Stories of Birth and Death in Villupāṭṭu of Tamil Nadu

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Villuppāṭṭu or bow-song is an oral performance-art in the Tamil folk tradition, surviving today mainly in the districts of Tirunelvīli and Kaṉṉiyā Kumāri, the southernmost region of Tamil Nadu. Bow-songs are so called because they are sung to the accompaniment of a simple bow-like instrument played by the singers. The songs are sung at temple festivals and narrate histories connected with local gods and goddesses.

Bow-song singers divide their stories into two categories: birth stories and death stories. The birth stories narrate the mythic origins of gods and goddesses and are grouped under the category of *teyva piṟavi* (divine birth — the term used by the singers). They originate in Kailasha, the heavenly realm of Shiva and Parvati, and go on to narrate the deeds of the deities after their descent on earth. The stories of the folk-deities Kaḷiammaṉ, Muttāramman, and Sāśtā, etc., belong to this category. Death stories are referred to as stories of *iṟaṇṭupaṭṭa vātai* or *veṭṭupaṭṭa vātai* (horror of violent death). These stories are local histories of men and women who are believed to have ascended to heaven after death and have therefore been deified in local cult. The stories of Palavēcam Cērvaikkāraṉ, Kurukkulāñci, Muttupaṭṭaṉ, Pūlaṅkoṇṭāḷ, and Ciṉṉattambi, etc., belong to this category. This article presents some stories from both categories and analyses their narrative patterns.

Here is the story of Palavēcam Cērvaikkāraṉ, a representative example of death stories. The story opens with an invocation (*kāppu*) and a prayer to the audience (*avai aṭakkam*) to forgive inadvertent errors in the performance.

In a village in the eastern part of Tirunelvīli district, a dispute over the hereditary right to watch over village lands breaks out between two groups of the Maravar caste (whose traditional occupation was to guard land and property). In the end, the main family of the group of lower status (a subcaste lower in the Maravar hierarchy) is forced to leave the village, Aracūr, and settle in another village a hundred miles away to the west. There the eldest son of the family, Irulappattēvaṉ, marries Muttāyi, but remains childless. His wife undertakes a pilgrimage and worships in several temples. Failing to get a child, she visits

Tiruccentūr and by the grace of Lord Murukaṉ, the presiding deity, she gives birth to a baby boy. When the astrologer is summoned, he foretells the birth of a second son, but adds that both the sons would die when the elder one is twenty-two years of age. He tells the father to name the boys after Palavēcam Cāmi, a god once worshipped in the father's lineage and later forgotten.

After some time the second son is born and both are named Palavēcam. The two brothers attain manhood, learn the martial arts prescribed by their caste, and soon the elder brother gets married. He happens to ask his father about their hereditary right of land-watching. His father tells him that their right to watch over lands in Aracūr was taken away by the wily Pūlāvuṭaiya Tēvaṉ — the leader of the opposing faction — and the Maravar chiefs of nine neighbouring villages. Hearing this, the brothers swear they will win back their right. Their father and maternal uncle try to stop them because they know that the boys are no match to their enemies. But the brothers do not heed the elders' advice and start off for Aracūr.

When they arrive at Arācur, the Palavēcam brothers are happily received by their relatives. The brothers tells their relatives that they intend to build a house of their own in the village. The opposing group, sensing the threat posed by the Palavēcam brothers, order the villagers not to give them land or sell them house-building materials or else face the consequences. Left with no alternative, the brothers begin to loot and eventually encroach upon the lands of their enemies. Their enemies try to confront and punish the brothers but are outwitted or beaten in every encounter. Then, in an apparently conciliatory gesture, they invite the brothers to a wedding ceremony and hatch a plot to kill them. The brothers, even though they know they would be helpless in the situation, decide to attend the wedding. At the wedding the brothers deliberately show disdain for their hosts. Instead of entering the marriage pavilion, they remain outside — the elder brother sitting bolt upright on a blanket and the younger standing near him with a drawn sword. The hosts are furious and demand that the brothers participate and show deference to the elders of their group present at the wedding. The brothers refuse and in the ensuing fight kill and injure a large number of their foes.

