



ARTICLES

Gods, Gurus, and Ghouls: Jain and Hindu Bhakti in Medieval Tamil Literature

Nicholas Hom

Keywords: Hinduism, Jainism, Tamil literature, Bhakti, Ritual, Epic Poetry, Devotional Poetry, Performance Theory, Cilappatikaram, Kannaki

Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa

Vol. 47, Issue 1, 2023

Scholars have traditionally approached Jain devotional practices, or bhakti, as a “borrowing” from Hindu traditions. John E. Cort (2002) argues that this formulation of bhakti limits our understanding of Jainism’s role in the early development of bhakti within Indian religions. As the birthplace of bhakti, the literature of medieval Tamil Nadu offers rich evidence of how Jain and Hindu thinkers put their distinctive stamps on the emerging devotional landscape. This paper compares the role of bhakti in the fifth-century Jain narrative epic poems *Cilappatikaram* and *Nilakeci* as well as the sixth-century poetry of the Hindu poet-saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar. Drawing on the performance-centered approach to the study of religion described by Catherine Bell (1998), I argue that the Jain authors of *Cilappatikaram* and *Nilakeci* stress complex ritualistic actions as the correct performance of bhakti, while the poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar emphasizes a form of spontaneous and ecstatic devotion towards the Hindu god Shiva.

Introduction

Medieval texts from the Tamil-speaking region of South India depict a dynamic, religiously plural world with Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and others living and worshiping in close proximity.¹ This pluralistic landscape was grounded in *bhakti*, religious devotionism to a personal deity, which scholars historically have associated primarily with Hinduism.² In the medieval period in Tamilnadu, however, *bhakti* was not a monolithic category but rather a wide range of actions and attitudes towards the divine that was understood in different ways by these diverse communities.³ While archaeological and epigraphical evidence from this period demonstrates that adherents of these

1 I define “medieval” here as the period after the classical Cankam age of Tamil literature (first-century BCE to third century CE), which is also sometimes called the “Post-Cankam” age. For a detailed history of the periodization of Tamil Jain literature see Christoph Emmrich, “Camaṇakālam. Tamil Jains and Periodisation,” in *Cooperation, Contribution and Contestation: The Jain Community, Colonialism and Jainological Scholarship, 1800-1950*, ed. Andrea Luthle-Hardenberg, John E. Cort, and Leslie C. Orr, vol. 6, Studies in Asian Art and Culture (Göttingen, Germany: Hubert & Co., 2020), 517–50.

2 For example, Hermann Jacobi, one of the most important among the early Jain scholars, insists that image worship and, by extension, *bhakti* in Jainism was a borrowed practice from Hinduism. John E. Cort, “Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religion in South Asia,” *History of Religions* 42, no. 1 (2002): 59–86.

3 Tamilnadu is a cultural region of southern India wherein the Tamil language is spoken. Although sharing the same name as the modern-day state in the Republic of India, Tamil texts defined this region much more broadly than today. Early Tamil literature, such as the *Cilappatikaram*, define the borders of this ancient region as bounded by the Venkattam Hills (Tirupatti) in the north, by the ocean in the east and west, and by the Kumari Hill (Cape Comorin) in the South. Tamilnadu during this period consisted of three kingdoms: the Cola, the Pantiya, and the Ceral. Each book of the *Cilappatikaram* focuses on one of these kingdoms are named after their capital cities (i.e., “The Book of Pukar,” “The Book of Maturai,” and “The Book of Vanci”). R. Parthasarathy, “Introduction” in *The Tale of an Anklet: An Epic of South India*, trans. R. Parthasarathy (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 1–6.

traditions shared *bhakti*-oriented practices and ritual spaces, medieval Tamil texts cast these interreligious relationships in a more hostile and competitive light.⁴

Such texts frequently describe the many debates and miracle contests between Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists. Known as *sramanas* or “strivers (for liberation)” Jains and Buddhists rejected the authority of the Hindu texts known as the *Vedas* and engaged in contestations both with Hindus and among themselves.⁵ Further, Tamil Hinduism was fiercely divided between Shaivas, the devotees of lord Shiva, and Vaishnavas, who were devoted to lord Vishnu.⁶ Tamil Shaiva texts like Cekkilar’s *Periyapurāṇam* (twelfth-century CE) were written to respond to the critiques of both their main Hindu rivals, the Vaishnavas, and the *sramanas*.⁷ Interreligious attacks in literary sources between Hindu and *sramana* groups reveal how these groups mediated their perceived differences and how they defined themselves against their religious rivals.

