

## The Language Games of Śiva

### *Mapping Text and Space in Public Religious Culture*

By what process does a text—a product of the written word—depart from the materiality of a palm-leaf manuscript to enter, irrevocably, the domain of public culture? What does it mean for a religious text, a compendium of sacred mythology, to go public, to seemingly cut beyond local publics defined by caste, religion, and even language? These are questions, on one hand, about the sheer dynamics of circulation, the material factors facilitating the spread of knowledge. But on the other hand, these selfsame questions interrogate the very nature of the public itself in early modern India—of space and its relation to the public religious culture that enlivens it with a shared sense of significance.

For the majority of Madurai's modern-day residents, no work of literature better captures the spirit of the city than does the *Tiruvīḷaiyāṭal Purāṇam* (TVP), or the "Sacred Games of Śiva." The TVP threads together sixty-four mythological vignettes illustrating Śiva's divine intervention—in other words, his cosmic play (Skt. *līlā*, Tamil *viḷaiyāṭal*)—in the city of Madurai. In the process, the "Sacred Games" effectively maps Madurai's *religious* landscape onto the *spatial* terrain of the city itself, so that its defining topography comes to be seen as shaped by Śiva's sacred play. It was here, indeed, by the banks of the river that defines the old city, that Śiva set down (*vai*) his hand (*kai*) on the ground to quench the thirst of an unruly wedding guest, bringing forth the gushing torrents of Madurai's Vaikai River. Likewise, on the outskirts of town, to this very day stands the distinctively elephant-shaped Yānaimalai mountain, an elephantine war machine launched by the Jains of Madurai as they assailed their Śaiva adversaries, frozen in place by Sundarēśvara, the "Beautiful Lord" Śiva come to earth in the form of Madurai's king. It is Śiva himself who dwells, alongside his green-skinned consort Minākṣī,

at the spatial and ritual heart of the city, Madurai's Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple, located at the center of both text and landscape. Above all, the temple is home to one of the most extravagant ritual performances in contemporary south India: the wedding of Mīnākṣī and Sundareśvara, the most celebrated of the sixty-four sacred games, brought to life in an annual festival that attracts throngs of pilgrims during the month of Cittirai (April/May).<sup>1</sup>

And yet, before the sixteenth century, these narratives were scarcely known outside of the elite circles of Tamil literati. One cannot help but wonder, then, how it happened that Madurai as a city came to be *entextualized* by a single work of Tamil literature. Indeed, the seventeenth-century *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam* of Parañcōti Muṇivar has come to be accepted by popular religious culture and temple authorities alike as the sole canonical instantiation of the sixty-four sacred games.<sup>2</sup> First premiered before a public audience in the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple itself, Parañcōti's *TVP* is a text inseparable from its context. Parañcōti composed his masterpiece, more than likely, during the reign of Tirumalai Nāyaka, post-Vijayangara regent of Madurai, whose enthusiasm for temple renovation had radically transformed the visual contours of the city center. Writing at a pivotal moment in the city's history, Parañcōti had every reason to sing the praises of Madurai as sacred center and center of power, and his extended prologues on the incomparability of Madurai and Mīnākṣī's temple leave little doubt as to his affections for his hometown. His exposition of the sacred marriage, rhetorical centerpiece of the epic and liturgical centerpiece of the temple's annual calendar, waxes eloquent for nearly two hundred verses about the jeweled wedding pavilions and garlands of basil and *campaka* flowers, down to the minute details of the ceremony's ritual implements, as if to evoke a panorama that was, literally, lived reality to his readers. The *TVP*, succinctly, is a textual icon that points directly to the lived space of the city of Madurai.

A similar cycle of sixty-four "Sacred Games of Śiva" was first compiled around the thirteenth century by Perumpaṭṭrapuliyūr Nampi.<sup>3</sup> Although certain individual episodes we find in Nampi's work had surfaced on various earlier occasions in Tamil literary history,<sup>4</sup> no evidence survives to indicate that a complete canon of Śiva's sixty-four divine sports had ever been previously compiled. Writing in Cidambaram, the medieval seat of Śaivism in Tamil Nadu, Nampi fashioned his *TVP* in a register of verse that intersected seamlessly with the tail end of the more classicized and ornamentalizing Cōḷa period literary culture.<sup>5</sup> He claimed initiation under a Śaiva pontiff, a certain Paramajñānaśivan operating out of the Māḷikai Maṭam,<sup>6</sup> a Śaiva monastery in the vicinity of Cidambaram. As a result, it may come as no surprise that Nampi's verse fuses a high Tamil literary idiom with the ethos of earlier Śaiva devotional (bhakti) hymns, in which both Madurai and Cidambaram were integrated into a network of Śaiva sacred sites spread across the Tamil landscape. Perhaps no aspect of the text better illustrates the divergence of Nampi's

interest from that of Parañcōti than his treatment of the Sacred Marriage. In Nampi's work, the ceremony itself is relegated to a mere eight verses. Śiva concludes the wedding ceremony by graciously taking political command of the Pandian kingdom, his in-laws' estate, for he deems a mere woman, such as Mīnākṣī, obviously unfit to rule. The entire event, in fact, is entirely devoid of emotional affect. It is only in the following story, in which the sage Patañjali petitions Śiva to perform his cosmic dance in the city of Madurai—replicating the sacred center of Cidambaram's Golden Hall in his second, colonized home, the Silver Hall of the Madurai Mīnākṣī temple—that Madurai becomes a truly sacred city. Himself a foreigner to the cultural heartland of southern Tamil Nadu, Nampi reimagines Madurai as an embodiment of a translocal Tamil Śaivism, with little intent to engage with either the landscape or local populace of Madurai itself. As such, Nampi's work lends itself to interpretation as a novel and creative work of literature, synthesizing the scattered material of cultural memory into a textual artifact capable of entering, for the first time, the sphere of elite, translocal vernacular literature.

And yet, as we shall see, the "Sacred Games of Śiva" boasts a lengthy history of creation and re-creation, making it perhaps the most fluid literary motif in south Indian history, remarkable for its facility in traversing boundaries of language, class, sect, and locality. Originally—as it was for Nampi—*TVP* had been simply a text, with no pretensions to achieving scriptural authority or to being woven into the fabric of everyday life. Whereas the legends had previously been known only to premodern Tamil literati through the work of Nampi itself, the "Sacred Games of Śiva" irrupted suddenly into a more general popularity across the Tamil region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period in which the genre of the Tamil *talapurāṇam* (sacred narrative of place; Skt.: *sthalapurāṇa*) surged in popularity in conjunction with the rising social, cultural, and economic prominence of the south Indian temple complex. Written for an entirely distinct literary and cultural milieu, a work like Parañcōti's thus speaks at once to an audience of literati and to popular enthusiasts already captivated by the cultural dynamism of the Madurai Nāyaka regime and the newfound social capital of the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple. Over time, Parañcōti's rendering of the work became such a fixture of the religious culture of Madurai that it entirely eclipsed any public memory of Nampi's *TVP*, which remained an obscure fragment of literary history until (and perhaps even after) it resurfaced in the early twentieth century through the editorial craft of U. Ve. Caminataiyar.

Indeed, within the span of a single century, the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam* made the transition from a highly delimited legend of place, restricted to the classics of Tamil literary culture, to a canonical fixture of Śaiva religiosity across south India, visually reenacted in sacred sites across the Tamil country. Over the course of a mere handful of decades, a narrative that had previously attracted little imitation prompted numerous transcreations in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit, with Marathi

and Kannada versions soon to follow. The legends even began to surface in temple murals, statuary, and public calendrical festivals in Madurai and beyond, a far cry from the hallowed halls of elite literary societies. The “Sacred Games of Śiva,” one might argue, have permanently entered the public domain of the people of Madurai and, in fact, have become a pillar of the city’s public religious culture.

In contemporary discourse on the public and publicity, the multiplicity of publics—or public spheres—has met with unproblematic acceptance in the aftermath of a spate of critiques responding to the English translation (1989) of Habermas’s seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The public in the singular—itself a largely imagined construct—is made multiple, recent theorists suggest, by the emergence of *counterpublics*, a term employed by Nancy Fraser (1991) and Michael Warner (2002), among others, to highlight the sites of subaltern resistance to a dominant cultural paradigm, where public discourse fragments to give voice to subordinated identities of gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. Likewise, in the south Indian context, to describe the “Sacred Games” in Madurai as a fixture of public culture in the singular immediately raises the question of who, precisely, constitutes such a public. More often than not, the working assumption of most interpreters would be to presume that such a public is simply coterminous with Brahminical normativity. In such a formulation, Brahminism is unproblematically treated as the South Asian equivalent of the bourgeois public sphere. Like its European analogue, which presumes that only an educated, enfranchised populace constitutes such a public, an Indian “bourgeois public sphere” would exclude the majority of Madurai’s population.

But does such a framework fit with the evidence at hand, or was the situation on the ground more complex? In early modern south India, *publics* were likewise indubitably multiple, but the factors that delimit one from another remain obscure. Did Veḷāḷas—considered Śūdras by Hindu legal code, despite their considerable wealth and social prestige—belong to the same public as Smārta Brahmins? Given south India’s history of linguistic—and literary—pluralism, did native speakers of Tamil belong to the same public as speakers of Telugu? Did the Śaivas of Madurai, frequenters of the Madurai Mīnākṣī temple, belong to the same religious public as the Vaiṣṇavas who attended the rival Aḷakar Temple just outside the city?

When speaking of religious publics in early modern south India, we have seen, over the preceding chapters, that Hinduism—as an umbrella category for describing multiple religious traditions—was never fashioned as a social imaginary distinct from the sectarian communities it comprised. No concept of *the* religious public had yet been constructed among south Indian Hindus, much less one that equitably incorporated Muslims, Christians, or Jains in the Tamil country. Arguably, indeed, the singular notion of *the public* as such, founded as it was upon a disembodied, normativizing conception of communicative reason, proves conceptually intractable in the South Asian domain and, perhaps, ultimately

incommensurable with the nature of publicity in early modern India. The religious publics of early modern south India, then—coterminous, to a large extent, with the sectarian networks of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava religious communities—were not counterpublics in the strict sense, were provided with no overarching public in the singular in defiance of which they might aim to construct a particularized, subaltern identity.

