"Variations in and of the Story
of the *Silappathikaram* (the *Epic of the Anklet*)"

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Many people consider the story of the *Silappathikaram* (the *Epic of the Anklet*), to be history. The ancient text of the *Silappathikaram* is written in verse. This text is attributed to Prince Ilango Adigal, and is linguistically dated as having been written approximately 1,600 years ago.

As is the case with many ancient stories that capture the imaginations of local people, some story episodes of the *Silappathikaram* have been modified, and some additional episodes have been added, by people in different locations in Tamil Nadu in their oral traditions.

Actually, the story existed in the oral tradition before it was written down: it is said that Prince Ilango Adigal wrote down the events of the story as they were told to him by eye-witnesses. In any case, the varying details of the different versions of the story tell us about people's different perceptions of the story.

This essay would consider some of the variations in story elements in different versions of the *Silappathikaram*, and what these variations might indicate. The essay would also consider some story elements of the *Silappadikaram* that appear in numerous other traditional Tamil stories.

The core of the *Silappathikaram* story is:

In the great port city of Poompuhar, on ancient south India's East Coast, Kannagi and Kovalan married. Kovalan saw Madhavi the dancer perform at court, and he went off with her. After approximately one year, Kovalan returned home. He and Kannagi walked to Madurai, a distance of about 250 km, to start a new life. There Kovalan was accused of stealing the local queen's anklet. As punishment, the local king (the Pandian king) put Kovalan to death. Kannagi came to the court and proved that her husband had been innocent of the crime of which he had been accused. She proved her husband's innocence in the following way: She broke open her remaining anklet, and rubies came out (these anklets were tubular, with precious stones inside). The queen's remaining anklet was broken open -- pearls came out. The anklet Kovalan had been trying to sell was broken open, and rubies came out. Thus it was seen that the anklet Kovalan had been trying to sell matched Kannagi's remaining anklet. The Pandian king realised he had done an injustice, and immediately punished himself by simply laying down and dying. Kannagi walked around the city three times, tore off her left breast, threw it against the city wall, and called for Agni, the god of Fire, to burn the city -- but for good people and animals to be able to escape. Agni did as requested. Kannagi wandered westward to the Western Mountains, where some people acclaimed her as a goddess.[1]

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[1] Additional background about the story can be found in Miller, 1991 and 2006.

Variations in the story

1
Kannagi was the daughter of the Pandian king. The court astrologer told the king that the king's daughter would be involved with the destruction of Madurai. The king ordered his men to take his infant daughter into the forest and kill her, but instead they took her to the ocean and put her in a basket which they pushed put to sea, and which was eventually plucked out of the water by a fisherman (Beck, 1972, p. 26). (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

2
The classical text states that Kannagi and Kovalan physically consummated their marriage, and took great joy in each other's loving embrace. An oral version states that they never physically consummated their marriage -- this version seems to treat Kannagi as an unapproachable goddess even at this point in the story (Beck, 1972, p. 25).

3
The classical text states that Kannagi and Kovalan were married for a number of years before they observed Madhavi's dance performance at the Chola king's court in Poompuhar. An oral version states that Kannagi and Kovalan observed Madhavi's dance performance on their wedding night (Beck, 1972, p. 24, 29).

4
Madhavi used a magic potion to attract and keep Kovalan (Beck, 1972, p. 29). (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

5
Kannagi sent a message to Kovalan, saying that she was dying. It was then that Kovalan returned home (Beck, 1972, p. 24). (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

6
Kannagi was such a devoted and selfless wife that one time when Kovalan was living at home with Kannagi but was still carrying on his relationship with Madhavi, Kovalan's leg was injured, but he wanted to visit Madhavi anyway. So Kannagi carried Kovalan in a basket on her head so he could meet with Madhavi. (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

7
Meenakshi, goddess of Madurai, warned Kovalan not try to sell Kannagi's anklet in Madurai (Beck, 1972, p. 31). (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

