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Deification in Tamil Culture – The Case of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci (The Ascetic with a Chain)¹

Abstract

This article analyses the cult of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci or the Ascetic with a Chain as observed by the author during her research in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. The analysis of this continually evolving cult leads the author to more general reflections on deification in Indian culture, especially to the identification of liminality as the primary condition for deification. Like other deified groups (e.g. fallen warriors, widows who committed ritual suicide), Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci has a borderline existence and his death violates the natural ending of human life. The author demonstrates that stories about Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci can be interpreted as a myth about the trickster whose power is rooted in his liminal position and at the same time inextricably linked to transgression. Using Tamil religious terminology, Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci is qualified as a typical *ciru tēyvam* ('small god') of terrestrial origin who operates on the borderline between the worlds of humans and gods.

The paper attempts to interpret the cultural and religious phenomenon of the constant openness of the Hindu pantheon to certain human beings. The cult of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci (The Ascetic with a Chain) seems to be a good example here. It is a local cult, popular primarily among non-Brahmin castes in rural areas of northern Tamil Nadu (Northern

¹ This paper is a result of considerations which constituted the subject of my PhD thesis. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Professor Maria Krzysztof Byrski for the time he devoted to me and his inexhaustible patience and the many valuable comments on my work that he provided.

This paper is an English version of a speech delivered under the same title at the conference "India in Warsaw" organised to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the post-war history of Indological studies at the University of Warsaw (22-23.04.2004). I do not refer in it to E. Masilamani-Meyer's book *Guardians of Tamilnadu: Folk deities, folk religion, Hindu themes*, Halle: Franckesche Stiftungen zu Halle, Bd.5, 2004, which I only read after completing my paper. This seminal book has a sub-chapter on deification entitled *Deified Ancestors: Between Wilderness and Settled Space*, pp. 75-83. Although it does not directly discuss the cult of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci, which is the subject of my study, our respective conclusions based on different source materials are similar on a number of points, a fact I have noted with considerable satisfaction.

and Southern Arcot, Tiruvannamalai) and focused on the figure of a wandering ascetic who, according to handed-down tales, taught in the area approximately 170 years ago. He owes his name of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci, or the Ascetic with a Chain, to his characteristic ascetic practice which involved girding his body with a red-hot iron chain. The main site of his worship is his tomb – *samādhi* – with the whole area of his cult marked with *caṇṇiyācikkals*, or stones of an ascetic. These natural slabs with magic symbols (Tamil *yantiram*; Sanskrit *yantra*) give protection against evil powers and ensure prosperity.

The materials for this paper were collected during field work conducted from 1990 to 1993 and in 1998. I recorded oral tales, religious devotional songs, as well as ritual events. I also localised and investigated, from an iconographical and anthropological point of view, several dozen stones which serve as physical objects of the cult. To analyse the issue as a whole, it seemed necessary to take a number of research approaches. The cult of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci, not yet described in the literature, was captured here *in statu nascendi*, which makes it valuable material for the discussion of deification as a cultural phenomenon. What is shown here is the process of deification rather than its result.

Characteristically enough, Hinduism lacks an unambiguous, precise distinction between divine and earthly things. The elements which constitute the spheres of the sacred and the profane keep affecting, complementing, and permeating each other (cf. Das 1979). It is, therefore, not easy for a researcher to classify a figure unambiguously as a deity or just as an important deceased person still vividly remembered in the local tradition. It is equally difficult to determine groups and areas where the cult is active. It seems, nevertheless, worthwhile to find criteria which predestine to deification.

Examples from Tamil Nadu and from the whole of India confirm that individuals to be venerated are those who died a sudden, often violent, death, in contrast to those whose death was a natural ending of the whole path of life (Blackburn 1985). The chosen group consists primarily of warriors fallen in battle, widows who committed ritual suicide after the death of their husbands, as well as victims of crime and accidents. The objects of the cult of these persons are stones which also constitute places of worship and clearly mark the cult's location (on the memorial stones, see Settar, Sontheimer 1982; cf. also Świdzińska 2003).