John E. Cort argues that the scholarly dismissal of devotional orientations in Jainism ignores pertinent data indicating the central role of image worship in early Jain traditions, especially in Tamilnadu.⁸ In the standard academic history of this region, a new form of more public and enthusiastic *bhakti* developed in the middle of the first millennium CE in conscious opposition to highly ritualized Hindu traditions and the ascetic practices of Buddhists and Jains.⁹ This ecstatic *bhakti* movement was spearheaded by two groups of poet-saints: a Shaiva collective called the Nayanars and their Vaishnava counterparts, the Alvars, who sang hymns throughout South India as part of a “great Hindu revival.”¹⁰ Threatened by these popular devotional trends, Jain sects could not afford to lag behind their priestly caste Hindu and Buddhist rivals. Instead, these sects sought to acclimate to the changing religious landscape by adapting *bhakti* to fit their theology, which denied the immediate presence of the Jain

4 Christoph Emmrich, “Jainism in the Tamil-Speaking Region,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Jainism Online*, ed. John E. Cort et al., Handbook of Oriental Studies, South Asia (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2020), 359-64.

5 I use here the English definition provided by Peterson (1998). Tamil Shaiva polemics against these so-called “heterodox” groups parallel the attitudes of Brahminical sects throughout the rest of India during the Gupta period (fourth-sixth century CE). Indira V. Peterson, “Śramaṇas against the Tamil Way: Jains as Others in Tamil Śaiva Literature,” in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 165.

6 Peterson, “Śramaṇas against the Tamil Way,” 174-5.

7 Cekkilar, whose birth name was Arulmoli Devrār, was a minister under the Cola dynasty. The later compiler of Tamil Shaiva texts, Umapati, wrote that Cekkilar composed the *Periyapurāṇam* in response to the Cola king Anapaya’s love for the “heretical, lewd, and profane” Jain epic poem *Civakacintamani*. Peterson, “Śramaṇas against the Tamil Way,” 179; R. Nagaswamy, “Ganga-Kula-Tilaka” in *Kalbar (white water-lily): Studies in Art, Iconography, Architecture, and Archaeology of India and Bangladesh*, ed. Gouriswar Bhattacharya, Gerd J R. Mevissen, Mallar Mitra, Sutapa Sinha (New Delhi, India: Kaveri Books, 2007), 366-67.

8 Cort, “Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition,” 60-62.

9 Cort, “Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition,” 82.

10 Richard H. Davis, “The Story of the Disappearing Jains: Retelling the Shaiva-Jain Encounter in South India,” in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (New York: Routledge, 1998), 214-15.

deities in this universe.¹¹ However, scholars now argue that inscriptional evidence from Tamil Jain rock shelters (*palli*) points to a rich ritual culture of image worship shared and developed alongside Buddhists, Shaivas, and Vaishnavas.¹² Leslie C. Orr, for example, contends that medieval Tamil inscriptions, whether in Jain *palli* or Hindu temples called *mathas*, were incredibly similar in both language and purpose.¹³

This essay investigates the convergences and divergences of Jain and Shaiva *bhakti* following Cort's model of Tamil devotion. Cort argues that *sramanas* and Hindus disagreed with one another not about the efficacy of *bhakti*, but rather about its proper performance.¹⁴ Catherine Bell suggests that the language of performance in the study of religion emphasizes the qualities of ritual action and the execution of rituals by established codes of behavior.¹⁵ Bell proposes that a focus on performativity offers "a fresh awareness of human actors as active agents in cultural change rather than passive inheritors of a system who are conditioned from birth to replicate it."¹⁶ Building on Bell's insights, my first proposal is that sensitizing ourselves to the performative dimension of *bhakti* allows us to better appreciate contestations about its proper practice by Tamil Jains and Shaivas in the medieval period.

Now that we are familiar with the groups of human actors who were operating in the medieval Tamil religious landscape, we may turn our attention to its cast of divine actors. Tamil Jainism is distinctive from other regional variants of Jainism for worshiping both the *tirthankaras*, the twenty-four "ford-makers" who conquered the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*), and the *yaksis*, goddesses who are companions to the *tirthankaras*.¹⁷ Similarly, Tamil Shaivism incorporates goddesses as part of Shiva's divine play or "sport" (*lila*) and they act as the loving consorts to Shiva, who is often called the "erotic ascetic."¹⁸ Orr argues that medieval Tamil goddesses defied sectarian boundaries and could not be easily categorized as "Hindu" or "Jain."¹⁹ Furthermore, early sources depict Tamil women, especially those who exhibited chastity (*karpu*), as

11 Cort, "Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition," 63-4.

12 Emmrich, "Jainism in the Tamil-Speaking Region," 365.

13 Leslie C. Orr, "Jain and Hindu 'Religious Women' in Early Medieval Tamilnadu," in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (New York: Routledge, 1998), 191.