How, then, did the “Sacred Games of Śiva” manage to transcend the boundaries of south India’s multiple public spheres, differentiated along lines of caste, language, and religion? By excavating its multilingual textual history, I aim to narrate the journey of the *TVP* from text to public culture, a trajectory that left few boundaries uncrossed—particularly the boundary of language. While originally a classic of refined Tamil literature, the *TVP* gained widespread traction only when detached from its original moorings in temporally and culturally distinct literary culture to circulate across Madurai’s multiple publics through a discursive process of literary—and even visual—re-creation. Emerging first as an aesthetic fashion among cultured elites writing in Tamil, Telugu, *and* Sanskrit, the narratives began to surface within a matter of decades in temple murals, statuary, and calendrical festivals, thus entering the public domain irreversibly. Their becoming public, and transcending the text, thus, has quite a bit to do with the appeal it generated first among reading publics in multiple languages, followed by its visual and performative enshrinement in public space. In this light, the publication of the text itself can only be “read”—figuratively speaking—through its evocations in temple art, architecture, and public festivals, a fashion that *followed*, rather than preceded, its irruption into the spheres of south India’s literary publics.

While the precolonial textual archive often occludes dynamics of extratextual circulation, the “Sacred Games” may prove an exception to the rule, entering public discourse with remarkable visibility by the mid-seventeenth century. Take, for instance, the benedictory verse to a seventeenth-century grammatical work attributed to the renowned polymath Appayya Dīkṣita, the *Prākṛtamāṇidīpikā*,<sup>7</sup> a handbook designed to promote literacy in the Prakrit language among Sanskrit playwrights:

May that battle of the Pandian princess with Parameśvara  
At the time of their marriage protect [you],  
In which victory belonged to both equally—  
Marvelous in that Śiva and Śivā both obtained each other.<sup>8</sup>

Although somewhat unexpected in a didactic work on Prakrit grammar, the verse at hand refers unmistakably to the most widely known of Śiva’s sports in Madurai: his wedding to Mīnākṣī, who had taken birth in Madurai as the Pandian princess Taṭātakai. When the child, much to her father’s chagrin, was born with an extra breast, the sage Agastya assured the family that if the girl were raised as

the crown prince and trained in warfare, the extraneous breast would disappear as soon as she first encountered her future husband. In time, the young Taṭātakai grew to maturity and set out to conquer the directions, finally ascending toward Mount Kailāsa to defeat Śiva himself on the battlefield. Upon beholding her opponent, Taṭātakai's third breast disappeared and she bashfully laid down her weapons in deference to her future husband, after which the pair proceeded to Madurai to make arrangements for their wedding. Given the ellipticality of his verse, Appayya must have expected his readership—scholars and poets working within the Sanskrit knowledge systems—to readily supply the remainder of the narrative, despite its vernacular literary origins. Evidently, by the seventeenth century, the “Sacred Games” had achieved a certain currency among cultured audiences outside the Tamil literary fold.

As a point of comparison, another intriguing reference to the “Sacred Games” preserved in Madurai's Jesuit chronicles demonstrates beyond a doubt that less than a century later, the *TVP* narratives had spread far beyond the confines of courtly literary communities. Writing in 1700, a certain P. Pierre Martin describes the storytelling activities of a local Madurai woman as follows:

Her sixty-year-old mother distinguishes herself by her skill in winning souls for Jesus Christ; I want to quote an example for you. Before her conversion, she was firmly devoted to her sect and knew by heart all the fables of her idols. Her delight was to recount them and she did so with grace; her neighbors had no sweeter recreation than to come and sit around her to listen to them. As soon as she had received baptism, she invited her friends, who hastily rushed up to her and begged her to recite some *Game* of Śiva. “Oh! Those are just old stories,” responded our good storyteller, “but I'm going to give you one that is really something else! It's completely new; I've only known it myself for several days. If you listen to me with attention, I will let you know the place where we go after death, where our friends and ancestors have gone, where we will go in turn.”<sup>9</sup>

Considering that, although the Jesuit author of the above letter held little interest in the content of the woman's “idoltrous” narratives, he was able to readily classify them as “Games of Śiva” suggests that the *TVP* legends had made the transition from literary text to popular mythology by the end of the seventeenth century, such that the cycle had become virtually synonymous with oral Śaiva narrative for her captive audience. A respected elder by the year 1700, this woman came of age in a Madurai that had only recently witnessed the widespread temple renovation program of Tirumalai Nāyaka (1623–1659), who famously restructured the annual Cit-tirai Festival and instituted a number of calendrical observances to publicly showcase episodes of the *TVP*.<sup>10</sup> Narratives that may have been just beginning to rise to popularity in her youth had become for her, by 1700, the “old stories.”

By the end of the seventeenth century, then, text had transitioned to public religious culture: the *TVP* was no longer a classic of Tamil literature but popular

mythology that had percolated into public conversation at social gatherings. But before the *TVP* had truly become a public phenomenon, it had begun to spread like wildfire among literary elites writing in multiple languages, giving rise to a veritable explosion of variant narratives. Fortunately, the literary and documentary archive of the early modern Tamil country provides ample resources for re-embedding Parañcōti's *TVP* within its original enunciatory context. What we meet with, in fact, is not a singular text—the *TVP* of Parañcōti—but a discursive sphere. The “Sacred Games” had so thoroughly captivated the literary imagination of the epoch that, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the *narrative cycle* inspired quite a number of transcreations not only in Tamil but in Telugu and Sanskrit as well, a surprising number of which preceded the premiere of Parañcōti's masterpiece. By examining this profusion of textual variants, we can learn to read the *TVP* less as an isolated work of creative genius that inexplicably caught hold of public imagination and more as a discursive act, conditioned and made possible by a network of multilingual circulation. It was this process, in fact, that eventually resulted in the public reception of Parañcōti's *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam* as the singular *talapurāṇam* of Madurai, relegating its competitors to the footnotes of history.

Language boundaries, in everyday wisdom, are conceived of as permeable only through the concerted effort of translation, an intention to make the local intelligible beyond the intimate boundaries of a speech community. How—and why—did the *TVP* begin to circulate so seamlessly across Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit speech communities, with Kannada and Marathi soon to follow? As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously made clear, there is no such thing as a private language—all languages are by definition public by virtue of their invocation of a set of shared, intersubjective insights about reality. The games of language we play, conditioned by socially shared conventions and rules, cannot help but give rise to the very acts of communication they make possible, and the sacred games of Śiva are no exception. By examining the dynamics of language, circulation, and textuality during this formative period (ca. 1550–1650) when the *TVP* irrevocably broke from the constraints of the palm-leaf manuscript, we can see how a text gone public can transition from emerging object of literary interest to public religious canon, simultaneously fixed and open for critical response. It is this process of multilingual circulation, codification, and publication, succinctly, that interests us—and that is what I describe as the “Language Games of Śiva.”

#### MANY TIRUVĪLAIYĀṬAL PURĀṆAMS: THE INVENTION OF THE STHALAPURĀṆA OF MADURAI

The literary sphere of the seventeenth-century Tamil region, while situated unambiguously in India's Vernacular Millennium,<sup>11</sup> fostered a number of flourishing literary traditions, not least among them a prolific network of cosmopolitan Sanskrit



literati. Indeed, in the wake of the fragmentation of the Vijayanagara Empire, the Nāyaka kingdoms of Madurai and Tanjavur, heirs in the Tamil country to its cultural prestige, continued Vijayangara's liberal patronage of poets writing in both Sanskrit and the vernacular. Operating in such close quarters and competing for patronage and performance opportunities, the poets of the Nāyaka-period literary sphere,<sup>12</sup> whether writing in Tamil, Telugu, or Sanskrit, necessarily developed an acute awareness of each other's presence. Such an awareness is often overtly manifested in their literary creations, which show ample evidence of intertextual influence and response.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of these poets held less than favorable opinions of their competitors. Take, for instance, this verse by Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita from his Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, or classical epic, the *Śivalīlārṇava*,<sup>13</sup> or "The Ocean of the Games of Śiva":

Through the decadence of the Kali Yuga, having strayed from the  
Path of suggestion [*vyāṅgyapatham*] dear to the learned, disregard-  
ing scripture,  
[Bad poets] have acquired a taste for poetic feats [*citra*] of word and  
meaning—  
Much like the passion of hicks for vernacular texts.<sup>14</sup>

Such disapproval of vernacular literature may seem unremarkable coming from Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, descendant of one of India's most learned Brahmin intellectual families, ranked among the most celebrated Sanskrit poets of the second millennium—were it not for the fact that this statement *itself* appears in what is in fact an adaptation of a vernacular text, narrating in the form of a Sanskrit epic the *Tiruvīḷaiyāṭal Purāṇam*, the sixty-four "Sacred Games of Śiva" in Madurai. When reembedded in its immediate discursive context, then, Nilakaṇṭha's *Śivalīlārṇava* opens up a number of questions about the role of language choice in a diverse, multilingual society such as south India after the rise of vernacularism. Bronner and Shulman (2006), for instance, raise just such a question in their article, "A Cloud Turned Goose': Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium." Masterfully excavating the multilingual resonances in a number of seventeenth-century works of Sanskrit literature from the Tamil country, Bronner and Shulman demonstrate beyond a doubt that the Sanskrit literary tradition in the South had become thoroughly conversant with, and in some ways dependent upon, the thematic and stylistic conventions of the vernacular. Whether the *Śivalīlārṇava* was truly intended to harmonize with a preexisting vernacular literary canon, however, deserves a more nuanced consideration.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Bronner and Shulman interpret the *Śivalīlārṇava* as something of a replica of the Tamil original, largely conforming to its intentionality and cultural agenda. By describing the text as a "rendition of an earlier Tamil equivalent," the authors presume, perhaps inadvertently, that the text's only



intention was to “give voice” to a vernacular world that was preexistent in its entirety—and, by implication, essentially timeless.<sup>16</sup>

As we shall see, in the process of recasting the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam* narrative, the *Śivalīlārṇava* did incorporate quite a number of cultural allusions familiar primarily to an educated Tamil readership. It is not every day, after all, that we meet with elegant depictions in literary Sanskrit of the founding of the Tamil Caṅkam or of the exploits of the Tamil Śaiva bhakti saints Nānacampantar and Māṇikkavācakar, which Nilakaṇṭha faithfully included in his Sanskrit rendition of these sixty-four popular Tamil legends. To view Nilakaṇṭha, however, as faithfully transcribing a Tamil idiom in Sanskrit would misread the bold and often subversive intent of the text. Indeed, the first canto of the *Śivalīlārṇava* consists almost entirely of a highly specific literary-theoretical critique of Nilakaṇṭha’s fellow *Sanskrit* poets. We find here, for instance, a sarcastic diatribe against much of second-millennium (post-Mammaṭa) trends in poetic practice, such as the near-exclusive reliance on feats of language fashionable in the Nāyaka courts in which the formal properties of poetry are privileged over its content. Nilakaṇṭha expresses disdain, for instance, for *citra kāvya*—pictorial poetry (think Apollinaire in twentieth-century France)—and *yamaka*, a type of paronomasia that repeats the same sequence of syllables in entirely different words. Indeed, the very suggestion that poetry should be founded upon feats of language rather than the beauty of suggested meaning was anathema to Nilakaṇṭha:

In the Kṛta Yuga, suggestion [*vyañjanā*] became incarnate;  
In the Treta Yuga, it became subordinated [*guṇībabhūva*];  
In the third age, there were feats of meaning [*arthacitra*];  
And in the fourth age, a profusion of twinning rhymes [*yamaka*].