But the brothers know that their victory may be shortlived, so they seek aid from Kaṭṭappommaṉ[1], the chief of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, a neighbouring village. They then challenge their enemies to a fight in which more of them are killed. Subsequently they continue to raid areas under rival control, always escaping unhurt. The enemies meanwhile approach the British Collector who readily comes forward to help them. He sends them home with a company of soldiers and

[1]Kaṭṭappommaṉ is a historical figure, hanged by the British authorities in 1779 for his role in a peasant revolt.

issues orders to kill the Palavēcam brothers. Learning of the preparation of the enemies and the imminent attack, the Palavēcam brothers quickly gather food stores and retreat to a hideout — a temple to Ayyaṉār, the village guardian-deity. They make secret arrangements with a toddy tapper to bring them liquor in the temple.

Tipped off by the toddy tapper, the enemies soon find the temple-hideout but they do not launch an attack for fear of the powerful sword of the older Palavēcam. Instead, with the support of the British forces, they lay siege on the temple and bribe a Muslim friend of the brothers to trick the sword away. This friend approaches the temple alone as an envoy of peace, but the younger brother immediately suspects deceit and goes out to kill him. But his elder brother stops him and persuades him to trust their friend. The emissary tells the brothers that their enemies wish to make peace with them, but as a gesture of goodwill, they should give him their swords. As soon as the swords are handed over the enemies attack the temple and take the brothers captive.

They are blindfolded and led away to a far-off place. There the elder Palavēcam is killed and cut up into pieces. When a drop of his blood splashes on the younger Palavēcam, he breaks his bonds, rips off his blindfold, snatches a weapon and cuts down the executioners. To escape death at the hands of his enemies, he runs and leaps onto a sharp stake set upright in the ground, impaling himself.

When the enemies return to the scene and see what has happened, they cut off the head of the younger brother to prove to people in the village that they had killed him. After burning the bodies of the brothers, they march back to Aracūr carrying the brothers' heads. On the way, the younger brother appears as a spirit and stands on the road obstructing their path. When they try to run away the spirit kills them all, and then the toddy tapper and the friend who betrayed the brothers. These sudden and inexplicable deaths compel the local residents to consult an astrologer who advises them to build a temple to the brothers and to celebrate a festival in their honour. This is done and the story ends with the deified brothers receiving *puja* and food offerings in their temple.

The central issue in the story is land-watching right. The hereditary right of a group is forcibly snatched away by another. This violation leads to violence and the cruel death of the protagonists. Cruel death makes them deites. The deity (the younger brother) appears and takes revenge. The story ends with the establishment of a local cult. So the characteristic units of the story are: violation — violence — deification — revenge — establishment of local cult. This is the narrative pattern of all death stories. The issues are different in different stories,

but they all have a similar pattern and typology. For example, in the stories of Kuṟukkulāñci, Muttuppaṭṭaṇ, Kāttavarāyaṉ and Pūlaṅkoṇṭāḷ, the issue is sexual — love and marriage between a lower-caste man and an upper-caste woman or *vice-versa*. This violation of caste order, more broadly social order, leads to violence and cruel death, deification and revenge, and the founding of a cult.