14 Cort, "Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition," 85.

15 Catherine Bell, "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 206.

16 Bell, "Performance," 209.

17 R. Umamaheshwari, "Yakṣī Worship among the Tamil Jains: Understanding a Relational Concept Within Popular Jainism," *Center for Jain Studies Newsletter* 4 (March 2009): 33-35.

18 Anne E. Monius, "Śiva as Heroic Father: Theology and Hagiography in Medieval South India," *The Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 2 (April 2004): 169-70; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1981).

19 Leslie C. Orr, "Identity and Divinity: Boundary-Crossing Goddesses in Medieval South India," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 1 (March 2005): 12.

possessing a feminine sacred power (*ananku*) which could potentially turn destructive if unrestrained.²⁰ *Karpu* imbued a chaste wife with immense spiritual powers, transforming her into a “Wife-Goddess” (*pattini-daivam*).²¹ Sources suggest that the ideal medieval Tamil woman spent her whole life practicing austerities to accrue and also control her sacred power, in the process earning the status of a chaste, devoted wife (*pativrata*).²² This essay focuses on three distinct episodes of Tamil women performing *bhakti*—from the fifth-century Jain epic poems *Cilappatikaram* and *Nilakeci*,²³ as well as the sixth-century Shaiva devotional poetry of the woman saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar—to advance a second proposal. I argue that where the Jain authors of *Cilappatikaram* and *Nilakeci* stress complex ritualistic actions as the correct performance of *bhakti*, the Hindu saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar emphasizes a form of spontaneous and ecstatic devotion towards Shiva.

Gods in *Cilappatikaram*

The first poem that I focus on is the Jain epic *Cilappatikaram* written by the prince ascetic Ilankoatikal, which presents an expansive vision of the cultural and religious landscape of medieval Tamilnadu.²⁴ The poem narrates the journey of a woman named Kannaki whose husband is falsely accused and executed for stealing the queen of Matuari’s anklet. Kannaki confronts the king and breaks open her anklet to reveal the rubies inside, as opposed to the queen’s anklet which contained only pearls. After realizing his error, the king accepts his mistake and commits suicide. Kannaki curses the city of Maturai, wrenches off her left breast, and hurls it over the city. The god of fire, Agni, appears before her and she orders him to burn the city. The tutelary goddess of the city consoles her by saying that her husband Kovalan was killed due to the negative karma of a previous birth and that in fourteen days Kannaki will be reunited with him in heaven. Kannaki wanders on the outskirts of the city before the god Indra greets and carries her on a celestial chariot into heaven, where she transforms into the goddess of chastity Pattini.²⁵ In this section, I argue that the author of the *Cilappatikaram* emphasizes the highly ordered and systematized nature of Kannaki’s ritual performance that leads to the destruction of Maturai.

20 George L. Hart “Women and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (February 1973): 236-7.

21 Vijaya Ramaswamy, “Chaste Widows, Cunning Wives, and Amazonian Warriors: Imaging of Women in Tamil Oral Traditions,” *Asian Ethnology* 69, no. 1 (2010): 133.

22 Ramaswamy, “Chaste Widows,” 247-8.

23 There is little scholarly consensus about *Nilakeci*’s date of composition, but most agree that it must have been written in the latter half of the first millennium CE. R. Umamaheshwari, whose study on the *Nilakeci* I reference the most in this paper, agrees with A. Chakravarti on a fifth-century date of composition. Umamaheshwari, R. *From Possession to Freedom: The Journey of Nili-Nilakeci*. New Delhi, India: Zubaan Books, 2018, 93-4.

24 Parthasarathy, *The Tale of an Anklet*, 2.

25 Parthasarathy, *The Tale of an Anklet*, 4-6.

Ilankoatikal repeatedly highlights Kannaki as a paragon of wifely devotion and compares her to other chaste wives from Hindu mythology such as Arundhati, Savitri, and Gandhari.²⁶ Modern scholars, however, argue about the precise nature of Kannaki's *karpū*. On the one hand, Vijaya Ramaswamy's study of women in Tamil oral traditions emphasizes the destructive nature of Kannaki's *karpū* and notes how the valorization of Kannaki's *karpū* has persisted to the present day.²⁷ On the other hand, James W. Schubert argues that it is not through Kannaki's power that Maturai is destroyed, but through the power of the cosmic order (*dharma*) which acts through her.²⁸ Schubert cites earlier Tamil poetry where women threaten to cut off their breasts when their sons run away from the field of battle to prove that Kannaki's breast is symbolic of the injustice that has been perpetrated against her. Kannaki has lost her ability to perform wifely devotion to her husband.²⁹ Whether or not the ritual action is performed through Kannaki's own power, both scholars agree that the action derives its power from the immensity of the wrongs committed against her by the king of Maturai.