Indeed, having ascended to the overlordship of poetry,  
The resolute do not delight in mere feats of language [*śabdacitra*].  
Having reached the abode of celestial women in heaven,  
How could any one-eyed woman be worth approaching?

Did the creator fill the mouths of the feeble-minded with garlic,  
And sprinkle bitter neem juice?  
If not, from whence comes the putrid odor and acidity  
When speech is issuing forth from them?<sup>17</sup>

In these verses, Nilakaṇṭha’s polemic can be read intelligibly only within the context of a thoroughly Sanskritic conversation on aesthetics, specifically invoking the authority of the eighth-century literary theorist Ānandavardhana, who made the case in his masterwork, the *Dhvanyāloka* (The illumination of implicature), that poetry was made beautiful only by the complex interplay of literal and suggested meaning.<sup>18</sup> As with the entirety of the first canto of the *Śivalīlārṇava*, this

discourse was evidently intended for an audience not only proficient in Sanskrit but also thoroughly versed in the canon of Sanskrit literary theory. How can we make sense of this canto as figuring into a text that ostensibly celebrates the heritage of a distinctively Tamil vernacular culture? Given that such a polemic would have been all but unintelligible to anyone outside the orbit of the cosmopolitan Sanskrit literary tradition, it may not be accurate to claim that the *Śivalilārṇava* simply “participated along with” the vernacular in Nilakaṇṭha’s day and age. To make such a suggestion, as Bronner and Shulman have done, presumes that vernacular literature in general operated out of a unified intentionality—that of “inventing and elaborating . . . cultural identities.”<sup>19</sup> And given that Nilakaṇṭha was a notorious satirist, first-rate literary mind, and public figure in the literary salon and court of Madurai, his own intentionality in composing the *Śivalilārṇava* is far from cut-and-dried.

To more fully appreciate what may have motivated Nilakaṇṭha to compose a unique and interstitial work requires, above all, a nuanced understanding of its enunciatory context—in this case, both the institutional structure of the multilingual literary sphere in which it took part, and the textual history of the Tamil “original,” the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*. The Nāyaka period of south India in particular, a period of rapid social and political transformation, provides us with an ideal arena to explore such questions. A multilingual literary sphere such as this, which fostered multiple vernacular traditions (namely, Tamil and Telugu) with competing sources of institutional sponsorship and patronage, allows us to bracket the Sanskrit-vernacular binary in favor of a model that situates multilingual literary production within its diverse social and institutional settings. It also illuminates the social embeddedness of Sanskrit literary and intellectual discourse, as exemplified by the particular case of Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita. Nilakaṇṭha’s *Śivalilārṇava* is no accident of literary genius outside of time and space, but an active response to the multidimensional social and literary milieu in which his *mahākāvya* was deliberately articulated.

Just how many *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇams* are there? What little scholarship has been devoted to the subject is unequivocal:<sup>20</sup> there are *two* TVPs, the lesser-known TVP of Perumparrapuliyyūr Nampī, dated most convincingly to the late thirteenth century, and the celebrated TVP of Paraṅcōti Muṇivar, belonging most likely to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup> The latter, comprising nearly twice the number of verses found in Nampī’s version, incorporated a number of innovations that distinguish it from its “original” counterpart, substantially reordering of the sequence of games and replacing three of Nampī’s sixty-four episodes with entirely distinct narratives. In addition to these two primary Tamil variants, a single Sanskrit Purāṇic rendering has been attested, the Hālāsya Māhātmya, which, given the radical proliferation of manuscripts transmitted in numerous south Indian scripts, seems to have been transmitted widely across the southern half of the

subcontinent since at least the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup> In short, given our current knowledge of the *TVP*'s textual history, previous scholarship on the work(s) has focused nearly exclusively on two issues: a narratological comparison of the two Tamil *purāṇams*, and the adjudication of the relative priority of Parañcōti's *TVP* and the Hālāsya Māhātmya. The latter, by virtue of its Sanskrit Purāṇic pedigree, is by and large presumed to have preceded the *TVP*, with very little evidence adduced to support this conclusion.

Our textual archive, however, renders the actual number of *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇams* somewhat more ambiguous. Nampi, for his part, nowhere refers to his own work under the title *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*, claiming simply to have "spoken the sixty-four Sacred Games of Cokkan" (*cokkan viḷaiyāṭa laṟu pattu nāṅkuñ corṇēṇ*) contained in the "great *purāṇam* of Madurai" (*māmaturaip purāṇam*).<sup>23</sup> This may come as no surprise given its relatively early date compared to most representatives of the mature *talapurāṇam* genre, which truly established itself as a fixture of Tamil literary practice around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. More tellingly, however, our earliest-known literary references to Nampi's *purāṇam* seem similarly uninterested in designating the work as the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*. One such work, the *Payakaramālai* (Skt. *Bhayaḥaramālā*), refers to its project of rendering Nampi's work in a brief garland of sixty-four verses in the following terms:

Rejoicing, I complete reciting all sixty-four of the primordial sports  
of Our Lord,  
Praising Perumparrapuliṽr Nampi, chief among the Kauṇḍinya  
Gotra,  
Ruling over Celli garlanded with beautiful lotus flowers.  
Is it not the case, in the Kappinci land in the region bearing the  
fertility of rain clouds,  
I speak the sixty-four sports of the one garlanded in mountain  
ebony flowers  
Of Nampi of the famous Tillai, ruling over the auspicious southern  
town of Celli,  
Adjoining the place known as Caturvedimangalam of Paraśurāma.<sup>24</sup>

In short, our literary archive provides us with little evidence to discern whether Nampi's composition acquired its title from within the tradition or as a result of a superimposition of modern scholarship linking it directly with Parañcōti's better-known rendering of the narrative. To break with the arbitrary pairing of the two *TVPs*, then, permits us to narrow our scope of inquiry from the ahistorical domain of myth criticism, shifting our focus away from purely narratological concerns such as the sequence of episodes in favor of a more socially embedded approach

to texts and literary institutions. In fact, our textual archive tells a different story: we meet with no complete retellings of the “Sacred Games” between the lifetime of Nampi and the mid-sixteenth century, after which point we witness a sudden explosion of variant narratives crossing linguistic and social boundaries. The most significant of these pre-Parañcōti variants, in fact, is not in Tamil at all but in Telugu: the *Cokkanātha Caritramu* (The story of Cokkanātha) of Tiruvēṅḷakavi (circa 1540).<sup>25</sup> This unique work was patronized by the pair of subchieftains Pedda Rāma and Cinna Rāma, who operated out of southern Tamil Nadu in the vicinity of Ramnad, significantly removed from Madurai’s cultural orbit. Nevertheless, the Telugu *Cokkanātha Caritramu* is arguably the earliest example of a complete translation—or perhaps more accurately “transcreation”—of the full sixty-four sacred games postdating the thirteenth-century Nampi.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, much like Nampi, as a member of the vernacular literary elite residing at a distance from Madurai itself, Tiruvēṅḷakavi held little interest—either regional or rhetorical—in sacralizing the landscape of Madurai.

A number of fairly early works, dating to the first half of the sixteenth century, show an increased fascination with the TVP narrative. The *Tiruvuccāttānar Nāṇmaṇimālai* of Nociyūr Paḷaṇiyappaṇ Cervaikkārar (Tamil, circa 1527), for instance, while largely concerned with other matters, includes a chapter that condenses Nampi’s ordering of the sacred games into an easily digestible set of verses. Likewise, the *Kālahasti Māhātmyamu* of Dhurjaṭi (Telugu, circa 1509–1529), authored by a poet traditionally revered as one of eight literary celebrities (*aṣṭadiggajulu*) of the Vijayanagara court of Kṛṣṇadevarāya, incorporates—possibly for the first time—a cycle of the Tamil *Tiruvīḷaiyāḷal* legends into a Telugu text.<sup>27</sup> Within the domain of Madurai itself, the *Maduraic Cokkanātar Ulā* of Purāṇa Tirumalainātar (Tamil, early sixteenth century), belongs to the Ulā genre of Tamil literature, a literary form centered on the motif of the formal public procession of a ruler or deity in a particular locality—in the present instance, Cokkanātar or Sundareśvara of Madurai. While recounting the procession of Sundareśvara through the streets of Madurai, the *Cokkanātar Ulā* sprinkles allusions to several of the games of Śiva.

By the mid- to late sixteenth century, we begin to encounter a number of complete renditions of the sixty-four games in multiple languages—including the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*—which thus predate Parañcōti’s own masterpiece but often survive in fragmentary condition with numerous corruptions. Many have been all but forgotten by the scholars of Tamil or Telugu literary history. Take for instance, the *Cuntara Pāṇṇiyam* (The story of Sundara Pandian) of Aṇatāri (late sixteenth century), a virtually unstudied retelling of the “Sacred Games” in his incarnation as the Pandian ruler Sundareśvara, a work that despite its intriguing digressionary discussions of subtle body yoga and Śākta devotionism, has only barely survived to this day. How many other authors like Aṇatāri set out to retell the “Sacred Games” only to have the manuscripts of their compositions dismissed

by their colleagues or lost to subsequent generations?<sup>28</sup> We also encounter abortive attempts at alternative *talapurāṇams* of Madurai that subsume the “Sacred Games” under an entirely different narrative frame. The *Katampavaṇapurāṇam* (The purāṇa of the Kadamba Forest) of Vīmanāta Paṇṭitar, for instance claims to narrate the sacred history of the city from an entirely different stream of textual transmission, one that ostensibly was adapted from a Sanskrit work variously referred to as the *Kadambavanapurāṇa* or, synonymously, the *Nīpāraṇyapurāṇa*. Previous scholarship has assumed a somewhat earlier date for this work, as it incorporates within a structurally distinct mythological framework a single chapter that catalogues the sacred games according to Nampī’s earlier sequence. This argument, however, neglects the fact that its author, Vīmanāta Paṇṭitar, refers directly to Parañcōti in the opening verses of the composition, adopting an almost apologetic tone for his audacity in putting forth another contender for Madurai’s official *talapurāṇam*:

Even after the existence of the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam* flourishing  
suitably with the sixty-four  
Told by the great Parañcōti Muṇivar of excellent fame through the  
grace of Śiva,  
I commence to narrate in a manner in eleven chapters with fame  
known across the earth surrounded by water,  
Having recited the story of the Sacred Games of the One Who Is  
Like a Remedy, through the customs that grace the assembly.<sup>29</sup>

But precisely what sort of textual culture accompanied the *TVP*’s rise from obscurity to a place among the literary elite of multiple language communities? Why were these texts written, and was their enunciatory effect the same in Tamil, Sanskrit, and Telugu? In fact, it was not only the languages but also the institutions of literary circulation that had diverged radically in south India by the sixteenth century, leading to the emergence of distinct literary spheres that often intersected but operated out of disparate commitments in the domains of literature, politics, and devotion.