What has prompted me to place Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci in this context? Was it only a striking similarity of the forms of his cult, i.e. the presence of stones of the ascetic beside those of warriors and faithful wives?

It might seem that Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci fails to meet the precondition for deification which is a sudden and violent death. The ascetic wields power over death. His departure from the world is not caused by external circumstances (even indirectly, as in the case of suicides). Instead, the ascetic himself chooses the moment of departure from his physical body.

And yet, a closer analysis has prompted me to propose a thesis about a common concept underlying these, seemingly contradictory, kinds of death. I assume that liminality, or borderline features, is the key characteristic of the group under discussion. The death of an ascetic, like the deaths mentioned above, disturbs the natural course of life leading

to death from old age; such an unnatural death undermines the order of things and brings chaos and endangerment characteristic of structure-disturbing situations (Douglas 1966: 106). In Tamil folk beliefs, people who died in this way constitute a special group, whose members, defying the teachings of transmigration and liberation, remain in a state of suspension, in the area *betwixt and between* or the *limen* as it was described by A. van Gennep (1960) and V. Turner (see e.g. Turner 1970). They belong fully neither to the world of gods nor men, and act as intermediaries between the two universes, similarly to Roman Catholic saints. Christian theology also knows the concept of the intermediate sphere: St. Thomas Aquinas holds that eternity (*eternitas*) and time (*tempus*) are divided with a passage, a transition stage of “now” (*aevum*), which is the domain of saints (cf. Buchowski 1993: 86-87).

However, it is necessary to note that a virtuous, exemplary life is not a necessary condition for deification. Deified persons include criminals who died violently, as well as women who died on a funeral pyre following their lovers who were not their husbands (this concerns primarily women who broke the customary taboo by uniting themselves with a member of another caste) (on “criminal gods” and ballads glorifying “criminals”, see Hiltebeitel 1990; Shulman 1985: 340-379; Arunachalam 1976: 187-193).

Is, therefore, the kind of death the only factor of importance?

In Tamil religious beliefs, most of the deified characters already entered the border space, with its indefinite, non-homogenous structure, during the course of their lives. Warriors are active on external territories of that area which constitute a buffer zone; they also invade alien territories. Highly conventional *caṅkam* poetry, which is the oldest known literature in Tamil (approx. 1st-4th century A.D.), presents valiant heroes struggling in wild mountains (*kuṟiñci*) and dreadful desolate areas (*pālai*). After their death, the heroes are commemorated with stones and venerated with daily ceremonies which are equivalent to *pūjās*, celebrated in small non-Brahmin temples (cf. Świdzińska 2003: 581).

A wandering ascetic is a person who, after rejecting the world of systematised values, transgresses alien territories, never belonging to any of them.

The kinship of the characters of a warrior and an ascetic manifests itself in the fact that *vīrya* (a warrior's attribute) is one of the characteristics needed by a *yogin* (Reiniche 1971: 168). Hardly accessible, wild border areas are inhabited by hunting tribes.² As was correctly noted by F. L'Hernault, a hunter combines the features of a warrior and an ascetic, as he rambles through non-civilised areas and takes them in his possession. Indian tradition here supplies an excellent example with *Kirātārjunīya*. The mountain hunter Śiva enjoys his trade in the wood in which Arjuna devotes himself to ascetic practices in order to obtain almighty weapons (L'Hernault 1978: 124-125).

Memorial stones in Tamil Nadu are located mostly in deserted borderline areas, commemorating warriors and hunters who did not return from their solitary wanderings.