The story of Kuṟukkulāñci may be cited as an example. Tūṇṭimuttu, a young man of the Mutaliyār caste, is the hero of the story. He falls in love with Pūraṇavalli, daughter of Rāma Śastri, a Brahmin. In the course of the affair the girl becomes pregnant. Knowing that their society will not permit them to marry, they flee to Koṭṭārakarā in Kerala and live there as husband and wife. The parents of the girl die out of shock, and all the seven brothers of the girl start on an expedition looking for the couple. At last they reach Koṭṭārakkarā where they find their sister first and then her lover Tūṇṭimuttu. The brothers tie his hands behind his back and take him to the king of Koṭṭārakkarā, followed by their sister. The brothers seeks the consent of the king to hang Tūṇṭimuttu. The king advises the Brahmins to pardon him and let him go. But the brothers threaten the king that if Tūṇṭimuttu is spared, they would immolate themselves in protest. The king, fearing the sin upon his head if seven Brahmins were to die for the sake of a Sudra's life, tells them to do whatever they want. They hang Tūṇṭimuttu in public and then go for Pūraṇavalli. When the youngest brother strikes her on the head with his sword, the deity Kuṟukkulāñci appears — spirit of Tūṇṭimuttu. The deity kills the seven brothers and all those watching the hanging. Kuṟukkulāñci then pulls down the temples and forts of Koṭṭārakarā, destroys the palace, and sets the town on fire. The distressed king summons Kāḷi Pulaiyaṉ, a skilled magician, and seeks his help. The magician pronounces some mantras and Kuṟukkulāñci appears in his wrathful form. The magician tries to capture the spirit in a pot, but his efforts are useless. At that moment goddess Bhagavathi appears to console the wrathful Kuṟukkulāñci, who then goes to the hill-shrine of Potikaimalai to worship Akastiyar. Akastiyar grants him large boons. Then Kuṟukkulāñci visits the temple of Corimuttu Aiyaṉ (Shiva) who appoints him guardian-deity at the western gate of the temple. Kuṟukkulāñci remains there but wishes he had a shrine of his own. At this juncture a devotee, Poyyillāppiḷḷai, comes with his family to worship at the shrine of Corimuttu Aiyan. When Poyyillāppiḷḷai starts back home — the village of Kōpālacamuttiram — Kuṟukkulāñci follows him. Arriving at the village, Kuṟukkulāñci thinks of making some mischief to assert his powers. A spirit dancer (*cāmiyāṭi*) is called in by the troubled villagers, and he reveals that Kuṟukkulāñci is at the bottom of the trouble — that Kuṟukkulāñci is actually demanding a shrine for himself in the village. Accordingly a shrine is constructed

for Kuṟukkulāñci and a festival is celebrated. Kuṟukkulāñci remains there happily protecting the family of Poyyillāppiḷḷai and the people of the village.

It will be seen that the narrative pattern of this story is the same as the earlier story, even though the issue is different — the love and cohabitation of a lower-caste man with an upper-caste woman. This theme comes up again in the story of Kāttavarāyaṉ. Kāttavarāyaṉ is a *paṟaiyaṉ* (untouchable) who loves Āriyamālai, a Brahmin girl, and abducts her. The Brahmins lament before the king that they have been defiled by the *paṟaiyaṉ's* abduction of Āriyamālai. They demand that he should be punished. The king orders his army chief to arrest Kāttavarāyaṉ. Kāttavarāyaṉ is arrested and brought before the king. Kāttavarāyaṉ impales himself on a stake to escape death at the hands of his tormentors, and is then deified and worshipped.

The story of Muttuppaṭṭaṉ, also on the theme of love, is slightly different. Muttuppaṭṭaṉ is a Brahmin who falls in love with Pommakkā and Timmakkā, two sisters of Cakkiliyar (cobbler, untouchable) caste. He meets Vālappakaṭai, the father of the maidens, and asks him for the hands of his daughters. Vālappakaṭai first refuses his suit but later accepts the proposal on two conditions: first, Muttuppaṭṭaṉ must remove all signs of his Brahmin status — his sacred thread, the sacred ash on his forehead, his tuft of hair and silken garments. Secondly, he must satisfactorily perform the work of a Cakkiliyar — he must skin a dead cow and stitch a pair of sandals from the hide.

Muttuppaṭṭaṉ passes these tests and the marriage is performed, but that very night he goes out to protect Vālappakaṭai's cattle from cattle thieves. He kills them and, as he turns to wash his sword in the river, is stabbed in the back by one of the gang who had hidden himself in a bush. In the encounter, Muttuppaṭṭaṉ also stabs the robber and both of them die on the spot. Muttuppaṭṭaṉ's brides find his body on the river bank, sing a dirge for him, and finally join Muttuppaṭṭaṉ on the funeral pyre. All three become deities.

Though the story follows the general narrative pattern of death stories (violation—violence—deification) the violence here occurs not as a result of violation and, therefore, no revenge is taken. However, in all the death stories, death is always sudden, premature, violent and cruel.