#### THE SITES OF MULTILINGUAL LITERARY PRODUCTION IN NĀYAKA-PERIOD SOUTH INDIA

By the very definition of the genre, the Tamil *talapurāṇam*, a narrative of place, deals with the unique soteriological properties and divine exploits associated with a precise locality in the Tamil country. As these legends, more often than not, owe relatively little to the pan-Indic corpus of Sanskrit *purāṇas*, one might expect that authors of Tamil *talapurāṇams*, composed primarily of narratives that are strictly Tamil in geographical and cultural origin, would look no further than

the extensive literary and devotional archive accumulated by well over a millennium of Tamil textual history. Nevertheless, from the very inception of the Tamil *talapurāṇam* genre, poets evidently felt compelled to provide these temporally and geographically delimited narratives with a stamp of approval from the transregional Sanskritic tradition by framing their compositions as translations, or perhaps transcreations, from original Sanskrit exempla. Such was the case with Nampi's *TVP*, one of the earliest-known examples of the *talapurāṇam* genre, which, despite the obviously Tamil origins of many of its episodes, Nampi informs us, was not originally transmitted in Tamil at all. Nampi claims, rather, to have drawn on an otherwise unattested Sanskrit "text" known as the *Sārasamuccaya*, contained in the *Uttaramahāpurāṇa*.<sup>30</sup> Based on the title—even setting aside its absence in manuscript history—there is good reason to doubt that an excerpt titled the "Compilation of Essences" (*Sārasamuccaya*) in the "Other Great Purāṇa" (*Uttaramahāpurāṇa*) ever existed at all.

The relationship between Sanskrit and vernacular in the early modern Tamil South, succinctly, may not be quite as cut-and-dried as it appears. Regardless of how strongly Nīlakaṇṭha Dikṣita may have personally disapproved, the Nāyaka-period Tamil country belonged unmistakably to what Pollock (1998b) has termed the "Vernacular Millennium"; and in fact, vernacular literature flourished there in abundance. Not only did the region continue to foster its vibrant and prolific heritage of Tamil literary production, but also Nāyaka rulers, hailing from Andhra and formerly employed under the Vijayanagara Empire, imported along with their political rule a predilection for Telugu literature, which began to take root in the far South through their continued patronage. Of course, the social and political functions of vernacularization had been fully present in the Tamil region since the height of Cōḷa rule, when Tamil literature began to assume the role of the primary medium for royal encomium, adopting numerous stylistic and tropic features from the preexisting Sanskrit cosmopolitan tradition. Moreover, high Cōḷa literature was indubitably a courtly phenomenon, produced and publicized within the central networks of the empire's ruling elite and often directly underwriting the interests of royal power.

The vernacular of the Nāyaka period, however, took shape within a sphere of multiple competing cultural currents, creating a dynamic in which the emulation and implementation of received literary models did not flow unilaterally from the cosmopolitan to the vernacular, from the transregional to the language of place. In fact, literary classics were often adapted from one vernacular to another,<sup>31</sup> and just as often from the vernacular back into Sanskrit.<sup>32</sup> While the cosmopolitan vernacular, so to speak, often accompanies a certain documented social trajectory, much less is known about the sort of extratextual environment that would support such a multidirectional sphere of literary influence.

Given this apparent fluidity of interchange between competing literary currents—that is, given the ease with which the *content* of the literary craft

traversed the boundaries of language—should we presume an equally fluid *social structure* facilitating the production and transmission of literary texts across distinct language-based communities? Certainly, the answer to this question varies considerably by geographical region, even during the time frame we have been referring to as India's "early modern" period (ca. 1500–1800). Literary production in the Nāyaka-period Tamil country need not have operated within institutional frameworks equivalent to those of the seventeenth-century Rājput courts of Rajasthan or anywhere else in the Indian subcontinent. The situation in south India, however, is further complicated by the coexistence of multiple vernacular traditions within a shared geographical and cultural space. In such a context, Pollock's model of the vernacular age might suggest that the competing vernacular literatures of south India ought to have equally inherited certain constitutive features of the Sanskrit cosmopolitan paradigm. For instance, we might expect, in the present case, that Tamil and Telugu works of literature were patronized at the same Nāyaka courts, performed in the same venues, and influenced equally by the rhetoric and values of the Sanskrit literary tradition.

With its broad appeal across linguistic lines, the *TVP* and its numerous multilingual variants provide us with an ideal arena where we may explore the extent to which these assumptions hold true for the south Indian case. Fortunately, the texts in question speak for themselves, providing information about their contexts of patronage and performance both explicitly and implicitly through the rhetorical tropes they invoke. Take, for instance, the following verse from the introduction to the *Cuntara Pāṇṭiyam*:

Āṇatāri of the town of Vayarpati, in the court of  
The king Tiruviruntavaṇ in Kallur, offered in pure Tamil  
The Sanskrit text about the Nāyaka of Madurai Cuntara Pāṇṭiyaṇ,  
On the six-legged seat [*arukārpīṭam*] with jewels emitting rays of  
light.<sup>33</sup>

What precisely is this "six-legged seat" that Āṇatāri so specifically foregrounds at the outset of his work? The remainder of the *Cuntara Pāṇṭiyam* provides us with no further clues, but fortunately Āṇatāri is not the only one of our authors to mention just such a six-legged seat with the same emphatic placement in the introductory verses of a work. In fact, the first verse of Parañcōti's *TVP* is structured around a fourfold pun on the term *arukārpīṭam*, suggesting that the term is more than an idiosyncratic turn of phrase:

Like the nectar, the treasure presented [*arankērrum*] by Māl who  
had churned the ocean, exalted on his serpent seat [*arukārpīṭam*],  
Having sung in rare Tamil the greatness of Madurai where the  
female beetles [*arukārpēṭu*] play music,



Parañcōti Muṇi premiered [*arañkērrināṇ*] [this work] from the six-legged seat [*arukārpīṭam*] surrounded by the gods in the Sanctuary of Cokkanātha, whose crown is dignified by the glory of a six-strand topknot [*arukārpīṭu*].<sup>34</sup>

Not only does Parañcōti inform us here of the location of his “six-legged seat”—that is, in the interior of the Madurai temple’s shrine (*caṇṇati/sannidhi*) dedicated to Śiva as Sundareśvara or Cokkanātha—but he also connects this particular ritual platform directly with the institution of the literary premiere, or *arañkērram*. The *arañkērram*, as a literary-performative institution, survived well into the nineteenth century,<sup>35</sup> as a central pillar of preprint culture Tamil literary practice.<sup>36</sup> Seventeenth-century evidence suggests unambiguously that the *arañkērram* was an established institution of Tamil literary performance in the period; one notable instance is an extant correspondence written by the poet Antakakkavi to his patron inviting him to the *arañkērram* of his forthcoming work.<sup>37</sup> What we learn here, however, is that in the Nāyaka-period literary sphere in which Parañcōti premiered his highly influential *TVP*, the *arañkērram* of a *talapurāṇam*, and possibly of other works bearing on the sacred sites of the Tamil Śaiva religious landscape, seems to have been directly facilitated by temple institutions. Thus, as Parañcōti informs us quite clearly, his *TVP* was debuted in the Madurai temple within the central shrine of Sundareśvara itself. Further evidence is supplied by the repeated mention of the *arukārpīṭam*, evidently a type of ceremonial platform on which a poet sat when premiering his work.<sup>38</sup> Although little memory remains today about just what type of material artifact the *arukārpīṭam* was and how it was employed in literary performance, sufficient evidence exists to confirm that such a platform did (or perhaps still does) exist in the Minākṣi-Sundareśvara Temple,<sup>39</sup> if not also in similar Śaiva temples elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Succinctly, Parañcōti informs us here that his *TVP* was presented publicly within a ceremonial-performative context that linked the text’s literary virtues with the temple itself as a venue of performance, a politico-religious institution that structured the social prestige of literary patronage.

But just who were these sponsors of the literary works, such as Parañcōti’s, that were publicly premiered at major temple sites? In some cases, temple officials or priests seem to have played an instrumental role in encouraging an author to embark on composing a sacerdotal literary work in the Tamil language, ostensibly translated from a Sanskrit original. Vīmanāta Paṇṭitar, author of the *Katampavaṇapurāṇam*, for instance, describes his impetus to begin his work in just such a fashion, claiming that the temple priests (*talattōr*) requested that he translate into Tamil the Sanskrit Purāṇa on the greatness of the Kadambavana, the Kadamba forest that preceded the urbanized landscape of Madurai:

When the temple priests [*talattōr*—endowed with a fame that that has risen to flourish across the prosperous earth

That is suitable to those who worship of the Lord who lives in  
 southern Madurai of singular fertility—said to tell in the southern  
 language,  
 With love that perceives clearly, the northern book on the Greatness  
 of the cool Katampa forest fertile with beauty,  
 I commenced to narrate through His grace, with verdantly flourish-  
 ing garlands of verse in the Viruttam meter.<sup>40</sup>

That said, as the regional megatemples of south India—such as the Madurai temple—had by this period become significant centers of political and economic exchange, we should not underestimate the impetus for subordinate chieftains to participate as exhaustively as possible in this transactional network. Numerous other authors, such as Aṇṭāri, author of the *Cuntara Pāṇṭiyam*, cite as individual patrons of their works, not the Nāyaka kings of Madurai or Tanjavur, but generally their subvassals who had established smaller regional courts at various locations throughout the Tamil region. This decentralized form of patronage is a distinctive feature of what has been described, though not without some trepidation, as the feudal political structure of the Nāyaka regimes. From the Vijayanagara period onward, the term *nāyaka* was applied to describe a regional feudatory ruler subservient to the centralized authority of the empire. Even after Madurai and Tanjavur had attained functional independence from the declining Vijayanagara state, the term was retained as a key feature of political discourse, first perhaps as a rhetorical gesture of humility but later as a functional description of the similar political hierarchy that had emerged under the Nāyaka regimes themselves. Nāyaka vassals, too, often referred to themselves by the title *nāyaka*, and breakaway states frequently emerged in competition with the generally prevailing authority of Madurai and Tanjavur. This increasingly decentralized political structure appears to have provided subchieftains and subordinate officers with a heightened incentive to engage directly in the patronage of Tamil literature, especially works of more overtly theological import that offered avenues for advancement in the competitive prestige economy centered on major temple institutions.<sup>41</sup>

