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Essays on Tulu Oral Epics

Edited by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	VII
Note on Transcription and Transliteration.....	IX
Introduction	1
Three versions of the Kōṭi-Cennaya story collected in the 19 th century <i>Heidrun Brückner and Viveka Rai</i>	5
A Study of the Kōṭi-Cennaya Tradition <i>Vamana Nandavara</i>	41
Siri Epic Texts: Perspectives of Understanding <i>K. Chinnappa Gowda</i>	63
Siri in the Poetic World of Kargi Shedti: Selected Episodes and Comparisons <i>K. Ashoka Alva</i>	77
Three Unpublished Versions of the Siri Pāḍdana: An Analysis <i>Pauline Schuster-Löhlau</i>	109
Behind the Text: Performance and Ideology in a Tulu Oral Tradition <i>Peter J. Claus</i>	149
Editors and Contributors.....	171
Cultural Glossary.....	175

Introduction

Heidrun Brückner and Viveka Rai

The present volume studies three oral epic traditions in Tulu language (one of the Dravidian languages), which are living traditions in the Tulu speaking coastal districts of Karnataka up to the present day. All texts discussed here belong to the indigenous Tulu genre called *pāḍḍana*, which ranges from shorter invocatory texts of the local deities to texts of epic dimensions like the ones exhaustively studied here. *Pāḍḍanas* are also recited by women working in the paddy fields. A basic characteristic of a *pāḍḍana* is that it is sung or recited. In a ritual context, *pāḍḍanas* are mostly sung by male members of professional bardic castes who also impersonate the deities. Because these texts had been transmitted exclusively orally until the 19th century, when some of them were first reduced to writing, it is very difficult to assign their composition to a particular historical period. Linguistically, it can be observed that some archaic words are used in the *pāḍḍanas*. Some of these words, it seems, have become obsolete even in the 19th century, since, in the oldest transcriptions, some such words are explained by more common synonyms in brackets (see Brückner and Rai's contribution).

The social universe described in many *pāḍḍanas* may reflect a 16th- or 17th century late-medieval period, when petty rulers, like the Ballālas, who figure in the Kōṭi-Cennaya texts, administered small regions and struggled for dominance with one another. Lower-class heroes like the twins Kōṭi and Cennaya fought against them and tried to strengthen their own position, while, at the same time, they sought the rulers' patronage and support. In these texts, the combination of caste and traditional profession is subjected to dynamic change. The twin heroes, Billavas (biruva), whose caste profession was toddy tapping, opt for agriculture, which was considered the privilege of the upper castes like Ballālas, Baṇṭs and Jainas. But perhaps even more important for the twins' recognition and status were their extraordinary strength and fighting skills, almost a guarantee of success for the lords they fought for.

The texts presented and analysed here have been collected and partly published over a period of almost 150 years. The story of the heroic twins Kōṭi and Cennaya was reportedly first collected by the Basel missionary Herrmann Mögling in the mid-19th century. It was first printed as part of an unpublished collection by the Basel missionary August Männer in 1886. English translations of this and one more version were published posthumously from the papers of

A. C. Burnell by his friend R. C. Temple in *The Indian Antiquary*, Vols. 23–25, 1894–96.

Two papers in this volume are devoted to the story of the heroic twins, Kōṭi and Cennaya (Brückner and Rai; Nandavara), three to the Siri tradition with its strong focus on women (Gowda; Alva; Schuster-Löhlau) and one to the epic of Kōḍḍabbu, a Dalit hero with supernatural powers (Claus). Heidrun Brückner and Viveka Rai retrieve historical versions of the Kōṭi and Cennaya story collected and published in the 19th century in a colonial context. Vamana Nandavara makes accessible for the first time four epic texts of the same tradition that he recorded between 1988 and 1990. The two papers on the Kōṭi-Cennaya epic are complementary, one being archive-based and the other fieldwork-based. Vamana Nandavara's study not only provides information on the various ritual and other performance contexts, but introduces individual singers of different communities and their backgrounds. This throws new light on their respective renderings of the epic.

Chinnappa Gowda opens the Siri group of papers with a concise overview of the textual and performance traditions and the history of research. Ashoka Alva contributes a comparison of selected episodes of the Siri epic from published and unpublished sources. Pauline Schuster-Löhlau studies three hitherto unpublished versions of the text collected in the 1960s and 1970s, and presents selected portions in Roman transliteration and English translation.

Finally, the volume also contains a reprint of an important article by Peter J. Claus on Kōḍḍabbu (Kordabbu), the deified caste champion of the Muṇḍālas, a formerly 'untouchable' community about whom very little is so far known. The paper provides a long synopsis of Kōḍḍabbu's story and an in-depth analysis of the rituals during which he is worshipped and portions of his story are recited in different modes.

Contrary to the Kōṭi-Cennaya tradition, the epic of the Baṇṭ heroine, Siri, was not part of the old collections. In spite of the storyline being well-known to people from oral sources, it has come to be studied by scholars only since the 1960s and 1970s. It is a predominantly female tradition, both in its textual and its ritual dimensions, and this may be why it did not attract the attention of male European missionaries and colonial officials-cum-scholars. Women of different castes and communities know the epic. They are initiated into the cult and come together for the annual Siri festival rituals, where they get 'possessed' by different female characters in the epic. They interact by chanting lines from the epic in the first person as these characters. The male protagonists of the epic are not represented at all, except perhaps for Siri's son, Kumāra, whom she 'made *māya*' – that is, caused to vanish from the visible realm – when he was a small child. His name, Kumāra, is the designation of priests associated with the individual groups of women; the Kumāra priests also know the epic well.