In the story of Pūlaṅkoṇṭāḷ, the incident is suicide. Pūlaṅkoṇṭaḷ, a young Nāṭar (toddy-tapper caste) woman of a poor family jumps into an abandoned well with her two brothers and kills herself to escape abductors who had abducted her because their marriage proposal for her was rejected by her brothers. Transformed into a goddess, she takes revenge — killing her abductors, their families, and others who lent them assistance. The confused villagers decide to construct a

temple and worship her in a festival. So it would be seen that the one common factor in all death stories is violent death that transforms a man or woman into a violent god or goddess.

To sum up the discussion, death stories are set on earth, they are local histories of men and women who rise to the status of deities. The conflict in the stories lies in the violation of a social right or social order, this violation leads to violent death, deification, revenge and the establishment of a local cult.

There are some local variations in the stories. In some regions, particularly Nāñcil Nādu (present-day Kaṉṉiyā Kumāri district), the story of Muttuppaṭṭaṉ has been sung with a variation recorded in the palm-leaf manuscripts translated by Blackburn. The motif of substituted birth, or a divine origin prior to human birth, is introduced in this version. This lifts the narrative to the cosmological plane of Hindu mythology and links it with the Tamil variant of the myth of Skanda, the son of Shiva. According to the Tamil variation of the myth, to atone for the sin of killing the demon Sūrapadma, Skanda sends one of his commanders to meditate in Kailasha. There, his meditation is interrupted by two celestial nymphs whom he curses to be born on earth as Brahmins but to be brought up by Cakkiliyars. They in turn curse him to be born on earth and marry them. The meditator is then reborn as Muttuppaṭṭaṉ and the two nymphs are born to a Brahmin couple (Cuppukkuṭṭi Aiyar and Sundarākshi). The baby girls are abandoned and picked up by a Cakkiliyar couple (Vālappakaṭai and Vālā) and later married to Muttuppaṭṭaṉ.

Such mythic allusions lift the story above local history and the substituted birth blunts the critical thrust of the story since Muttuppaṭṭaṉ now marries not Cakkiliyars but Brahmins. Blackburn illustrates how the internal construction of the story goes against such a motif and also says that such changes were introduced, at least partially, to please higher-caste patrons who objected to cross-caste marriage (*Singing of Birth and Death Stories*, p. 143).

Another variation of this story is as follows: There was a Brahmin couple who had no child after many years of married life. One night, a cow fell into their manure pit in the backyard of the house and died. To atone for the sin, the Brahmin went on a pilgrimage to Kashi (Varanasi). By the grace of Lord Shiva, his wife became pregnant and delivered twin girls while he was still away from home. Fearing slander, the mother abandoned her children in a forest where they were picked up and brought up by Vālappakaṭai. This version of the story is available in the performance-text of Muttukkuṭṭippulavar, a bow-song singer, who admitted to Na. Vāṉamāmalai, who edited the Tamil compilation *Muttuppaṭṭaṉ Katai*, that he brought in this change in the text some twenty-five

years ago yielding to the pressure of the higher castes (Vāṉamāmalai, 1971: p. 15). The motif of substituted birth has also been inserted in the stories of Maturai Vīran and Kāttavarāyaṉ, in which the protagonists are untouchables, to remove reference to cross-caste marriage.

Let us now look at an example of birth stories and see how they are different from death stories. Here is the story of Sāśta:

When the gods and demons churned the ocean, *tiruppaṟkaṭal*, ambrosia, came up. The gods and demons quarrelled over sharing the ambrosia. At last, they approached Lord Kaṇṇaṉ (Vishnu) to settle the dispute. Kaṇṇaṉ asked the demons to sit in a row on his left and the gods on his right. He then served the ambrosia. He went down the row of the gods first and when all the gods had been served, there was no more ambrosia left for the demons. The demons were angry and turned against Kaṇṇaṉ, but the god took his powerful discus and flung it at them. The demons were driven back to Pātāḷam, the nether world. There Vallarakkaṉ was born to the demon couple Cakaṭaṉ and Cātmiki. By the age of five he had learned all the arts. He was crowned king of Pātāḷam, and married a girl named Nēcamuṟṟāḷ. Vallarakkaṉ was a cruel ruler. Although there had been no rain for twelve years, he exacted tributes from his people. There was no law and order. He also tried to take the women of his subordinate chieftains. These chiefs, joining together, vowed to kill him. They raised an army against Vallarakkaṉ and marched towards his palace. Sensing danger, Vallarakkaṉ started praying to Lord Shiva. Sitting on a needle fixed on a pole sixty feet high, he performed his *tapas* (meditation) with fire raging around him. Lord Shiva, unable to bear the heat of the *tapas*, sent Nandi to bring Vallarakkaṉ to Kailasha. Nandi came to Pātāḷam and took him to Shiva's abode. Vallarakkaṉ asked for a boon — the power to destroy anyone simply by pointing his thumb towards him. Shiva granted him the boon. On his way back to Pātāḷam, Vallarakkaṉ met Nārada who told him that Shiva had given him a false boon. So Vallarakkaṉ went back to Kailasha to test the power of the boon on Shiva. Seeing him again, everyone fled in confusion as Vallarakkaṉ chased after Shiva. Shiva, fleeing his devotee, reached a garden where he met Kaṇṇaṉ. Shiva requested him to kill Vallarakkaṉ. Kaṇṇaṉ first refused him, telling Shiva this had happpened far too often in the past. However, he finally gave in to Shiva's pleading and, transforming himelf into the beautiful Mōhini, appeared before Vallarakkaṉ. Vallarakkaṉ looked at her with amazement and fell in love with her. Responding to his suit for her hand, Mōhini told Vallarakkaṉ that he already had a wife at home, and if she (Mōhini) were to live with him, he must take a vow never to talk to his wife. Vallarakkaṉ agreed to this condition and, forgetting his own boon and trusting Mōhini's words, took the vow

pointing his thumb directly at his own head. As a result his head exploded and rolled into the sea. Kaṇṇaṉ went to Shiva and informed him that the demon was dead. Shiva wanted him to reveal the form in which he had appeared before the demon. So Kaṇṇaṉ appeared in the form of the beautiful Mōhini, which aroused Shiva's desire, and Sāśta was born out of the spilling of the semen.

The child received Shiva's boon at Kailasha and descended on earth on a mission to kill the buffalo-demon Mahishi. The maharaja of Pantalam in Kerala had no child after many years of married life. One day, when he was out hunting in a forest, he saw a baby lying in the shadow of a tree. He brought him to the palace and named him Maṉikaṇṭaṉ. When the child was twelve, he performed many wonders. He killed the demon Mahishi and then disappeared into the air. Thus Sāśta came to be worshipped in Kerala and temples to him were built at eighteen places, of which the temple at Sabarimalai is the principal shrine.

All birth stories follow this pattern. Unlike death stories, they are set in heaven and narrate the divine or mythic origin of gods and goddesses who descend on earth and perform miracles, inspiring people to construct temples for them.

In death stories, on the other hand, men and women on earth ascend to heaven through deification. The contrasting patterns of the two categories of stories are brought out in the following tables :

TABLE 1

	Birth Story	*Death Story*
Setting	Kailasha	Earth
Birth	Divine	Human
Conflict	Supernatural (deity *vs* demon)	Social (human *vs* human)
Death	None for the deity	Violent murder/suicide
Ending	Establishment of cult, building of temple, festival to placate deity	

TABLE 2

Kailasha

Birth Stories		Higher status	*Death Stories*		Lower status
	Birth ↓			Deification ↑	
	Boon ↓			Revenge ↑	
	Conflict ↓			Death ↑	
	Miracles ↓			Conflict ↑	
	Deification			Birth	

Earth

The gods who descend from heaven to earth are linked with the Hindu pantheon of gods, hence they enjoy a higher status in local custom. There are big and durable temple-complexes and icons of these gods; they receive regular *pujas* and are worshipped by all sections of the people. The gods who rise from earth to heaven are accorded a lower status. Their shrines are mostly an open platform (*pitam*), their icons are usually of clay, and they are worshipped only in particular regions by people of a clan, caste or village. These folk-gods are also to be found in the capacity of watch-gods in the temples of the Brahminical gods. It would seem disparities exist even among gods! □

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