Such was the case with Aṇṭāri, author of the *Cuntara Pāṇṭiyam*, who in the above verse describes his patron as a certain subordinate officer, Tiruviruntavaṅ of Kallur. He then further elaborates the complex chain of hierarchy that linked his direct patron, Tiruviruntavaṅ, with the centralized Nāyaka authority of Madurai under Kacci Virappa Nāyaka, apparently through the mediation of a certain tertiary figure, Cevvanti, who held some official role at the Madurai court and evidently held favor among the Nāyaka as well:

The truthful southern one, Tiruviruntāṅ Cavuntaraṅ—friend of  
 Cevvanti of the *sabhā*, who is endowed with the favor of such a man,  
 surrounded by sovereigns,

Known as the king Kacci Virappa—said to tell with a southern  
treatise

The story flourishing in the language of the gods; thus I undertook  
to tell it.<sup>42</sup>

Such was the case as well for the author of the *Cokkanātar Ulā*, Purāṇa Tirumalainātar, who names as his patron Vīramāraṇ, functionary or ruler in a certain locality known as Mulaicai, whose anniversary of rule he celebrates with the composition of the work in question, narrativizing the occasion as the impetus for Cokkanātha's public procession:

On the day commemorating the affectionate rule of the earth,  
Surrounded by the ocean, by Vīramāraṇ, of southern Mulaicai of the  
Vedic books,  
The primordial sovereign god, the Lord residing of Madurai  
Tiruvālavāy,  
Graciously came in procession.<sup>43</sup>

In short, whereas patronage may in some cases have derived from temple officials directly, in most cases it was more likely granted by various subvassals of the Nāyaka rulers or upstart rivals at minor courts who aimed to enhance their standing in the economy of ritual exchange centered on honors distributed by the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple. A third factor, however, that significantly influenced the structures of literary circulation among Tamil Śaiva poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was participation in the devotional networks of prominent Tamil Śaiva monastic centers, such as Tarumapuram or Tiruvavatuturai. These monastic centers had increased dramatically in economic social prominence over the preceding centuries<sup>44</sup> and, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, seem to have provided a crucial venue for circulating of literary works and fostering poetic talent among those who wished to participate in Tamil literary circles.<sup>45</sup> Cultivating a distinctively Tamil Śaiva identity in contrast to the Sanskritic lineages of the Śaiva Siddhānta,<sup>46</sup> these monasteries attracted mainly lay participants of Vēḷāḷa social origin.<sup>47</sup> While Vēḷāḷa castes were technically considered Śūdra in origin, their representatives had often attained an elevated social standing in this period as major landholders and managers of agricultural property.<sup>48</sup>

It is no accident, in fact, that the vast majority of Śaiva poets writing in Tamil during this period who provide us with any biographical information explicitly professed a Vēḷāḷa caste origin<sup>49</sup> as well as affiliation with spiritual preceptors of the Tamil Śaiva lineages. Among the authors of *TVP* variant narratives, a prime example is Vīmanāta Paṇṭitar, author of the *Katampavaṇapurāṇam*, who directly links his poetic endeavors with his caste origin:

I aim to expound the ancient book, the Purāṇam of the forest of  
 young Katampa trees with golden blossoms, by the nectarean  
 grace of the Lord,  
 While sweetly singing poets recite, in fertile Tamil, in the manner  
 stated by Agastya, sage of the Potiyam mountain.  
 I, Vīmanātaṇ of Ilambur, who gives renown to the Lord with the  
 great lotus eyes, the fame of the southern king,  
 Examining thoroughly the Purāṇam that inquires into the true path,  
 I compose the great devotion of the Vēlālas of the clan of the river  
 Gaṅgā.<sup>50</sup>

It was not merely caste alone, however, that provided a social foundation for the continued patronage of Tamil literature; rather, it required the mediation of monastic institutions that structured their ideological self-representation on the Vēlāla heritage of its founders and lay participants. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Vēlāla authors of Tamil Śaiva literature in this period often participated openly and actively in the development of these increasingly prominent devotional centers. The prototypic example of such a poet is Kumārakurupara, a seventeenth-century contemporary of Tirumalai Nāyaka who authored numerous works dedicated primarily to the goddess Mīnākṣī of Madurai.<sup>51</sup> After a long-standing connection with the *maṭams* at Tarumapuram and Tiruvavatuturai, Kumārakurupara is believed to have been sent northward by his lineage preceptors to establish a branch *maṭam* of the Tamil Śaiva tradition in Varanasi. From among authors of the TVP corpus, one highly specific reference speaks to the sectarian allegiance of the family of Purāṇa Tirumalainātar, author of the *Cokkanātar Ulā*. His son, in his grammatical work the *Citamparappāṭiyal*, informs us of his family's close affiliation with the Tamil Śaiva lineage,<sup>52</sup> referring unmistakably to the lineage's founder, Meykaṇṭar, and even suggesting that he composed the work in question at the behest of a later preceptorial figure, Tatuvaṇṇanaprakācar (Skt. Tattvajñānaprakāśa):

Meykaṇṭaṇ of Veṇṇai, whose gardens flourish with flowers,  
 Having come as Tatuvaṇṇanaprakācar, who adorns Kanchi with fame,  
 By the grace of him who said to tell it, so that the meters may flourish,  
 Having praised his feet, I apportion the *Citamparappāṭiyal*.<sup>53</sup>

A great deal of research remains to be done on the influence of Tamil Śaiva monasteries on both the literary sphere of early modern Tamil Nadu and its expression in public religious culture, despite their social influence and avid patronage of religious expression in diverse media. For instance, a significant portion of temple mural paintings produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was sponsored directly by highly ranked administrators or members of these same Tamil Śaiva monasteries.<sup>54</sup> In short, present evidence strongly suggests that the

Tamil literary sphere of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had become intimately intertwined with the Tamil Śaiva monastic lineages as an institutional foundation for literary patronage and circulation. The dynamics of Tamil textuality in the early modern Tamil country, then, were markedly distinct from what we observe in the case of both Telugu and Sanskrit literature of the period: Tamil literariness, in early modern Madurai, was centered upon its production, performance, and circulation within the Śaiva monastery.

The patronage of Telugu literature, on the other hand, even within the same time frame and geographical region, diverges significantly from the Tamil case. One striking example, for instance, is the *Cokkanātha Caritramu* of Tiruvēṅḷakavi, a text that relates the same cycle of narratives but with a rhetoric that marks its social location as distinct from that of its Tamil counterparts. This unique work was patronized by a pair of subchieftains, Pedda Rāma and Cinna Rāma,<sup>55</sup> who operated out of southern Tamil Nadu in the vicinity of Ramnad. It is arguably the earliest example of a complete translation—or perhaps more accurately “transcreation”—of the complete sixty-four sacred games of Śiva into a language other than Tamil, and it dates to the mid-sixteenth century and likely predates the most influential renderings of the narrative, the *TVP* of Parañcōti and the Hālāśya Māhātmya. As a result, this previously unstudied work stands well-positioned to expand our perspective on the institutional foundations and linguistic media of literary circulation during this period.

In terms of patronage, the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*, much like a number of the Tamil texts of the period, was sponsored by relatively minor chieftains from a sub-regional court to the south of Madurai. Its performative rhetoric, however, is quite different from that of its Tamil counterparts, explicitly evoking the imagery and prestige of a courtly literary *sabhā*—a world where kings are attended with yak-tail fans and offered an uninterrupted flow of betel leaf. One might even describe the setting as “secular” in this case, as the work betrays no connection with any temple-based or monastic institution but, rather, emphasizes the aestheticized political power of its patrons. As we can glean from the following passage, Pedda Rāma and Cinna Rāma felt that their worldly prestige stood to benefit considerably from attracting skilled Telugu poets hailing from long-celebrated literary families:

“Praiseworthy among the Bhaṭṭa lineage, like green camphor,  
The son of Tipparāja, Tiruvēṅḷaluṇḍu, clever at propagating through  
narrative”—

When he was so informed, that king of men Cinna Rāma,  
Then, with great joy, called me and welcomed me with respect,  
Praising me and offering me betel—

“O faultless person, the younger brother of your grandfather,  
Timmarāja,

Exalted across the entire earth, received the name  
‘King of Green Camphor’ from Praudharāya [of Vijayanagara]—

Timmarāja begat Tipparāja, who extolled kings brilliantly.  
 You, an Indra among poets, who are praised by the noble,  
 Are the son of that literary connoisseur [*rasika*].  
 You have a mind dexterous in the play of illustrious poetry.

Therefore, compose a poem for me, and make it known across the  
 earth—

In the Dvipada style, with clarity, as a great exemplar,  
 So that it shines in the minds of great poets,  
 Such that they praise it in their minds with sweet sentences—  
 About the sixty-four sports of the one of stainless, auspicious acts,  
 The Lord of Madurai, in the Andhra language,  
 Dedicated to the name of Pedda Rāma,  
 An Indra for the grandness of his good deeds.”<sup>56</sup>

In this respect, the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*, unlike the Tamil texts we have examined, is undoubtedly an heir to the political, social, and literary values of the Sanskrit cosmopolis. Unsurprisingly, the linguistic register as well is highly Sanskritized, and we meet with a celebration of cosmopolitan literary history in the guise of the traditional *kavi praśamsā* (praise of previous poets), not only of the great celebrities of the Telugu literary world but of the Sanskrit tradition as well:

Having extolled all the poets existing on the earth  
 With true sentences of praise shining with true devotion—  
 Those by the names of Vyāsa, Vālmiki, Mahākavi Kālidāsa,  
 Bhavabhūti, Daṇḍi, Māghu, Bhīma of Vēmulavāḍa,<sup>57</sup> Nannaya,  
 Tikkana, Errana, Śrinātha—making effort with great devotion  
 To compose such a work by which work I obtain the desired aim.<sup>58</sup>

Succinctly, it is the Telugu literary sphere that has inherited many of the more overtly political functions of aestheticized discourse in Nāyaka-period south India. The same pattern holds true for the central Nāyaka courts of Madurai and Tanjavur,<sup>59</sup> which extensively patronized works of Telugu literature but rarely works in Tamil, a strategy that was perhaps intended in part as a political statement of hegemony by a dynasty still perceived by the local populace as foreign in origin, Telugu speakers by heritage rather than Tamil. The Nāyaka rulers of Tanjavur in particular were not only avid connoisseurs of Telugu verse but also themselves active participants in the literary sphere. A prime example is Raghunātha Nāyaka,<sup>60</sup> who as a child was showered in gold (*kanakābhiṣeka*) for his extemporaneous *yakṣagāna* drama, and who continued throughout his career to craft ornate renditions of the Sanskrit classics, including a Telugu adaptation of the *Naiṣadhiyacarita*. In fact, for the Tanjavur Nāyakas, literary talent was primarily a royal virtue embodied in the king's own persona. This royal embodiment of poetic virtuosity was iconically

represented by the Śārādā Dhvajamu, the “literary banner” gracing the court to announce, for instance, that no poet could surpass the poetic prowess of Vīrarāghava Nāyaka,<sup>61</sup> Tanjavur’s king, a prolific author of exclusively Telugu compositions. Language, in short, was a central determining factor of literary excellence at the Nāyaka courts. For the duration of the Nāyaka regimes, cosmopolitan courtly literature remained the exclusive property of Telugu and Sanskrit rather than Tamil, the true vernacular of the region, which had successfully carved out for itself an independent institutional domain.