A suttee (Tamil *catī*), being the third member of the group of most often deified characters, does not transgress her space in the physical sense. However, the death of her

² *Kuṟiñci* is inhabited by hunters – *kuṟavars*, while *pālai* is the domain of wild highwaymen-hunters.

husband places her between two orders. On the one hand, she becomes a widow who is bound to live on the outskirts of the community. On the other – her heroic decision lets her retain the status of wife, which is the embodiment of prosperity.

Let us see whether liminality is the key characteristic of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci, who is the subject of this research.

In the holy topography of a village, gods of human origin are associated with borders between localities and temples, or they act as guardians of other gods (on the guardian gods in popular Hinduism; cf. Hildebeitel 1990). Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci can also be classified as a guardian deity. According to believers, he perambulates their villages by night, protecting them against evil powers. However, his attribute is not the *arivaḷ* – a sickle wielded by the majority of fearsome guardian deities, but a chain, which shows that he prefers ascetic ways to military methods. Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci, who guards the borders of villages, operates on the borderline between the worlds of fixed cultural values and of dangerous nature which proliferates outside.³ Paradoxically enough, a wandering ascetic, a newcomer, becomes a guarantor who, in the moment of crisis when the safety of village and its residents is threatened, ensures that they stay away from the untamed forces of the external worlds and preserves the undermined peace and order. Similarly to other ascetics, Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci is perceived as a person who does not belong wholly to any place, and as such he can be recognised simultaneously as a guardian deity of a specific domain and as a stranger.

Interlocutors⁴ evidently emphasise that Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci was a stranger who came from faraway unknown lands. He is also described as Lāṭa Caṇṇiyāci. Lāṭa is a country in the northern part of Deccan whose name is used in everyday Tamil to describe a mysterious, unknown land, a home of magicians and *yogins* (Winslow 1976: 105). The word *lāṭam* appears also in combination with a chain. *Lāṭacaṅkili* is one of the attributes of ascetics from Lāṭa. The magic signs on stones are also said to be written in *lāṭa*. Some stories about Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci refer to specific geographic locations, such as Orissa or Karnataka. However, the context proves that the names are used as metaphors of faraway, unknown and strange places.

The Ascetic with a Chain has rejected his caste membership and for this reason he can maintain relations with all kinds of people. At the same time, he is an intermediary between the world of people and the world of gods. Stories about him can be interpreted as myths about the trickster – a prominent figure in many folk traditions and literatures who plays a variety of roles. The trickster appears as a trickster in the strict sense of the word, a practical jokester, clever and deceptive. He is a culture hero, who brings

³ I discussed the role of borders in the cult and role of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci as a guardian of village boundaries in my speech at the Annual Conference of the International Society for Tamil Studies, Kodaikanal 1993. A summary is included in conference materials issued in 1993. For the unabbreviated text, see Świdzińska 1997.

⁴ I used the term “interlocutor” on purpose. Every researcher conducting field work in Tamil Nadu is well aware that the difference between persons collecting information and their respondents is rather questionable. Any newcomer becomes the focus of the attention of a group, and he usually has to cope with a crossfire of questions, before he can start collecting the data which he needs.

knowledge of cultural skills and, last but not least, he is a transformer who changes the often chaotic original world into the present one (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica. Micropaedia* 1978: 10:119:b; see also Mielecinski 1981: 221-239; Carroll 1981; Carroll 1984). His extraordinary magical power and wisdom combined with his cunning typical of a trickster allow him to use methods which frequently violate the values of behaviour adopted in the world of his believers. The Ascetic can eat beef, which turns into lotus flowers in his mouth, he can drink spirits, smoke *gañjā* or cigarettes, and use dirty language. His behaviour is clearly of a transgressive nature (on transgression in Hinduism, see e.g. Visuvalingam 1990). He is situated above the division between the allowed and the forbidden, which functions in the world of men, but is irrelevant in the world of gods. Although the use of stimulants is known to lower Tamil castes (some of them can even eat beef), it is noteworthy that this motif is common to the story of Caṅkili Caṅṇiyāci and it also appears in ritual pantomimes. Such pantomimes are staged in M. Pudur village in North Arcot, Sengam taluk, in the month of *āṭi*, beginning in the dark half of the year (*dakṣiṇāyana*) and related, among other things, to ascetic practices. A man, chosen from among the residents, impersonates (Tamil: *vēṣam*) Caṅkili Caṅṇiyāci and grants to people favours for which they have prayed. Throughout the whole performance the character ostentatiously smokes a cigarette. Even when the believers adore him, while he keeps throwing holy ashes (*vibhūti*) on them, he does not take the cigarette out of his mouth. The generally adopted taboos are similarly reversed in the story of the miraculous healing of a landlord's wife, suffering from paralysis of hands and legs. This story introduces the motif of saliva as a healing agent. The saliva of common people is as impure as all other physical excretions, while the saliva of ascetics has purifying properties (on this concept, see Skyhawk 1999: 191-192).