Kannaki tearing off her breast and destroying Maturai should thus be understood as a ritual action with powerful resonances across Tamil culture and literature. In this moment, when the king has profoundly failed in maintaining justice and order in his kingdom, Kannaki's spiritual power supersedes the power of the king and she holds the fate of Maturai in her hands. The author of *Cilappatikaram* further emphasizes this regime change throughout the next book, "The Book of Vanci," which focuses on the exploits of the king Cenkuttuvan. Cenkuttuvan hears of Kannaki's apotheosis into the queen of chastity, Pattini, and goes to the Himalayas to get a stone with which to carve a new image of her. On the way, he conquers the northern kingdoms and becomes the new universal emperor (*cakravartin*).³⁰ Just as Kannaki had called upon the gods to exact justice, Pattini now appears to bless the new king's righteous rule. Thus, the text both highlights the duty of the king to protect and uphold the chastity of the women in his kingdom and the danger that ensues if he fails to uphold that primordial duty.

While Schubert appropriately highlights the symbolism of Kannaki's breast, I argue that he downplays her ritual agency in this scene. For Schubert, Kannaki's power comes from the "benevolent forces without rather than the dangerous forces within; it is not inherent in her but rather the result of the

²⁶ Parthasarathy, *The Tale of an Anklet*, 329.

²⁷ Ramaswamy, "Chaste Widows, Cunning Wives, and Amazonian Warriors: Imaging of Women in Tamil Oral Traditions," 133-35.

²⁸ James W. Schubert, "Death and Destruction in the Tamil Silappadikaram: What Is Really Behind the Flaming Breast of Madurai," *Literature East and West* 18, no. 2-4 (1974): 166.

²⁹ Schubert, "Death and Destruction in the Tamil Silappadikaram," 169-70.

³⁰ Parthasarathy, *The Tale of an Anklet*, 5.

way that she had lived and the goals to which she remained faithful.”³¹ I argue that this ascribes too much agency to the “cosmic order” and that Ilankoatikal actually suggests that it was through Kannaki’s own *karpu* power that she conducts the ritual. When Agni appears before Kannaki, the god asks Kannaki who shall be spared from the inferno and who shall perish.³² The envoi of Canto 21 further states, “As the fire of virtue burned the renowned Pandiyan [the king], his wives, palaces, ... the gods and deities of Maturai became invisible through their powers.”³³ It is through Kannaki’s “fire of virtue” (i.e., her *karpu*) that the city of Maturai is destroyed, not just through Agni’s powers. As Ilankoatikal states in this quoted passage, the incendiary flame of her *karpu* power is so great that even the other gods and deities take notice and attempt to flee from it. Kannaki’s breast is not just, as Schubert writes, useless “without her mate” but it is the centerpiece of her ritual performance.³⁴ In a study of another Tamil Jain epic poem, called the *Civakacintamani* (ninth-century CE), Ryan James states that breasts were described as *vem*, a Tamil word that could mean “desirable,” “hot,” “fierce,” or even “cruel.”³⁵ As the embodiment of her wifely devotion, Kannaki’s breast is inherently hot, so it is logical that Maturai is destroyed through this “fierce” heat. Instead of being purely symbolic of the wrong done to her as Schubert suggests, I suggest that Kannaki offers up her breast to Agni *in exchange* for the power to redress the wrongs done to her. In his comparative study of Jain and Hindu ritual cultures, Lawrence A. Babb states that this form of ritual transaction between god and worshiper (*dan*) is a fundamental pattern throughout South Asian religions, both in Jainism and Hinduism.³⁶ We shall see in the next section how ritual transaction operates in the context of a different Jain epic where a woman asks to gain intellectual powers rather than destructive ones.

Gurus in *Nilakeci*

The epic poem *Nilakeci* was written by an unknown Jain author around the fifth century (though the date is still a matter of debate).³⁷ This epic poem follows the journey of Nili, a *pey* (ghoul) who becomes a Jain philosopher, as she travels around Tamilnadu debating rival philosophical schools. While the story of *Nilakeci* picks up after Nili has become a *pey*, the story of her transformation into a *pey* illustrates a well-known trope in Tamil literature

31 Schubert, “Death and Destruction in the Tamil Silappadikaram,” 167.

32 Ilāṅkōaṭikal, *The Tale of an Anklet*, 21.67.

33 Ilāṅkōaṭikal, *The Tale of an Anklet*, 21.74-7.

34 Schubert, “Death and Destruction in the Tamil Silappadikaram,” 170.

35 Ryan James, “Erotic Excess and Sexual Danger in the *Civakacintāmaṇi*,” in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (New York: Routledge, 1998), 75.