Given the preceding evidence—that is, in light of the multicentric structure of literary production in the Nāyaka period—how can we explain the increasing popularity of the *TVP* across the boundaries of language and place? Previous scholarship has speculated that the *TVP* owed its popularity directly to Tirumalai Nāyaka, thought to have been a likely patron for Parañcōti’s celebrated re-creation of the legends, but the sixteenth-century evidence renders this conclusion highly improbable. And yet, given the diverse attributions of patronage for these works, no single regime or ruler can be held responsible for their circulation, including—as counterintuitive as it may seem—the Nāyaka rulers of Madurai, in light of the central iconicity the legends eventually attained as signifiers of Madurai’s cultural heritage and religious authority. Alternatively, as many of the narratives record exploits of the quasi-historical rulers of the Pandian dynasty, one might have suspected an incentive for the southern Pandians of Tenkasi to encourage the production and circulation of a narrative that eulogizes the ancient Pandian dynasty. No evidence, however, is available to support such a hypothesis. As a result, we are left to posit a much more complex discursive dynamic by which literary influence and interchange traveled fluidly beyond the boundaries of social institutions and regional polities, a process deserving of further research and inquiry.

Although an intriguing phenomenon in its own right, the multiplicity of institutional sites that supported literary production in the Nāyaka period also bears significant implications for our understanding of how literary themes are developed, circulated, and disseminated into the domain of public culture. The *TVP* is simply one example of a narrative that grew to maturity and attained its now cherished place in cultural memory by navigating this multicentric, multilingual literary milieu. As a literary theme that received substantial attention throughout the sixteenth century across the boundaries of language, institution, and locality, the *TVP* appears to defy a number of our normative assumptions about how works of literature attain a position of social or cultural prominence, whether through the genius of an individual poet or through the direct patronage of a single political ruler or other social agent wishing to legitimize his claim to authority. In fact, the *TVP*’s widespread dissemination throughout the sixteenth century—and this presuming a flawed and incomplete historical archive—defies the very possibility of reading its reemergence in the Nāyaka period as a top-down act of political



legitimation. To the contrary, Tirumalai Nāyaka interventions coincide closely with the period of textual codification witnessed in the following decades, as the *TVP* began to circulate outside the boundaries of elite literary circles, entering the domain of popular literary culture.

TWIN TEXTS: THE CANONIZATION OF THE  
*TIRUVIḶAIYĀṬAL PURĀṆAM*

Most importantly for our purposes, none of the works noted above appear to be indebted to either of the two exemplars of the *TVP* genre given historical primacy by existing scholarly literature, namely the *TVP* of Parañcōti and the Sanskrit Hālāśya Māhātmya, allegedly the direct sources for all representations of the “Sacred Games” in the centuries after Nampi. In fact, two of the most interesting of these works, the *Cuntara Pāñṇiyam* and the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*, are sufficiently similar on structural grounds to that of Parañcōti’s *TVP* to suggest the genuine emergence of a shared template for narrative improvisation. But the works diverge in crucial respects, bringing seriously into question the presupposition that all of the texts could have been adapted unilaterally from a single point of origin. Reactions in the scholarly literature have varied considerably, ranging from that of Harman (1987a), who has emphasized the purely rhetorical role of Sanskrit “originals” in Tamil Purāṇic composition, to those of Jeyechandrun (1985) and Wilden (2014), who virtually assume that Parañcōti translated the Hālāśya Māhātmya directly into Tamil. And yet, to date, I have not once encountered a single citation of the Hālāśya Māhātmya originating earlier than the late seventeenth century.<sup>62</sup> Internal textual evidence, on the other hand, speaks volumes about this issue, but only when Parañcōti’s *TVP* and the Hālāśya Māhātmya are brought into dialogue with a much broader spectrum of contemporary literary production. As I argue below, the suspiciously similar contents of Parañcōti’s *TVP* and the Hālāśya Māhātmya pair them as “twin texts,” so to speak, strongly suggesting at the very least that the Hālāśya Māhātmya could not have been known to any vernacular poets before Parañcōti.

Beyond the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*’s inclusion of three of Nampi’s original games, perhaps the work’s most suggestively interstitial feature is its “elision” of the prolific Purāṇic frame narratives that feature prominently in both Parañcōti’s *TVP* and the HM. While the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*, much like Nampi’s earlier *TVP*, undertakes a streamlined narration of each of the sixty-four games, showing no predilection for mythological elaboration, the latter canonical narrative is scattered with mythological backstories and nonnarrative materials—from ancient curses to applied religious observances (*vratas*) and spontaneous *stotras*—as one would expect from the texture of a typical Sanskrit Purāṇa. Some of these digressions, such as the apparently irrelevant Somavāravrata chapter in the HM and the

*stotra* sung by Patañjali upon witnessing Śiva's dance after the sacred marriage in Madurai, feature only in the HM and no other known variants. Most mythological addenda, however, although preserved identically in both Parañcōti's *TVP* and the HM, appear in no other early rendering of the "Sacred Games," including the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*, which otherwise conforms closely in narrative structure to the later *TVP* and the HM.<sup>63</sup> Combined with his inclusion of Nampi's three original episodes, however, Tiruvēṅkaḷakavi's apparent unawareness of *any* of the later Purāṇic frame narratives strongly suggests that he did not have either the HM or Parañcōti's *TVP* available as a model when composing the *Cokkanātha Caritramu*. Moreover, given his deep respect for Sanskritic culture (such as a lengthy digression on the virtues of sixteenth-century Varanasi), heavily Sanskritized vocabulary, and the Purāṇic narrative style employed in his introductory frame, it is highly unlikely that Tiruvēṅkaḷakavi would have neglected entirely these new additions had he indeed "translated" the HM into Telugu.

One prime example of such a mythological excursion, and a fairly controversial one at that, sets the stage for the origin story of the Tamil Caṅkam and is featured prominently in both Parañcōti's *TVP* and the HM, a series of narratives that eulogize the prehistoric efflorescence of Tamil literary culture in the city of Madurai. Although this particular narrative is unattested before the *TVP* and the HM, its distinctive features in the HM have been cited as evidence for both the priority and relative antiquity of that work by scholars of Tamil literary history such as David Shulman (2001). Our story begins with Brahmā and his three wives, who have set out on a pilgrimage to Varanasi to bathe in the Ganges together. Upon their arrival at the sacred river, Sarasvatī's attention is suddenly diverted by the melodies of a celestial musician of sorts, and she abandons the task at hand in pursuit of the unseen singer. When she returns to rejoin her husband and cowives Gāyatrī and Sāvitrī, Sarasvatī discovers that Brahmā and the others have already completed their ablutions, and Brahmā is distinctly displeased at her unexplained absence at the crucial moment of ritual purification. Angered at her apparent irresponsibility, Brahmā curses her to undergo forty-eight mortal births in recompense for her lapse. When Sarasvatī, distraught, begs Brahmā to relent, he modifies the curse so that she will be born simultaneously as the poets of the Tamil Caṅkam represented by the forty-eight letters of the alphabet, accompanied by Śiva as the forty-ninth poet, the embodied form of the letter *a*. In Parañcōti's words:

When she said, "You who have crossed beyond the travails of the  
flesh, shall I,  
Who am your companion in this rare life, truly be cast into a mortal  
womb?"  
Seeing the lady of the white lotus, in which the bees submerged in  
its honey, who

Sounded the Vedas, the four-faced leader spoke, in order to soothe her distress:

“Let it be that the forty-eight letters, renowned among the  
Fifty-one, known as those beginning with *ā* and ending with *ha*,  
Having become forty-eight poets, will be incarnated from your  
body,  
With its budding breasts, in the world surrounded by the excavated  
sea.

Permeating all of the letters appearing as such, enlivening [*uyttiṭum*]  
them so that they appear  
With various motions [*iyakkam*],<sup>64</sup> having acquired a natural form  
suitable to the  
Body [*mey*] of each of them, the Lord who flows as the primacy  
belonging to the letter *a*  
Is, indeed, our Lord of the Ālavāy of the Three Tamils, in just such a  
manner.

Each of them having become a single scholar, adopting a sacred  
form,  
Having ascended to the great jeweled seat of the Caṅkam, and  
He, having become the forty-ninth, manifesting erudition to each in  
their hearts,  
They will guard poetic learning with delight,” said the Lotus-Born  
Lord.<sup>65</sup>

And as similarly recounted in the HM:

Then, the Speaker of Speech, afraid, bowed and touched  
The pair of lotus feet of her husband with her hands, and petitioned  
him:

“All of this rebuking was done by me out of ignorance.  
Forgive me, Ocean of Compassion! Look upon me with your side-  
long glance.”

[Brahmā replied:]

“I, petitioned, along with my vehicle again and again by Brāhmī  
have given a counter curse to that Bhārati out of compassion.

The letters from *a* to *sa*, consisting of speech, which have come forth  
from your body,  
of clever intellect, will be born together on the earth with different  
forms.

