, there were hardly any exchanges of information for want of a common language as the most of the scholars were from the vernacular background. Brenda Beck's *The Three Twins: The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic* was the first attempt to look at the complex aesthetic and spiritual world of the folk epic community. Coming to India, Tamilnadu as a cultural anthropologist in the 60s, Beck started her study by audio recording the performance and went on to write a full-fledged book. Moving beyond the literary approach, it took into account the ritual dimensions of the story. Sustaining her interest in the story for the past 50 years, she has now made an animated version of it and is popularizing the greatness of the epic through her website *The Legend of Ponnivala*.

Another *Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (1986) edited by Stuart Blackburn and A K Ramanujan perhaps was the first book which put the Indian folk epics on the world map followed by *Singing of Birth and Death: Texts in Performance* (1988) by Stuart Blackburn. Earlier using the classical mythology, David Shulman studied the temple myths (David Shulman, 1980). The complementarity between the classical and folk epics had led scholars like Hildebeital to lean more on the folk element (Rethinking *India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadi among Rajputs, Muslims, and Dalits*. 1999). But the first book which identified the epic and community, epic performance and an attempt to see the relationship between classical and folk epics was *Oral Epics in India* (1989) edited by Stuart H. Blackburn et.al. It made a survey of all the Indian folk epics. Going beyond the classical epics and heroic epics it identified the 'mythic epics' and 'miracle cycle epics' of India from the States of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and came to the conclusion that, 'Living epic traditions are not static but continue to change and respond to the communities in which they are performed' (Stuart Blackburn, et.al, 1989 p.9). Apart from noticing the caste and regional identity it also observed the 'unwritten and unperformed' aspects of these epics which formed the core of the cultural studies. National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai has published *Oral Epics of Kalahandi* (2007) by Mahendra Kumar Mishra. Mishra made a survey of studies on folk epics especially the African folk epics mentioning Stephen Belcher's book *The Epics in Africa* which made a 'diachronic study on epics in relation to history, caste genealogies, and myths' (Mishra, 2007). There are not many exclusive studies on the relationship between folk epic and folk religion. P.Krishnaswami's doctoral work *A Comparative Study of MaleyaMadeshwara and AnnanmarKathai* located the folk epic region of North Western Tamilnadu and Southern Karnataka where there is a big tribal population. The Saivisation of the tribal population originated during the time of imperial Cholas had undergone many changes but all through the changes, the *gramadevata* (village goddess) worship and the worship pattern of subordinate castes survived. Folk epics stand testimony to this. Most of the folk epics have literary text, performance text and ritual text. All the three texts are interlinked but they also have independent existence (P.Krishnaswami, 2000). Having been exposed more to the literary text in the beginning, Krishnaswami changed his perception after a few rounds of field work. Contacts with around ten singers and performers helped him update his knowledge of the behavior of folk epic community and their world view.

### IX. Myths and their Religious Manifestations

When the message of myths is passed on to folk epic community, the places associated with myths assume greater importance. The veneration and fear attached to the places are lost and those places become like any other place of worship. This is a testimony to the way the performance and ritual texts lead to the institutionalization of the folk epic losing its original value. This is illustrated through the comparison of the status of the epic locations. This researcher visited the same places he had visited during the 90s in connection with doctoral work and found significant changes in their status. The place where the Brothers are believed to have ruled has a garden attached to it and this is the garden where the sister Thangal used to spend her time with her cohorts. What was just a barren land with a terracotta image of sister Thangal has now transformed into a pilgrimage centre.



Photo:P.Krishnaswami 1996



Photo: M.Santhosh Kumar 2013

The private garden of Sister Thangal  
The same place has become a temple now

*Padugalam* has multiple meanings. One of the meanings is battlefield. In 1996 and earlier the place was completely deserted with only the statues of Ponnar and Sangar exposing their chest to the swirled sword up. There was just a small hutlike structure with small statues of characters from the epic. The picture below (left) shows the construction of a temple for the heroes Ponnar-Sangar. There never used to be any animal sacrifice at the battlefield. The picture to the right, taken just in front of the temple, shows the skinning of a goat after being sacrificed to the deities.



Photo: M Santhosh Kumar 2013  
Construction of the temple is seen in the background. The compound wall is a new addition to the temple



Photo: M Santhosh Kumar 2013  
The sacrificed animal will be cooked for the pilgrims

Virappur temple is the place where the Brothers worshipped their clan deity. Located a little away from the village Virappur, this temple used to attract crowds only on occasions. Now the temple is visited by devotees throughout the year and shops have come up to cater to the needs of the pilgrims.