36 Lawrence A. Babb, “Ritual Culture and the Distinctiveness of Jainism,” in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 157.

37 Umamaheshwari. *From Possession to Freedom*, 4.

and folklore.³⁸ Nili makes her first appearance in the *Cilappatikaram*, where she is a fierce and vengeful goddess located in Palaiyanur.³⁹ Scholar Barbara Schuler argues that later authors connected the two parallel strands of the *pey* Nili and the untamed ancient Tamil goddess by alluding to their shared *ananku* power.⁴⁰ I argue that it is by performing *bhakti* first towards her guru Muncantiran and then to the *tirthankaras* that Nili is able to complete her transformation from *pey* to philosopher.

While the bulk of the *Nilakeci* text describes Nili's debates with other rival schools, the author also inserts a frame narrative that explains how Nili developed from a fearsome *pey* to a Jain philosopher. The story begins with a Jain monk named Muncantiran observing several people from the nearby village bringing sheep and goats to sacrifice at the temple of the Hindu goddess Kali. Muncantiran dissuades them by leveraging his Jain belief in *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and convinces them to instead offer her clay models of goats and other creatures. The goddess Kali, upset at these substitutions, enlists the help of the *pey* Nili. Nili attempts to scare and seduce Muncantiran, but she is amazed by the Jain monk's ability to see through her various disguises. She ultimately apologizes to the monk and asks him to initiate her into Jainism, vowing to spend the rest of her life propagating Jain doctrine.⁴¹

Cort argues that Tamil Jain *bhakti* may have developed from the veneration of living mendicant gurus (*vandana*). The devotion that one showed to a living guru likely then expanded to include the veneration of deceased gurus, which eventually led to the deification of the founders of those guru lineages (i.e., the *tirthankaras*).⁴² Nili follows this same progression from veneration of living guru to deceased *tirthankara* in her journey. After her ordination into Jainism by Muncantiran, Nili travels to the shrine of a *tirthankara* where she propitiates the *tirthankara* in a variety of ways, including by offering flowers, sandal paste, lime, fragrant incense smoke, and songs.⁴³ Jain authors since at least the middle of the first millennium CE reference the offering of ornaments to icons of the *tirthankaras* for *puja* (worship). These ornaments were then left on the icon to enhance the visual impact of *darsana* (divine sight) between the worshiper and the deity.⁴⁴ In her study of miracles in Jainism and Buddhism,

38 Ramaswamy, "Chaste Widows, Cunning Wives, and Amazonian Warriors," 137.

39 R. Mahalakshmi, *The Making of the Goddess* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011), 116.

40 Barbara Schuler, "Tracing the Name Nili throughout Tamil Literature," in *Of Death and Birth: Icakkiamman, a Tamil Goddess, in Ritual and Story*, vol. 8, Ethno-Indology: Heidelberg Studies in South Asian Rituals (Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 54.

41 Umamaheshwari, *From Possession to Freedom*, 84-9.

42 Cort, "Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition," 81-2.

43 Umamaheshwari, *From Possession to Freedom*, 101.

44 John E. Cort, "God's Eyes: The Manufacture, Installation, and Experience of External Eyes on Jain Icons," in *Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions*, ed. Tracy Pintchman and Corinne G. Dempsey (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 48.

Phyllis Granoff argues that scholars often create a false dichotomy between an image and the divine being that it represents.⁴⁵ By beautifying the image, Nili offers up worship to the *tirthankara* who founded her intellectual tradition just as she worshiped her living guru, Muncantiran.

Much as Kannaki's ritual performance is highly ordered and hinges on a clear ritual transaction between worshiper and divinity, Nili addresses the *tirthankara* as the one who "stopped the influx of desires, who crosses the ocean of birth, death, and rebirth and destroys the cause of suffering for the benefit of all living beings" and asks for the *tirthankara*'s blessings for her debating journey.⁴⁶ Bell argues that a performance-centered approach to religion conveys the multiple ways in which ritual actions are meant and experienced, as well as how such multiplicity is vital to the efficacy of these rituals.⁴⁷ Nili's ritual performance exhibits a wealth of meanings beyond the exchange of blessings for worship in the form of hymns and offerings. Umamaheshwari points out that this is, perhaps, the first time that Nili offered worship instead of being worshiped by people out of fear.⁴⁸ Nili's ritual invocation to the image of the *tirthankara* serves as an important moment of self-reflection and transformation. Babb argues that encounters with the *tirthankara*'s image serve as an opportunity for ritualistic reflection that brings the worshiper closer to emulating the persona of the *tirthankara*.⁴⁹ Nili conducts an incredibly multifaceted ritual performance that serves both as an expression of her devotion to the lineage of her gurus and as an affirmation of her own agency on her path to becoming a Jain philosopher. With the ordered systems of ritual expression found in Tamil Jain texts in mind, we may now consider how the Shaiva saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar performs a radically different sort of spontaneous, ecstatic *bhakti*.