The motif of the miraculous healing of humans and animals and the seemingly opposite motif of inflicting diseases, disability and death are among the most common elements present in the stories about the life and deeds of Caṅkili Caṅṇiyāci.

Then relations of the Ascetic with village residents depend primarily on the attitudes of the people and manifest themselves mostly in the context of disease and healing. They occur on two levels: individual and social.

The motif of a devoted believer, rewarded by the Ascetic with health, and a scoundrel-disbeliever, who is punished with sudden physical disability, appear repeatedly on the individual level.

The Ascetic with a Chain often intervenes in cases of infertility. The stories emphasise that only Caṅkili Caṅṇiyāci is able to find a remedy and they list a number of varied methods used prior to his interference in order to emphasise the power of the Ascetic even more. People who doubt it suffer from various discomforts and disabilities, which are removed when the mocker recognises the true nature of Caṅkili Caṅṇiyāci and joins the group of faithful disciples. In one of such stories, Caṅṇiyāci wanted to stay overnight in the house of a rich landlord. The host thought that the Ascetic was a beggar, beat him and ordered him out. Immediately, the unkind man lost his speech and the strength in his hands. The family of the villager begged the Ascetic to lift the disabilities, explaining

that the farmer was unaware of the nature of his visitor. The Ascetic withdrew the curse when the villager himself beseeched him humbly.⁵

The unfair host not only violated the principle of hospitality (on the obligation of hospitability, cf. Basham 2000: 214), but, still worse, behaved wrongly towards a person who was not an ordinary human being. Characteristically enough, the punishment meted out by Caṅṇiyāci affected the organs which were directly involved in the blasphemy – the mouth which uttered foul words and the hand which was raised against the Ascetic.

On the social level, Caṅṇiyāci is the saviour of the whole village. He appears at times of crisis – the most common instances are cholera or cattle plague – and he puts an end to the disease.

Ethnographical works on Southern India emphasise that the role of inflicting and lifting plagues is mostly ascribed to goddesses (Whithead 1988: 31-32; Elmore 1984: 13).⁶ The place of Caṅṇiyāci in the Tamil pantheon is determined by his relations with other gods. The Ascetic with a Chain does not replace any goddess inflicting plagues, but he rather seems to be an intermediary between the goddess and men, whom he teaches ways to stop divine anger. The rituals used by him are repeated during every epidemic and are also celebrated by way of prevention at every cyclic festival devoted to him. The main attributes during celebrations are *kuṛaṭu* – tongs used to remove diseases (on the role of tongs in healing rituals, cf. Briggs 1990: 127), a chain, and stones with *yantras* which keep the disease at bay.

Bhajanas sung during *guru-pūjā* celebrations arranged in Madavachcheri at the *samādhi* of the Ascetic with a Chain also focus on events which are re-enacted during days devoted to him. The sequence of events is as follows:

1. Fire is lit within a holy circle (Tamil *kuṇṭam*, Sanskr. *kuṇḍa*);
2. An iron chain is placed in the fire;
3. The red-hot chain is tied around the ascetic's hips;
4. A stone is set up.