Photo: P.Krishnaswami, 1996

Virappur Temple, isolated and less visited



Photo: M.Santhosh Kumar, 2013

Virappur Temple with shops around  
The bard with the researcher

All these indicate that when the folk epic moves from the first life to the second life (Honko, 1991) the dynamics of the epic reaches new dimensions with a change of status of epic locations. If folk epic and folk religion are supposed to be dynamic, they should never be allowed to get institutionalized. In fact they are to be preserved as heritage sites as the memorials for the dead heroes.

#### X. Primitivity and Modernity: The mythical connection between *Kalevala* and *AnnamarKathai*

This mythological connection is seen among many folk epics of the world with extended reference to birds and animals. This is the thread that connects primitivity and modernity even crossing geographical boundaries. One striking similarity between *Kalevala* (KV) and *AnnamarKathai* (AMK) which AskoPorpola quotes is the miraculous, mystical and sacred object *Sampo*. (Porpola (tr. Sivalingam 1994: xi-xiii). This is a crucial object around which the entire story revolves making changes in the behavior of people. Porpola finds the cosmic connection of the object relating *Sampo* to *stampa* the Sanskrit word for the Tamil

word *kambam*, the cosmic pillar that upholds the key to all the riddles of AMK. Porpola constructs his theory with linguistic concepts laying emphasis on the metaphysical nature of human existence. This, *TapasuKambam* is the pillar on which goddess Parvathi sits to do her penance till she gets her redemption and also till the sister Thangal comes to her for redemption. The Birch tree and the cuckoo bird are treated with respect in *Kalevala*. The *Vanni* tree and the parrot are revered in the same manner in AMK. Vainamoinen has an anthropomorphic touch to his character and so has Mayavar, the troubleshooter and an *avatar* of Vishnu in AMK.

One major difference that separates the male and female characters is the musical sense that almost all the characters have in KV. Otherwise women in both the epics try to prevent men from undertaking any adventure and committing any evil deed. Their attachment towards the son or the brother and their inability to cope with the death of their loved ones is shown in their attempt to revive them. While Lemminkainen is revived by his mother in KV, it is the sister who revives the Brothers in AMK. It is the ability of the singers who go on creating mental universes all along their performance and after and this adds new meaning to culture and civilization.

### **XI. Organic Growth engages the Vedic elements**

When the epic moves through time and space it engages itself with many contrasting concepts and values. The religion Hinduism in its organized form challenged the influence of the folk beliefs and practices. Of the three pantheons of Hindu gods covering three cycles of creation, preservation and destruction, Vishnu is the god of preservation. Vishnu is the god of love. He is the guardian of mankind and the keeper of Dharma. When humanity reaches a point of decay, Vishnu appears as a saviour. Though Vishnu is a vedic god, singers of AMK nativise Vishnu and name him as *Mayavar* (invisible savior) and accord him the highest reverence even above Lord Shiva. He is equated with a friendly old folk in the family, and acts as a mediator between the young sons and their parents in the village. Each troupe of the performers of this epic make this character an endearing one using their imagination and looking at the community in which they perform. Naturally the singers show the best of places as the abode of Vishnu as He sustains the spirit of existence. Bard Mylsamy includes AyyarMalai*Ratnagiriswara* Temple, located near Kulithalai in his Epic Journey and calls it the abode of *Mayavar* (Vishnu). It could be noticed that a Shiva temple is conveniently transformed into a Vaishnava temple to suit the requirements of the narration and also to achieve spiritual and cultural purpose. (Mylsamy, Interview, 11 August 2013) This place is strategically located between the places where the ancestors of the heroes lived and where the heroes ruled. Assimilation of mainstream gods into exclusive traditions and the pivotal role assigned to them by the bards go to prove the eclectic nature of their composition.

The number seven occupies a prominent place in Indian culture right from the Vedic period as *Rigveda* refers to this number. The statues of seven goddesses are found in most of the temples. The fact that Vedic Aryans believed that the universe consisted of seven regions and the Sun God *Surya* is driven by seven horses would have percolated down to the folk culture. This is also a distinctive feature of ancient Indian sculpture. With Mother Goddess worship and a strong faith in fertility cult, the peasant society has very easily appropriated it. This accounts for the argument by Bard Mylsamy that Goddess Periakkandi makes sister Thangal one of the seven sisters at the end of the story. This also accounts for Thangal's depiction as a spinster attaching no importance to the wedded life. Virginity as a form of purity has always occupied a prime place in the folk culture. The blending of vedic and non-vedic practices and mixing of classical and folk elements are done so judiciously by the singers.