Ghouls in the Poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar

Like Nili, the Shaiva saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar holds the dual identities of *pey* and devotee. Traditionally considered among the sixty-three Nayanar *bhakti* poets, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's work was later collected as part of the *Tevaram* collection, which is now the most important canon of Tamil Shaiva works.⁵⁰ Her poetry is among the earliest examples of Tamil *bhakti* hymns dedicated exclusively to Shiva and draws extensively from both Tamil and Shaiva literary traditions. In her study of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Karen Pechilis contends that

⁴⁵ Phyllis Granoff, "Divine Delicacies: Monks, Images and Miracles in the Contest between Jainism and Buddhism," in *Images, Miracles and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions*, ed. Richard Davis (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 55–97.

⁴⁶ Granoff, "Divine Delicacies," 101.

⁴⁷ Bell, "Performance," 218.

⁴⁸ Umamaheshwari, *From Possession to Freedom*, 90–1.

⁴⁹ Babb, "Ritual Culture and the Distinctiveness of Jainism," 157.

⁵⁰ Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

this poet forges a new devotional path distinct from the *bhakti* traditions of her time and creates a new devotional subjectivity through the identity of “servant” to Shiva.⁵¹ Following Pechilis’ argument, I argue that Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s poetry centers around a different kind of *bhakti* than the Jain *bhakti* exhibited in *Nilakeci*. Whereas Nili’s *bhakti* is highly ordered and staid, Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s *bhakti* is predicated on her ecstatic encounters with the image of Shiva as the lord of dance, known as Nataraja.

Shiva’s dance appears in the oldest stratum of orally-transmitted Hindu texts, the *Vedas*, and on sculptures from the Gupta period (fourth-century to sixth-century CE).⁵² His dance is accompanied by a troupe of impish beings named *ganas* who play musical instruments while Shiva’s consort watches them or joins in the dance.⁵³ Similarly, the indigenous Tamil goddesses led a cohort of *peys* in a fierce dance, which they performed while eating dismembered corpses of the battle-field.⁵⁴ Karaikkal Ammaiyar notably does not mention any of the indigenous Tamil goddesses in her work, instead focusing on the devotional gaze of the consort of Shiva as she watches his dance.⁵⁵

Central to Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s devotional image of Shiva is his cosmic dance, which she situates in the cremation ground, a landscape known to be populated by *peys*. For her, the cremation ground is where life’s impermanence and the path to salvation through Shiva are revealed.⁵⁶ Unlike other Shaiva groups who emphasize controlled ritualistic performances in the cremation ground, Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s poetry celebrates the unscripted encounter between herself and the elegant dancer Shiva in this site’s chaotic wilderness.⁵⁷ I suggest that the way that Karaikkal Ammaiyar employs *pey* imagery in certain sections of the *Tevaram* exemplifies spontaneous *bhakti* encounters between worshipers and Shiva. For example, she describes how “the female *pey* has sagging breasts and bulging veins...she lingers, howling, at the cremation ground.”⁵⁸ Karaikkal Ammaiyar goes on to describe how Shiva dances effortlessly and with unbroken concentration despite the harshness of his

51 Karen Pechilis, “Affect and Identity in Early Bhakti: Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār as Poet, Servant, and Pēy,” in *Bhakti and Power: Debating India’s Religion of the Heart*, ed. John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019): 25–6.

52 Elaine Craddock, “Kali Dances into the Cremation Grounds of the Tamil Land,” in *Regional Communities of Devotion in South Asia: Insiders, Outsiders, and Interlopers*, ed. Gil Ben-Herut, Jon Keune, and Anne E. Monius, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 37.

53 Craddock, “Kali Dances into the Cremation Grounds of the Tamil Land,” 37–8.

54 Mahalakshmi, *The Making of the Goddess*, 53.

55 Craddock, “Kali Dances into the Cremation Grounds of the Tamil Land,” 39.

56 Craddock, “Kali Dances into the Cremation Grounds of the Tamil Land,” 39–40.

57 Pechilis, “Affect and Identity in Early Bhakti: Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār as Poet, Servant, and Pēy,” 34.

58 Karaikkal Ammaiyar, “Tiruvallankattut Tiruppatikam, Sacred Decade of Verses on Tiruvallankatu – 1” in *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India*, trans. Karen Pechilis. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 1.1–7.

environment.⁵⁹ Karaikkal Ammaiyar thus sets up a contrast between the idleness of the *peys* and the vigor of Shiva's dance. Karaikkal Ammaiyar brings this idea to its culmination at the end of this section when "the *pey* of the incomparable lord gather, clap one another, and join in a resounding cry."⁶⁰ The once lingering, wild *peys* of the cremation ground have now joined in Shiva's dance and become his servants. While Nili transforms from *pey* to philosopher, Karaikkal Ammaiyar transforms the *pey* identity itself such that one may simultaneously be a *pey* and a devotee of Shiva.