The three locations used in this sequence (the holy circle, the body of the ascetic and the stone) may be interpreted as three reservoirs of holy power. Ritual activities begin with the opening (Tamil *tīraṇṭatu*) of the holy circle, as it is described by believers. An open circle of fire becomes a gate to a world of chthonic powers with their creative potency, and in combination with the purifying fire it forms the *axis mundi*. When the ascetic places the chain in the fire, he draws power from the resources treasured by *kuṇṭam*. Then, girding himself with the glowing chain, which is the *tapas* practice in

⁵ *Cinṇa Cēlattil tuṛai vīṭuṇṇu oru vīṭu iruntatu. Cinṇa Cēlattukkē tuṛai. Avaru periya itu oru paṭṭā. Avaru vīṭuku pōyi tinnaiyila paṭuttuyiruntirukkāru. Eṇṇaṭā taṭiyaṇṭṭū iṅka vantu paṭittirukka yāru nī eṇṇu kēṭkum pōtu. Nā yārō oruttā vante piccaikkārā. Appaṭiṇṇu colla eḷuntirucci pōṭāṇṇu vēḷiyē coṇṇārām. Aṅka collī tuṛaikku vāye tīrakka muṭiyalaiyām. Kai pēca muṭiyalaiyām. Kammunṇu kuttivittāru. Ayyō avaru paṭṭukku ... pō appurā ivaru paṭṭukku ūmaiyaṭṭā jāṭai appurā aṅkayirunta vaṅkaḷai kūppiṭṭu ‘cāmi nīṅka vāṅka. Inta mātiri eṭō avarukku nīṅka teriyāta ceyti’ collittāru. Maṇṇippu koṭuṅkaṇṇu collī, appurā anta tuṛaiyē pōyi cāmi pātāṅkaḷa kālai puṭicci, inta kālai puṭicci kīḷe vīḷuntu kumpiṭṭu maṇupaṭiyū mīṇṭū jalattai koṭṭi pōṭā kaḷutai nallāyiruppa appaṭiṇṇu coṇṇārā. Pecarārā.* Narrated by Rajagopalaswami of Kallakurichchi (1998).

⁶ Works discussing the beliefs of Northern India also frequently associate epidemic diseases with a goddess.

the form of a particularly painful mortification of the body, he accumulates and further increases the energy which he originally possessed. The chain around the ascetic's body, similarly to the ash circle around the *kunṭam*, encloses the holy power and protects it from the external world. Then, while mounting the stone, the ascetic transfers the power into it and protects it with magic signs which prevent the removal of the power from the stone. An area protected in this manner remains under the power of the Caṇṇiyāci and it will be free from any disasters.

The travels of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci are marked with stones placed in all areas within his reach; they are evidence of the spreading of cultural patterns transmitted throughout his pilgrimage. The ascetic is a "master and benefactor who gives people skills, inventions, laws, institutions and other cultural benefits and teaches them how to use them" (Zowczak 1987: 149; see also Mielecinski 1981: 221-239). According to another story, when Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci stayed in a village, he taught the residents how to grow coconut palms.⁷ The motif of agricultural innovations frequently appears in myths about culture heroes. Cultural activities related to farming bring to mind the original meaning of the word "culture" which in Latin (*cultura*) initially meant agri-culture (Kłoskowska 1981: 38).

The story of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci and coconut palm growing involves the euhemerisation of mythology by providing historic, geographical and custom-related details. Characteristically enough, various versions of the myth narrated by various people always refer to Kumbakonam, a town in Tamil Nadu, to which an expedition was arranged for palm saplings. This consistency stands in explicit contrast to the disagreement between various versions of the myth concerning the birthplace of the ascetic. Such a construction of the story seems to emphasise that the skills and deeds of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci benefit communities which worship him.