The all-pervasive Lord Sadāśiva, bearing the form of the letter *ha*,  
 Shall become a single lord of poets in the midst of those clever-  
 minded ones.  
 And the forty-nine the true poets of the Sangham.<sup>66</sup>

Aside from the often noted confusion about the total number of letters, which may result in part from the ambiguities of cross-linguistic transmission,<sup>67</sup> the most salient feature of this mythological prehistory is that the Caṅkam poets have been symbolically encoded as the incarnate letters of the *Sanskrit* alphabet, which together are said to comprise the body of Sarasvatī herself, the power of language. Shulman (2001), for instance, argues that this esoteric imagery provides unambiguous evidence that the HM originated from an older, pan-Sanskritic Śākta theological system,<sup>68</sup> which was later imperfectly transmitted into the Tamil cultural sphere in Parañcōti's *TVP*, resulting in a denuding of the HM's specifically Sanskritic Śākta vocabulary. It is true, in fact, that this episode, as well as numerous other passages in the HM, are heavily overlaid with Śākta terminology, from the reference to the *saṅghaphalaka*—the Caṅkam plank, the seat of the poets in the assembly hall—as a *vidyāpīṭha* or *māṭṛkāpīṭha*<sup>69</sup> to references to a set of *navasāktis*, or nine fierce goddesses, who are somewhat less coherently integrated into the overall plot of the *Purāṇa*.<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, none of these terms are truly tradition-specific enough to evince a definitive origin in any pan-Sanskritic tradition of esoteric Śāktism, much less, as Shulman contends, within an unspecified Śākta lineage from the northwest of the Indian subcontinent.

We do, on the other hand, find numerous exact parallels to the Śākta terminology of the HM from within the Tamil Śaiva canon itself, suggesting that we need not look as far afield for their origin as Shulman has contended. In particular, the *Tirumantiram*, which notoriously preserves numerous remnants of a proto-Śrīvidyā esotericism that seems to originate in the Kashmiri Śākta-Śaiva traditions exported to the South, repeatedly invokes the set of fifty-one letters of the alphabet as central elements of its various *yantras* and other esoteric imagery. On several occasions, we also find reference to Śiva as embodying the foremost of these syllables, the letter *a*:

From the beginning she is the life of the fifty-one  
 Letters that constitute the alphabets.  
 The bejeweled one is with Śiva  
 In the *cakra* of the letters.<sup>71</sup>

Chambers are twenty-five; each contains two letters;  
 Letters enclosed are fifty; the commencing letter is *A*;  
*Kṣa* is the final letter; to the fifty is added *Om*.  
 In all, fifty-one letters are inscribed in the chambers.<sup>72</sup>

Although the Tirumantiram was most likely composed centuries before Parañcōti's *TVP*,<sup>73</sup> as the tenth book of the Tamil Śaiva canon, its imagery understandably maintained widespread popularity among Parañcōti's contemporaries, even surfacing in publicly available works of Tamil Purāṇic literature. The trope of the fifty-one letters, for instance, makes an appearance in the *Cuntara Pāṇṭiyam* as well, entirely disconnected from any mention of the Caṅkam or its myth of origin:

We bow, to escape the ocean of existence, to the raft that is the pair  
of feet marked with the *cakra*  
Of that very Cokkaṇ of the beautiful twelve-petaled lotus  
[*dvādaśānta*], of which the radiance is ripened  
In the void that has come together as Śiva and Śakti, *nāda*  
[resonance] and *bindu* [drop],  
Where the various lotuses—whose petals are fifty-one letters—  
unfold in a single syllable.

Given these striking parallels, the esoteric imagery that may seem to betray an extralocal origin for the Sanskrit HM in fact evokes the flavor of a distinctively Tamil Śākta-Śaivism, leaving little remaining doubt that the HM emerged not from any pan-Indic Sanskrit tradition but directly from the Tamil Śaiva textual culture of the early to mid-second millennium. Although preserving a number of originally Sanskrit features—from the inclusion of the letter *kṣa* in the alphabet to translocal yogic terminology such as *nāda*, *bindu*, and *dvādaśānta*—the imagery of the Tirumantiram had been adopted and reworked for centuries within the confines of the Tamil Śaiva tradition. Far from blending uneasily with Tamil Śaiva theology as Shulman would have it, the fifty-one letters play a central role in a subtle cosmology that had been accepted centuries earlier into the core repertoire of Tamil Śākta-Śaiva tradition, remaining in circulation through the seventeenth century and beyond.

This being the case, the frame narrative of the Tamil Caṅkam cycle simply cannot indicate an earlier, extra-Tamil origin for the HM. To the contrary, the fact that both the HM and Parañcōti's *TVP* preserve such a memorable and idiosyncratic Purāṇic accretion in nearly identical form—one that is attested by no other known variant dating to the sixteenth century—establishes beyond doubt that the circumstances of their composition were directly linked, but within a much more delimited time frame than previously suspected. The twin texts appear to postdate the *Cokkanātha Caritramu* of the mid-sixteenth century, which closely resembles the later narrative structure but includes none of the Purāṇic accretions and preserves Nampī's earlier episodes, which were forgotten by later audiences. All evidence considered, the HM was most likely re-Sanskritized directly from Parañcōti's fabulously successful *TVP* shortly after its composition in response to demands for a Sanskrit original, although it remains possible that the Sanskrit Purāṇic version

was “found”—that is, commissioned—and employed as a model for Parañcōti’s work. In any case, it is beyond a doubt that the Sanskrit HM never circulated in south Indian literary venues before Parañcōti’s *TVP* had substantially influenced the public culture of Madurai and the temple of Minākṣī and Sundareśvara.

Some decades later, however, Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita, luminary of the Sanskrit literary society of Madurai, had personally gained access to the HM, a fact that can be gleaned through a careful reading of his own rendition of the “Sacred Games” as a Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, his *Śivalilārṇava*. In the course of the Caṅkam cycle of episodes, after the goddess Sarasvatī had taken incarnation as the forty-eight Caṅkam poets in Madurai, the current Pandian ruler, Campaka Pāṇḍya (so named for his well-known preference for the fragrance of *campaka* flowers), had encountered a troubling dilemma. During the course of an intimate evening with his newly wed queen, Campaka Pāṇḍya discovered that her hair was endowed with a rather distinctive fragrance and began to contemplate its origin. The king was so troubled by his uncertainty that he promptly announced a prize of a purse of gold coins for any poet who could produce a compelling and eloquent verse explaining whether or not a woman’s hair can produce such a fragrance without the presence of flowers or artificial perfumes. The prize-winning verse, which Śiva himself composed and entrusted to a young Brahmin bachelor named Tarumi, was widely understood from the earliest attestations of the Caṅkam narratives to be a genuine Caṅkam-period verse preserved in one of the anthologies, the *Kuṇṭokai*:

O bee with your hidden wings, you have lived a life in search of honey.  
 So tell me truly from what you have seen.  
 Among all the flowers you know, is there one that smells more sweet  
 Than the hair of this woman with her peacock gait and close-set teeth  
 And ancient eternal love?<sup>74</sup>

In the course of adapting this episode, the necessity naturally arose for both Nilakaṇṭha and the author of the HM to translate this verse into Sanskrit, preserving in the process a distinct linguistic texture from the surrounding narration. Beyond any possible coincidence, however, both the HM and the *Śivalilārṇava* employ precisely the same verse,<sup>75</sup> in *āryā* meter, as a translation for the Tamil of the second stanza of the *Kuṇṭokai*:

O bee, you know the fragrances of flowers. Tell me truly today:  
 What fragrance can compare with the fragrance in the locks of a  
 noble woman’s hair?<sup>76</sup>

Nilakaṇṭha’s *Śivalilārṇava* (ca. 1625–1650), then, provides a definitive *terminus ante quem* for the twin canonical renderings of the “Sacred Games,” the HM and Parañcōti’s *TVP*, which as a conjoined pair may have been composed a mere decade or two before. From a strictly literary historical standpoint, this exercise in dating may appear somewhat inconsequential. From the standpoint

of political history, however, the idea that the publicly acclaimed versions of the “Sacred Games” should have originated during this particular period demands a consideration of the narrative’s role in Nāyaka statecraft and in the city of Madurai, a cultural capital rapidly transforming under the influence of the Madurai Nāyaka regime. Following the reign of Viśvanātha Nāyaka (1529–1564), who by the end of his career had achieved de facto independence from the declining Vijayanagara Empire, the religio-political landscape of Madurai took on a newfound importance for the agenda of the Madurai Nāyakas, who may well have found it advantageous to highlight the rich cultural legacy of the ancient Pandian capital at the heart of their kingdom. Given the political, economic, and cultural significance of the south Indian temple complex during this period, the cultural renaissance instituted by the successors of Viśvanātha Nāyaka naturally began with an expansion of the most influential regional temples—particularly the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple, the geographical and cultural center of Madurai.

“THE PASSION OF HICKS FOR VERNACULAR TEXTS”:  
THE ŚIVALĪLĀRṆAVA OF NĪLAKAṆṬHA DĪKṢITA

The “Sacred Games of Śiva” had become a pillar of local culture and religion and, in the literary sphere, a theme primarily inviting response rather than active recreation. Perhaps the most influential of these responses, articulated during the height of the public codification of the *TVP*, came from the pen of none other than Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita himself, one of the most celebrated figures in the literary and courtly circles of Madurai during the reign of Tirumalai Nāyaka. A closer look at his response—a Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, the *Śivalīlārṇava*—will illuminate the dynamics of response to an emergent fixture of popular culture and to the place of Sanskrit language and literature within the multilingual, multicentric literary sphere of seventeenth-century Madurai. Succinctly, Nīlakaṇṭha appears to have served as a sort of premodern public intellectual, remembered primarily for his interventions in the local and regional circulation of Sanskrit discourse. Indeed, his bold style and idiom display a degree of intellectual freedom than is typically associated with court poets of the cosmopolitan Sanskrit world order. Although unquestionably surviving through royal patronage, Nīlakaṇṭha never once deigned to mention the name of his patron in a single one of his works, a far cry from the politicization of Sanskrit aesthetic discourse regnant in Indic courtly culture for well over a millennium. And yet, we never meet with mention of a *Tirumalābhyudaya* (Victory of Tirumalai Nāyaka) to match the *Rāghunāthavilāsa* (The play of Rāghunātha Nāyaka) of Nīlakaṇṭha’s rival to the north, Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dīkṣita, patronized by the Nāyaka court of Tanjavur. Rather, Nīlakaṇṭha’s literary style is fiercely nonconformist and unrelentingly satirical, humorously highlighting the social degeneracy of his contemporaries as well as the decadence he



perceived in Nāyaka period Sanskrit literature. Given this precedent, it should perhaps come as no surprise at all that Nīlakaṇṭha was bold enough to adapt into Sanskrit the most popular vernacular work of his day, the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*, while simultaneously denouncing the very idea of vernacular literariness: “[Bad poets] have acquired a taste for poetic feats [*citra*] of word and meaning—*much like the passion of hicks for vernacular texts.*”<sup>77</sup>

Much like Nīlakaṇṭha’s other works of *kāvya*, the *Śivalīlārṇava* is replete with hints of its author’s intention and deliberately incisive wit. Indeed, the precedent of Nīlakaṇṭha’s idiosyncratic style, as well as the historical evidence of his public visibility in mid-seventeenth-century Madurai, would caution us against neglecting these hints of Nīlakaṇṭha’s contrarian ambitions by reading the *Śivalīlārṇava* as a passive fulfillment of royal commission or subservience to popular fashion. Similarly, we would be ill advised to read the *Śivalīlārṇava*, rather presumptuously, as a mere “translation” of a timeless—and essentially ahistorical—work of vernacular literature, thus reducing Nīlakaṇṭha’s agenda to faithful replication of the original Tamil. This is not to say, however, that Nīlakaṇṭha approached the narrative of Śiva’s sacred games with anything less than the highest respect. To the contrary, as a fiercely loyal devotee of Mīnākṣī, he exhibits a deep and sincere reverence for her earthly manifestation and sport with Śiva throughout the *kāvya*. This reverence, however, is directed in Nīlakaṇṭha’s voice to a canonical narrative that has been deliberately divorced from its original linguistic context. Distancing himself from “the passion of hicks for vernacular texts,” Nīlakaṇṭha has represented a traditionally Tamil legend that, for him, derives none of its virtue from an intrinsic connection to Tamil language or culture.