Bell suggests that a performance approach is alert to the ways in which people manipulate traditions to construct an empowering understanding of their world.⁶¹ Pechilis notes that Karaikkal Ammaiyar emphasizes in her poetry that devotion to Lord Shiva outweighs actions and their consequences (karma) that trap people in the cycle of death and rebirth. Regardless of one's gender, caste, socio-economic status, or occupation, liberation is always possible for those who become Shiva's servants.⁶² Karaikkal Ammaiyar's sense of "servant" builds upon and revises traditional courtly associations to imagine a community of devotees, equal in their loyalty and love for their master.⁶³ Rather than having the *peys* journey to a temple of Shiva and perform their worship there, the poet has Shiva appear in the *peys'* abode so that they may worship him in a performative grammar that they can immediately understand (i.e., their dance). Just as every living being may be liberated from the cycle of rebirth through intellectual self-reflection and debate in *Nilakeci*, Karaikkal Ammaiyar argues here that living beings are saved only through their devotion to Shiva, without the need for complex rituals. The precise nature and structure of this ritual performance is less important than the devotional feelings that it provokes in the worshiper through their encounter with the divine.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar and the author of *Nilakeci* both describe the salvific power of *bhakti* to transform *peys* into servants of Shiva and Jain philosophers respectively. However, neither of these new identities completely erases their former *pey* identity. One example of Nili's *pey*-ness breaking through occurs in her debate with Picacakan, a Materialist (*Lokayata*) who doubts the existence of supernatural beings. When Picacakan asks Nili to reveal her true *pey* form, Picacakan reacts to seeing her *pey* form by falling unconscious. In Umamaheshwari's rendering of this episode, Nili "held him up and, comforting him, said, don't be afraid, that *pey* was that of your beloved

59 Karaikkal Ammaiyar "Tiruvallankattut Tiruppatikam," 1.8-11.

60 Karaikkal Ammaiyar "Tiruvallankattut Tiruppatikam," 11.1-3.

61 Bell, "Performance," 217.

62 Karen Pechilis, "The Poet's Vision" in *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 46.

63 Pechilis, *Interpreting Devotion*, 50.

mother.”⁶⁴ By reverting to her *pey* form to prove a point of Jain doctrine (i.e., that supernatural beings exist), Nili successfully demonstrates that she is still the same being that she was before her instruction by Muncantiran as well as a Jain philosopher. Karaikkal Ammaiyar, by contrast, never uses her *pey* form to prove a point of Shaiva doctrine, but that does not affect the larger devotional portrait of Shiva that she is drawing. Even though Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Nilakeci are both *peys*, they each have their unique devotional paths that will lead them to liberation.

Conclusion

This essay explores the convergences and divergences between Jain and Shaiva attitudes towards *bhakti* in medieval Tamil literature through a focus on the Jain epic poems *Cilappatikaram* and *Nilakeci* and the devotional poetry of the poet-saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar. This essay follows the less sectarian model of *bhakti* proposed by Cort that emphasizes *bhakti* as a more wide-ranging religious orientation that suffuses all Tamil traditions. I argue that *Cilappatikaram* and *Nilakeci* center their protagonists’ controlled ritual performances of devotion while Karaikkal Ammaiyar emphasizes uncontrolled *bhakti* performances towards Shiva. By understanding these ritual performances through the theoretical framework of performance theory, we can better appreciate how these authors both shaped and responded to their cultural and literary landscapes as well as the role of women’s ritual actions in medieval Tamilnadu. In addition, the forces of a woman’s *karpu* and *ananku* are integral to interpreting their ritual actions as shown in *Cilappatikaram* with Kannaki’s destruction of Maturai, or in *Nilakeci* with Nili’s transformation into a Jain philosopher. Through their *bhakti* performances, these women transgress the boundaries of worshiper and god, student and guru, philosopher and ghoul.

Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the generous support of my mentor Amy L. Allocco, the Center for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society, the South Asian Research Group at Elon (SARGE), the editors from JTAK, and my close friends and family who graciously read over (and over and over) this essay until it was ready for publication.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license’s legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

⁶⁴ Umamaheshwari, *From Possession to Freedom*, 154.