The Ascetic with a Chain wields magic powers which can be categorised as *siddhi* skills (on *siddhi*, see: Patanjali 3: 16-55; cf. also Ganapathy 1993: 15, 40-56, 127-128).

⁷ *Tennaitōppu vaikkalāmṭā vāṭa Kumpakōṇam pōyi tennamaram eṭṭaṇṭṭā colli ivaru vaṇṭiyai kaṭṭuṇkaṭāṇṇu collittāru. Maṭṭukku vēṇṭiya poruḷ tṭivāṇkaṇellām vaṇṭiyilē eṭuttu vecci taṭattala amaicci cāppitāra poruḷuṇkaṭellām vecci vaṇṭivōṭṭi pōyirukkāṇka. Ivaṇkaḷum kūṭapōyi cērttuṇṇēyiruttirukkāṇka. Aṇkē pōṇavuṭaṇē ivaṇkellām cāppitṭu tennāṇkaṇellām vāṇki, vaṇṭiyilē eṭuttu veccikkittu nī oṭṭuṇkaṭāṇṇu avaru collumpōtu paṇā koṭuṇkaḷā avaṇkaḷukkuṇāru ... 'Tēy Kaṭantapaṭāccī iṇka vāṭa paṇā koṭuṭa' avaṇkaḷukku appaṭiṇṇāru. 'Ayyā cāmi ... naṇ eṭuttatilēyē nīṇka varīṇkaṇṇu. Eṭā, eṇṭa! Cari, nīṇkayellām cāppitṭuttu iruṇkaṭā, nāṇ pōyi paṇā koṭṭarē. Eṇkaṭā veccēṇṇu... kēṭṭāru. Intamāṭiri aṇka pōyi Poṇṇammā, Poṇṇammā avaṇṭaiya Kaṭantapaṭāccī maṇēvi pēru Poṇṇammā. Poṇṇammālṭṭa pōyi Poṇṇammālṭṭēyē kēḷuṇka koṭukkum appaṭiṇṇā. Viṇuviṇṇu avaru aṇkiyiruntu avaru eppaṭi rūṭṭattai māṭṭiṇṇu vantārō? Iṇka vantu avaru ē! Poṇṇammā eḷuntiru appaṭiṇṇicci eṇṇaṭā cāmi. Kuralu kēṭkutēṇṇu colli eḷuntirucci antammā eṇṇa cāmi inta nērattila. Avantāṇ 'Kaṭantapaṭāccī paṇā eṭukkāma vantuttā. Tennāṇkaṇṇu koṭuka muṭiyala. Nām paṇā vāṇkiṭṭu varēṇ. Nīṇka ellām cāppitṭu māṭṭukku tṭivāiyuṇkaṇṇu collitṭu vantuttēṇ.' Appaṭiṇṇu coṇṇāru. Uṭaṇē aṭukku 'pāṇaiyila kampu vecciyirukkiyā... Anta kampukkuḷlāra tuṇiyila muṭiṇci anta rūṭṭaiyāi vaiccirukkiyā eṇṇaiya vāṇkiṭṭu vara' coṇṇāṇ... Pōyi pārtta uṭaṇēyē ante pōla iruntatu. Anta rūṭṭaiyāi eṭuttukkiṭṭu, avaṇka ellām cāppitṭuttu uṭkāntu vettila pākku pōṭṭuttu irukkāṇka, cāmpōyitṭāru aṇka Kumpakōṇam. 'Appō a...? Carīrattaiyitṭu vāyu rūṭṭamā paṇantirukṭāru. Aṇka pōṇavuṭaṇē, eṇṇā cāmi... ācciriyamā irukku! Nīṇka eppaṭi pōṇiṇka? Eppaṭi Celliyampālaiyā vantuttṭiṇka? Nāṇka ippatāṇa cāpiṭṭuttu kaikāl kaḷuvi, vettalai pākku pōṭṭarōmē. Iṭu aticayamā? Ayyō nammacāmiṇṭaiya iṭu varaikkum teriyāma iruntuttōm. Cāmiyṇṭaiya cittikaḷaināma aṭiyāyē enkaḷa ellām maṇṇiṇkaṇṇu kalai piṭcittāṇka.'*

The story quoted above includes an element of miraculous travel through the air, which clearly indicates that the Ascetic can levitate (*laghimā*) and can also overcome all obstacles and accomplish everything desired (*prākāmya*).