The first publication, in 1998, of the entire text of the Siri epic along with an English translation was an Indo-Finnish venture, in which two of the contributors

to the present volume, Viveka Rai and Chinnappa Gowda, were involved. Starting as early as the 1960s, the American anthropologist Peter J. Claus was studying the Siri tradition. He published several papers on it, but not the texts that he had recorded. In this book, some of his materials have been retrieved. The German research scholar Pauline Schuster-Löhlau, to whom some of Claus' notebooks were made accessible, has undertaken a study of three versions of the Siri epic collected by him and provides excerpts of original passages in Tulu with English translations. Ashoka Alva published in 2009 a newly recorded text recited by the female *pāḍḍana* singer Kargi Shedti in Kannada transcription; for the present volume, he has contributed a paper comparing selected passages of this text to three other published versions and one unpublished one. His paper also makes parts of the Tulu texts available in English for the first time.

A major difference between the Kōṭi-Cennaya and Kōḍḍabbu traditions, on the one hand, and the Siri tradition, on the other, is that the first two are strongly related to particular communities to which the epic protagonists belong, i.e. the Billavas and the Muṇḍālas, whereas the Siri tradition is not community-based but, rather, based on gender. If we look closely at the Kōṭi-Cennaya epic as compared to the Siri epic, one point to be noted is the abundance of female life cycle rituals described in the Siri texts. The most elaborately described life-cycle rituals in the Kōṭi-Cennaya story are the ritual shaving as a puberty ritual for boys and the cremation of the dead heroes at the end. In the Siri epic, the corresponding puberty ritual for girls is found, along with many others, including engagement, wedding, pregnancy ritual and funeral ritual.

The Kōṭi-Cennaya and the Kōḍḍabbu stories share the motif of a child of lower status being brought up or reared in a landlord's family. However, this motif is more pronounced in the Kōḍḍabbu story. The hero's mother, orphaned as a small baby, is taken into the manor house. When she grows up she miraculously gets pregnant and has to undergo trials to prove that she did not have illegitimate relations with her master. Thanks to her power of truth, she survives the trials unharmed, and she gives birth to Kōḍḍabbu, who starts speaking to his mother right from the womb. When she dies giving birth to her child, her son, like her, is brought up in the manor house. He starts displaying unusual powers at a very young age. Like Kōṭi-Cennaya, he has encounters with people from different castes who do not show respect to him. Making use of his miraculous capacities, he humiliates them and makes them apologize to him.

Both Kōṭi-Cennaya and Kōḍḍabbu encounter other children and play games with them in which the other children cheat them. Thus, in the first part of the Kōṭi-Cennaya story, a young boy called Bāmalla Kumāra is sent into a well to retrieve a ball his playmates had thrown in. After he enters the well, they close the mouth of the well and plant a tree on it. Miraculously, his mother finds him and feeds him breast milk from above. This makes him grow so tall that he can get out of the well and return home. In the Kōḍḍabbu story, it is kings who consider the boy a threat to their power, conspire and request him to climb down into

a well which has not struck water. Despite his forebodings, he gets down into the well and they have the well shut with a big bolder. His shouts are heard by a young girl who, by her power of truth, makes the bolder crack. She lowers her saree into the well for Kōḍḍabbu to climb out. Despite having promised not to look at her, he does so inadvertently on his way up. The two of them ask each other's lineage and become brother and sister. They then disappear together into the invisible realm of *māya*.

Similar to this incident and to the trials undergone by Kōḍḍabbu's mother, the power of truth (*satya*) is invoked by most of the heroines in the three epic traditions studied in this book, most conspicuously by Siri. Concepts of Truth and Justice play a central role in these narratives. Whereas women invoke truth and proclaim justice in order to protect themselves against injustice and to activate miraculous powers (many examples in the contributions by Alva and Schuster-Löhlau), male heroes often fight against injustice in a more martial setting (instances of the invocation of justice by Kōṭi and Cennaya are quoted and discussed in Brückner and Rai's contribution).

The wealth of texts and versions reflected in this volume, allows, for the first time, to make systematic comparisons between different texts of the same tradition as well as between narrative elements and cultural concepts found in different traditions. Depending on their contexts, they may convey very different meanings. Small variations may give a completely different thrust to an episode, and similar stories may take an entirely different turn, as in the well incident just cited. Linguistic analysis, too, is just beginning to reveal possibly unique textual and narrative features in the respective traditions. Thus, it appears to be a special feature in all renderings of the Kōṭi-Cennaya story that the two protagonists at times switch over to first person direct speech, in both the singular and the plural, and often without any speech-markers (examples in Nandavara's and Brückner and Rai's contributions). In the recorded Siri epic texts, this narrative mode is not found, but it can be observed in the ritual interaction of the Siri groups.

The editors consider this book, which brings together for the first time Indian, European and American scholars working on Tulu oral epics, as a first step on these lines of investigation. We hope that this work will encourage further detailed studies and analyses of both the texts and rituals and their wider social and cultural significance and impact.