REFERENCES

- Babb, Lawrence A. 1998. "Ritual Culture and the Distinctiveness of Jainism." In *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, edited by John E. Cort, 139–62. New York: Routledge.
- Bell, Catherine. 1998. "Performance." In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 205–24. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Cort, John E. 2002. "Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religion in South Asia." *History of Religions* 42 (1): 59–86. <https://doi.org/10.1086/463696>.
- . 2016. "God's Eyes: The Manufacture, Installation, and Experience of External Eyes on Jain Icons." In *Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions*, edited by Tracy Pintchman and Corinne G. Dempsey. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Craddock, Elaine. 2020. "Kali Dances into the Cremation Grounds of the Tamil Land." In *Regional Communities of Devotion in South Asia: Insiders, Outsiders, and Interlopers*, edited by Gil Ben-Herut, Jon Keune, and Anne E. Monius, 1st ed., 31–53. New York: Routledge.
- Davis, Richard H. 1998. "The Story of the Disappearing Jains: Retelling the Shaiva-Jain Encounter in South India." In *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, edited by John E. Cort, 213–23. New York: Routledge.
- Emmrich, Christoph. 2020a. "Camaṇakālam. Tamil Jains and Periodisation." In *Cooperation, Contribution and Contestation. The Jain Community, Colonialism and Jainological Scholarship, 1800-1950. 515-550: Studies in Asian Art and Culture*.
- . 2020b. "Jainism in the Tamil-Speaking Region." In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Jainism Online*, edited by John E. Cort, Paul Dundas, Knut A. Jacobsen, and Kristi L. Wiley, 34:353–69. Brill Publishers.
- Granoff, Phyllis. 1998. "Divine Delicacies: Monks, Images and Miracles in the Contest between Jainism and Buddhism." In *Images, Miracles and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions*, edited by Richard Davis, 55–97. Boulder Colorado: Westview Press.
- Hart, George L., III. 1973. "Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad." *Journal of Asian Studies* 32 (2): 233–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2052342>.
- Ṭaṇkōvaṭikaḷ. 2004. *The Cilappatikāram: The Tale of an Anklet*. Translated by R. Parthasarathy. Penguin Books India.
- James, Ryan. 1998. "Erotic Excess and Sexual Danger in the Cīvakaśintāmaṇi." In *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, edited by John E. Cort, 67–84. New York: Routledge.
- Mahalakshmi, R. 2011. *The Making of the Goddess: Korravai–Durga in the Tamil Traditions*. Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Monius, Anne E. 2004. "Śiva as Heroic Father: Theology and Hagiography in Medieval South India." *Harvard Theological Review* 97 (2): 165–97. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0017816004000653>.
- Nagaswamy, R. 2007. "Ganga-Kula-Tilaka." In *Kalhar (White Water-Lily): Studies in Art, Iconography, Architecture, and Archaeology of India and Bangladesh*, edited by Gouriswar Bhattacharya, Gerd J.R. Mevissen, Mallar Mitra, and Sutapa Sinha, 365–69. New Delhi, India: Kaveri Books.
- O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. 1981. *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Orr, Leslie C. 1998. "Jain and Hindu 'Religious Women' in Early Medieval Tamilnadu." In *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, edited by John E. Cort, 187–212. New York: Routledge.

- Pechilis, Karen. 2000. *The Embodiment of Bhakti*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- . 2011. *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- . 2019. "Affect and Identity in Early Bhakti: Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār as Poet, Servant, and Pēy." In *Bhakti and Power: Debating Indian's Religion of the Heart*, edited by John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Peterson, Indira Viswanathan. 1989. *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints*, 3–76. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400860067>.
- . 1998. "Śramaṇas against the Tamil Way: Jains as Others in Tamil Śaiva Literature." In *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, edited by John E. Cort, 163–86. New York: Routledge.
- Ramaswamy, Vjiaya. 2010. "Chaste Widows, Cunning Wives, and Amazonian Warriors: Imaging of Women in Tamil Oral Traditions." *Asian Ethnology* 69 (1): 129–57.
- Schubert, James W. 1974. "Death and Destruction in the Tamil Silappadikaram: What Is Really behind the Flaming Breast of Madurai." *Literature East and West* 18 (2–4): 166–70.
- Schuler, Barbara. 2009. "Tracing the Name Nīli throughout Tamil Literature." In *Of Death and Birth: Icakkīyamman, a Tamil Goddess, in Ritual and Story*, *Ethno-Indology: Heidelberg Studies in South Asian Rituals*, 27–54. Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Umamaheshwari, R. 2009. "Yakṣī Worship among the Tamil Jains: Understanding a Relational Concept Within Popular Jainism." *Center for Jain Studies Newsletter* 4 (March): 33–35.
- . 2017. *From Possession to Freedom: The Journey of Nīli-Nīlakeci*. 1st ed. New Delhi: Zubaan Books.