According to another mythical story, the Ascetic had a miraculous ability to shrink to the size of an atom (*aṇimā*) that enabled him to pass through the walls of a prison cell in which he was confined by those who failed to recognise his true nature. He was also able to grow infinitely (*mahimā*) and, thanks to this, kill demons; make all wishes come true, create and control everything (*īśitva*) – to change stones into gold, to reveal places where treasures are hidden underground, and to save a shepherd lost in the woods.

Some stories about Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci clearly refer to pan-Indian motifs dealing with holy men; in such stories he plays the role of a guru who is surrounded by disciples and passes on to them the secrets of his wisdom; another such story describes an attempt to seduce him and to strip him of his power collected through mortification.

The Ascetic with a Chain is called Caṇṇiyāci Cāmi or Caṅkili Cāmi. Although the term *cāmi* (Sansk. *svāmin* – God, Lord) can also refer to people, particularly to holy ascetics, wise men and priests, in this context it seems to point to the divine nature of the character. Expressions ascribed to the Ascetic and the invocations used in *bhajanās* resemble those used in religious hymns for the worship of gods. Phrases such as “oh Generous one” (*varatā*), “you come to me as my true support” (*uttama tuṇai enakku nī varuvāy*), “you are the one who knows everything” (*cakalamum aṇintavar*) seem to be reliable evidence of such an attitude. In some of them the word “god” is used *expressis verbis*: “you came and helped us; and then for the sake of believing in you as a god you gave us also your grace” (*nī vantu tuṇai purintāy, aṇru kaṭavuḷāka nampina pērukku aruḷum nī koṭuttāy*).

Although the cult of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci is a relatively unknown local belief of northern Tamil Nadu, it may serve as an excellent example explaining the character of the phenomenon of deification, which in itself is an important element of Hindu religious beliefs. Liminality or borderline features, as I have tried to demonstrate, is among the key factors of deification. Every *saṁnyāsin* (Tamil *caṇṇiyāci*) is by definition a liminal character. His life is a borderline existence, both in the spatial and social sense, while the character of his death violates the structure of the natural ending of human life.

Hence, it is no wonder that an ascetic, who was active in the northern areas of Tamil Nadu approximately 170 years ago and who found his death there, could become a local deity. The cult of Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci emphasises this character’s liminality. He is shown as a stranger hero who does not belong to any specific place or group. The main festival devoted to the Ascetic is the anniversary of his departure from this world.

Stories about him can be interpreted as a myth about the trickster whose power is the power of breaking rules and the liminal (Grottanelli 1983: 138). He is powerful and at the same time impure. As M. Douglas has shown in her analysis of purity and danger, the idea of pollution is generally associated with persons and events that are structural anomalies according to the particular system of classification: “pollution dangers strike

when form has been attacked” (Douglas 1966: 104). The trickster in his ambiguity is such a person indeed.

And then, is not this a reason that our trickster – Caṅkili Caṇṇiyāci – is worshipped by low castes and that he is a non-vegetarian deity?

I do not want to suggest that his position and the type of rites connected with this figure will not be transformed. Under favourable conditions, (e.g. a growing social role for his worshippers, similarities to other deities whose place in the village pantheon is higher) his status can change. Anyway, he is a typical “small god” (*ciru teyvam*) of terrestrial origin, who operates on the borderline between the worlds of humans and gods, and variability is part of his nature.

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