8
The Pandian king was hasty to punish Kovalan for stealing his wife's anklet, because he himself (the Pandian king) had been having an affair with a dancer and he wanted to do something to show his wife that he was concerned for her. (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

9
The court goldsmith in Madurai was in fact the person who had stolen the Pandian queen's anklet. This goldsmith not only accused Kovalan of stealing the Pandian queen's anklet, but also accused Kovalan of having an affair with the Pandian queen (Beck, 1972, p. 28). (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

10

In Madurai, after Kovalan was beheaded, Kannagi stitched his head back onto his body with a golden thread drawn by a silver needle. Kovalan came back to life. However, as time went on, Kovalan made it clear that he was still in love with Madhavi, and he continued to save the best food (especially mangoes) for Madhavi. As a result, at a certain point Kannagi pulled the thread, and Kovalan's head fell off and he died again. (This episode is narrated by Dr. C. Sumaresan and Dr. A. Ramanathan in the "Episodes in the Countryside" video recording at http://tinyurl.com/Kannagi-Places , beginning at 8:35.) (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

11

As mentioned, when Kannagi was speaking with the Pandian king, first the Pandian queen's remaining anklet was opened (pearls were found to have been inside); then the anklet Kovalan had been trying to sell was opened (rubies were found to have been inside). Some people say that when Kannagi threw her remaining anklet on the ground -- rubies came flying out, these rubies immediately burst into flames, and these flames burned Madurai. This version of the story seems to omit Agni's role in and responsibility for burning Madurai -- although it does provide a divine (or magical) beginning of the burning of the city. (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

12

When Madurai was burning, Kannagi was walking westward. Goddess Meenakshi rushed after her, and pleaded with Kannagi to stop the burning of Madurai. Kannagi finally agreed. This story presents Kannagi as a goddess who at this point was more powerful than goddess Meenakshi. (Please see the video recording at http://tinyurl.com/Kannagi-Places , beginning at 17:40.) (This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

13

There are various claims regarding where Kannagi walked to and settled after she left Madurai. The classical text states she went to Vanci. It is not clear exactly where Vanci was and is. Three other claims (from north to south) are: Valparai (Tamil Nadu), Kodungallur (Kerala), and Thekkadi / Kumili (on the Tamil Nadu / Kerala border). Regarding Valparai, the Mudhuvan tribal people believe: In the time of Kannagi, some of their male ancestors had been advisors to the Pandian king. These advisors told the king, "Kovalan is innocent, do not harm him". However, the king did not follow their counsel. Kannagi requested to Agni that good people should be allowed to escape the fire, so these advisors and their families were able to escape, and they walked with Kannagi towards the Western mountains. They walked to near Valparai, and there in the mountainous forest with Kannagi they founded a new tribe and village. The tribe came to be named as the Mudhuvan people. Mudhuvan people continue today to live in the forest near Valparai.[1]
(This is not mentioned in the classical text.)

14

One oral tradition is that Kannagi was a manifestation of goddess Kali, especially when Madurai was burning (Beck, 1972, p. 28). Another tradition is: After Kannagi had founded a village and tribe in the forest, she was wandering in the forest. Siva came and addressed Kannagi as goddess Shakti. Kannagi remembered her divine nature, returned to her form as Shakti, and ascended to heaven with Siva. This is in the 1941 movie, "Kannagi", by Jupiter Films. In contrast, the classical text states that

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[1] This story was told to me by the head man of a Mudhuvan village near Valparai, in 1989.

a divine chariot, in which the resurrected Kovalan was sitting, descended from the sky, Kannagi entered the chariot, and the chariot took them both up to heaven.

15
Following the burning of Madurai, goddess Meenakshi required a number of male members of Madurai's goldsmith community to be put to death on an annual basis, as a collective punishment. After many years, one man of the community sang so beautifully to the goddess, apologising and asking for forgiveness, that the community was forgiven and the punitive deaths ceased.