### **XII. Organic growth as seen through current recorded version**

The oral performance of *AnnanmarKathai*(AMK) by E C Ramasami was first recorded by Brenda Beck in 1965. Lasting 44 hours, this was recorded on an ordinary tape recorder using batteries. This was transcribed and published in the year 1992 (Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies). This audio version is preserved in the United States Information Service, New Delhi. The department of Folklore Studies of St.Xavier's College, Palyamkottai, Tamilnadu has also recorded one version of the story. Though certain episodes were recorded for commercial purposes, a full-fledged recording was done recently by this researcher. The recording was done in two schedules in January and February 2013. A team of three singers, PoolavadiPonnusamy (75), DevanampalayamMylsamay (63) and Gopal (55) with a performing history of many decades were brought to Bangalore for the documentation. Prior to this a video-interview was done with Sakthikkanal who brought out the first print version of the epic. This audio-documentation of *AnnanmarKathai*(AMK) was recorded at Taala Studios, St. Antony's Friary, Checkpost, Madiwala, Bangalore on a TASCAM-DM-3200 multi-track recording digital mixer using Protools-9 software and two microphones 1) Neumann U-87-AI and 2) TLM 103 K having a recording quality of 24 bits/48000 Khtz.

Close to 30 hours of audio-recording was done. According to Honko's folklore process, this can be considered as the first life of the epic. Before the recording the singers were told to narrate, sing and act out the sequences exactly as they perform in the village environment cutting down on the interludes. 4 hours of recording was done every day. They did not refer to any notes and the entire narration and singing was purely



from memory. All the singers were from the subordinate castes and at the subconscious level, feel subservient to the dominant agricultural community. Of the three, Ponnusamy's voice reflects the appropriateness and seriousness of the situation but lacks the knowledge of the cultural significance of the episodes in the story. He belongs to a migrant community with his mother tongue being Telugu. Gopal is his brother's son-in-law. He was originally a tailor and during a visit to his in-law's place he became acquainted with Ponnusamy and thus began the long journey. Gopal has a voice that can connect traditions and ages. His narration is so unselfconscious and appeals to women instantly. It is the voice of the subordinate with an unbroken rhythm expressing centuries of stored sorrows. When Gopal sings the dirge of sister Thangal lamenting over the loss of her parents or her brothers, there is absolute silence in the audience and he does it without the accompaniment of the *udukkai* (small drum). The lament goes on for 15-20 minutes or even more depending upon the mood of the singer and the situation. It expresses the expectations and sentiments of the community. The epic community considers the funeral proceedings as a prestigious event attended by thousands with elaborate rituals conducted for hours. Sister Thangal cannot bear the sight of the dead body of her brothers without these rituals.

*Oh Brothers*

*Where is the silk drape*

*Carried on a caparisoned elephant?*

*Where are the five lakh people*

*Around your holy body?*

*Had you died on our farm*

*Our pariah would have done the funeral rites*

*Now neither pariah nor pandal of sugar cane stems* (Audio recorded, Feb.2013)

It is a different matter that his lament seeks to perpetuate the very same hierarchical social system of which he is one of the victims. Here he identifies fully with the character Thangal and her grief. His (her) lament is aesthetically expressed. This is an offshoot of epic growth and could be considered as an independent *genre*. Separate recording of Gopal's lament will be a good study material for psycho-therapists like Hiltunen. She observes, "The lament tradition offers a transpersonal alternative to express grief, recognizing not only the spiritual needs of the mourner, but also the deceased. The ancient tradition is modified for contemporary transpersonal grief work to be aided by the Grief Work Prism of Consciousness checklist" (Hiltunen 2007: 95-101)

The third singer Mysamy is an authority on the culture of the region and very convincingly connects the sequences of the story with the history of the community. But his voice is so self-conscious and his *ragas* imitate the classical ones. On the whole all the three make a good combination offering a variety in narration and singing. They glorify the patron agricultural community of *KonguVellalas*. On the third day of the recording there was a minor technical snag and this was attributed to non-performance of proper prayers before the starting of the recording. The recording resumed after conducting prayers on the morning of the fourth day. The only musical instrument *udukkai* plays a crucial role in the narration and singing. Beating the drum for several minutes is necessary to create situations and the variation in beating the drum indicates contrasting situations. Celestial beings like Shiva and Vishnu are humanized and they converse in the best possible endearing terms. Births are always supernatural. Thamarai, mother of the heroes, was born out of the sperm produced by Lord Shiva splashed across the lotus leaves while having bath with Lord Vishnu. The performers nativize characters and contemporize the situations to suit the requirements of their audience. Laments often express relationships between language, culture, ecology and religion. Along with myths, laments are the sustaining factors of folk epics.

### **XIII. Conclusion**

Language departments the world over are still confined to language and literature ignoring the distance that culture has travelled in the past 50 years. Considering the growth jump in the fields of science and technology in the past few decades, it is imperative for these departments to convert themselves into departments of Cultural Studies providing enough space to oral traditions. This integration of oral tradition into the academic programmes will make a good connectivity to the otherwise isolated, insulated existence of folklore studies. The undying elements of culture covering all aspects of human existence should find representation in the curriculum of any study with varying degrees. When that happens the prefix 'folk' will disappear from culture and the study will become a dynamic and meaningful one, as dynamic as the folk epic and folk religion.

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