Commentary
In Prince Ilango Adigal's classic literary version of the story, Kannagi is a human woman throughout -- except perhaps at the end, when she is taken up to the heavens in a divine chariot with her now divine husband. A number of local folk modifications of and additions to the story present Kannagi as a goddess, or at least an agent of the divine, at various points in the story -- please see above, items 1, 2, 10, 11, 12, and 14. These are examples of the folk's tendency to interpret events in terms of the divine.

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Story elements of the *Silappadikaram* that are variations of themes found in numerous traditional Tamil stories

Three story elements that are found in the *Silappadikaram* and also in other Tamil stories are:
1) "A king punishes himself or his family members for misdeeds".
2) "A woman is miraculously served by nature due to her selfless devotion (her chastity) in relation to her husband".
3) "A woman in fury gets justice and becomes a goddess".

1) Story element: "A king punishes himself or his family members for misdeeds".

There was a Chola king, Manu Needhi Chola, who had a son. This son was driving his chariot recklessly, and it killed a calf. The mother of this calf, a cow, entered a town, rang the bell of justice (in those days there was a bell of justice near the centre of each town), and told what happened. The king put his son to death as punishment.

2) Story element: "A woman is miraculously served by nature due to her selfless devotion (her chastity) in relation to her husband".

Once there was a woman for whom water would form a large ball. She could carry this ball of water directly -- no container was needed. However, one time the woman thought impurely about a man other than her husband, and as a result the ball of water lost its shape and splashed to the ground.

3) Story element: "A woman in fury gets justice and becomes a goddess".

This character is very protective of her loved ones -- but if she feels violated, she wreaks tremendous destruction.

3A

Nalla Thangal (Good Sister).

Nalla Thangal was very close to her brother. Her brother married. She also married, and moved to a different village. One day, Nalla Thangal brought her two children to her brother's house, to visit him. Her sister-in-law (her brother's wife), said, "Your brother is not here. You and your children cannot come in. Go away." The sister went to a well, threw her children into it, and jumped in herself. A flood rose up out of the well, and washed away the entire village. Nalla Thangal became a goddess, and was worshipped.

3B

Isakki (also known as Neeli).

Isakki was impregnated by a man of the village. He denied it. Isakki went away, gave birth, and came back with the baby. The Panchayat leaders suggested that Isakki and the man she identified as the father of her child might sit and discuss the matter. They did so. The man continued to deny he was the father of the child. With her bare hands, Isakki tore the man's heart out of his chest. Isakki became a goddess, and was worshipped. (This story was told to me by Ms. S. Saraswati of Nagercoil).[1]

Commentary

Goddesses Kannagi, Nalla Thangal, and Isakki all began as women. When they felt grievously abused, they become infuriated and caused great civic destruction. A personal issue became a public social issue. However, even though these characters prevailed in their conflicts, they did not live as human beings very much longer. Rather, they were thought to enter divine realms, were acclaimed as goddesses, and were worshipped. In terms of human behaviour, it may be said they over-reacted regarding the destruction they wrought. However, it seems that in Tamil culture it is widely understood that these characters should not be judged by contemporary human standards, and also perhaps should not be directly imitated.

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Conclusion

Just as "No man is an island unto himself" (Donne, 1623), we can see from the variations cited in this paper that story elements in traditional stories also tend to not stand alone in isolation. Rather, these story elements may appear in variations -- within different versions of a story, and in numerous stories within a culture, woven into these stories in various ways that reflect the perceptions and beliefs of local individuals and groups.

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[1] Ms. S. Saraswati is a professional Villupattu artist, and she tells the story of Isakki as a Villupattu. Villupattu is a folk genre of storytelling which is performed by an ensemble consisting of a lead storyteller, a supporting speaker, and singers and musicians who provide musical interludes in the course of a story. Villupattu performances traditionally are often sponsored by temples at the times of festivals honoring particular diivine figures. A Villupattu performance often tells the story of a divinity who is then thought to be called into the bodies of some people present, although usually not the body of the lead storyteller.

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