In the case of the *Śivalīlārṇava*, the re-Sanskritization of a vernacular work of literature reversed the typical historical dynamic of vernacularization: rather than the expected localization of the transregional, we witness a deliberate deregionalization of local culture. It is unquestionably true that the Sanskrit of seventeenth-century south India regularly addressed itself to local concerns, but not necessarily in acquiescence or outright adulation. In fact, that Sanskrit literature remained a vital medium of discourse implies, by definition, that Sanskrit remained a vehicle for contestation as well as imitation. The *Śivalīlārṇava*, then, exemplifies an intriguing inversion of the vernacular by the still-vibrant values and presuppositions of a Sanskritic worldview. In the case at hand, two particularly noteworthy features stand out in Nīlakaṇṭha’s treatment of traditionally Tamil motifs, both of which deserve further exploration: first, Nīlakaṇṭha defiantly inserts the distinctive idiom of Sanskrit intellectual discourse into explicitly non-Sanskritic contexts; and second, he intentionally reads the canonical repertoire of Tamil Śaivism through the lens of the Sanskrit Śaiva tradition, as if to claim these legends for a Smārta-Śaiva orthodoxy that challenged the language and caste boundaries distinctive to the Tamil Śaiva community.

Certainly, it is no easy task to denude such a regionally inflected cycle of legends of its regional character, or even to “transregionalize” it—that is, to render it accessible to a cultured audience beyond the confines of its locality of origin. And like many Tamil works of the period, the *TVP* is emphatically Tamil in its ideology and literary texture. Among the sixty-four games of Śiva, several bear the overt impressions of a thousand years of Tamil literary and devotional history, reworking narratives from the Periya Purāṇam and other mainstays of the Śaiva canon that had long become ingrained in public memory. References to the Tamil Caṅkam, or to the Tamil Śaiva bhakti saints, for instance, would scarcely seem intelligible when translated out of a regional cultural framework. And yet, Nīlakaṇṭha proves himself exceptionally talented at rendering the core narratives of Tamil Śaiva culture in the idiom of elite Sanskritic, and even *śāstric*, discourse.

Perhaps the best example of Nīlakaṇṭha’s creative inversion of his material is his rendition of the Tamil Caṅkam cycle: indeed, where better to comment on the role of vernacular literature than while narrating the origin of India’s most celebrated vernacular literary academy? Before the *TVP* renaissance in Madurai, the preceding centuries had witnessed numerous literary and commentarial attempts to recover the quasi-historical origins of Tamil literature as it first emerged in Madurai’s prehistorical golden age, each of which took for granted the unique virtues of an intrinsically Tamil literary aesthetic. In Nīlakaṇṭha’s voice, however, the poets of the Tamil Caṅkam speak like Sanskrit *śāstrins*, intimately conversant with the history of Sanskrit thought from literary theory to Vedic hermeneutics. In just this spirit, the Caṅkam cycle of the *Śivalīlārṇava* begins with an encounter between the forty-eight Caṅkam poets, incarnated from Sarasvatī as the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, and a host of “bad poets” (*kukavis*) who attempt to harass the Caṅkam poets with specious arguments derived from a deeply flawed understanding of Sanskrit literary aesthetics (Alaṅkāraśāstra):

Several nonpoets, the worst of scholars, and other bad poets, who  
had made an agreement,  
Struck up a specious quarrel with those poets who had no match in  
the [triple] worlds:

“‘Word and meaning, free from faults, ornamented, and of supreme  
virtue’—[*śabdārthau doṣanirmuktau sālaṅkārau guṇottarau*]  
To those poets who define poetry as such, we fold our hands in  
salute.

What could be more flawed than the highest misdeeds of a lover,  
described in verse?  
Indeed, that is why the prattling of poetry [*kāvyānām ālāpaḥ*] is cast  
off by the learned.

Then again, others conceive of flaws and virtues [*guṇadoṣāḥ*] based  
on their own whim.

One may as well investigate crows' teeth and take up rustic village  
sayings.

The nonsensicality of poems that have no syntactical construal is  
hard to break through,  
Like sentences about sprinkling with fire; how do people delude  
themselves with them?

If suggestion [*vyañjanā*] were accepted as a modality of language,  
conveying various meanings  
While freed from all constraints, should not a prostitute be consid-  
ered a wife?

Let fire be 'implied' [*dhvanyate*] by smoke; let a pot be 'implied' by  
the eye.

If meaning 'implies' a meaning, what consistency is there to the  
means of knowledge?"<sup>78</sup>

After these and other spurious arguments pieced together from disconnected  
fragments of literary theory and logic—each of which would have been imme-  
diately recognizable to a Sanskrit-educated audience—Nilakaṇṭha draws the dia-  
logue to a close with his signature sarcastic wit:

"If the meaning of poetic statements conveys pleasure, even when  
distasteful,

Then listen with delight to your own censure composed by poets:

'Ah! The ripening of suggested emotion [*bhāvavyakti*]! Ah! Con-  
cealed flavor [*rasa*]!'

With moist tears streaming from their falsely squinted eyes,  
Their hair bristling repeatedly as if undigested food were churning  
in their guts—

How has the earth been pervaded by poets, those thick-witted  
beasts!"

Their pride wounded by those juveniles who in such a manner  
Continued prattling on repeatedly, long disciplined in deviant doc-  
trine,

Unwilling to listen to a single word of rebuttal,  
Those best of poets betook themselves to the Moon-Crested Lord  
for refuge.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, in Nilakaṇṭha's rendition, it is a barrage of third-rate literary theorists  
that prompts the Caṅkam poets to petition Śiva for the celebrated Caṅkam plank

(*caṅkappalakai*, Skt. *saṅghaphalakam*),<sup>80</sup> a magical device that automatically assesses the true aptitude of a poet. A small wooden platform measuring one square *muḷam* in length,<sup>81</sup> the Caṅkam plank expands when approached by a genuinely learned poet, thus seating all forty-eight members of the Tamil literary academy and excluding all others. The same narrative outcome occurs in the *Śivalilārṇava* as in Parañcōti's *TVP*; and yet, it may come as a surprise to witness the Caṅkam poets debating in a language and idiom foreign to their actual literary practice (both historically and in cultural memory). Were Nilakaṇṭha interested in either accurately depicting or extolling the legacy of the Tamil academy, many centuries of Tamil grammar and literary theory might have provided him with a foundation for contextualizing the narrative within the cultural ethos typically evoked by hagiographers and historians from within the Tamil tradition. As a point of contrast, Parañcōti's *TVP* not only actively celebrates the distinctively Tamil character of the Tamil Caṅkam but also takes great pains to adorn the Caṅkam cycle of games with direct references to Tamil literary theory. In Parañcōti's version, in fact, this set of episodes foregrounds the role of Agastya, the prototypically southern sage, whom legend regards not only as the primordial Tamil grammarian but also as the instructor of the Caṅkam poets themselves. When Agastya was first dispatched by Śiva to the Tamil country, he confirmed his own role in the origin myth of Tamil literary culture:

Preparing to take leave, he requested one thing:  
 “They say the land I am going to, the Tamil land [*tamiḷ nāṭu*], is full  
 of verse [*toṭai*].  
 As all the people dwelling in this land have researched sweet Tamil  
 [*iṇramiḷ*] and possess its knowledge,  
 I ought to be able to give a reply to those who ask.  
 So that the flaws of my thinking may leave me, Father,  
 Please graciously grant me a work on the poetics (*iyaṇṭūḷ*) of refined  
 Tamil [*centamiḷ*],  
 So that it may be clear to such a one, you have bestowed the first  
 treatise [*mutaṇṭūḷ*].”  
 After he had understood, he said “I see your feet—I am your  
 servant, O Eternal One!”<sup>82</sup>

In addition to the clear ethos of linguistic pride prevalent in Tamil literary self-reflection, this passage incorporates a number of references to Tamil grammatical theory, from *iyal tamiḷ*—literally “natural Tamil,” referring broadly to Tamil composition extending beyond the bounds of prosody strictly speaking, one of the “three Tamils” (*muttamiḷ*)—to *centamiḷ*, a common laudatory expression for the literary register of the language. The remainder of the passage only increases in technicality, celebrating Agastya's knowledge of the “two prefaces,” “seven tenets,”

“four meanings,” “ten faults,” “nine beauties,” and “eight *yuktis*.”<sup>83</sup> Parañcōti further manages to narrativize the origin of the southern sage’s legendary treatise on grammar, the *Akattiyam*, referred to above as the “primordial treatise” (*mutaṇṭl*), a work believed by many commentators to have preceded the *Tolkāppiyam*. For Parañcōti, it was specifically this body of knowledge that constituted the learning of the Caṅkam poets: an intrinsically Tamil corpus of literary and grammatical theory innately suited to both the language of their compositions and their cultural identity as icons of Madurai’s Tamil heritage.

Not to be outdone by his near contemporary, Nilakaṇṭha attributes a high degree of specialized knowledge to the Caṅkam poets—not of Tamil grammar but of Sanskrit *śāstra*, specifically of Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics. As we have seen previously, further into the Caṅkam legends, the king of Madurai, Campaka Pāṇḍya, had promised a rich reward to the poet who could present him with a verse convincingly explaining the fragrance of his queen’s hair. It was the young Brahmin named Tarumi, offering as his contribution a verse that Śiva had composed and revealed to him, who was awarded the prize. Green with envy, the illustrious Caṅkam poet Nakkīrar immediately demanded that Tarumi’s prize be rescinded on account of a literary flaw in the verse, arguing that poetic convention did not allow one to attribute fragrance to a woman’s tresses unadorned by flowers or fragrant oils. Upon hearing this insult, Śiva himself appeared before Nakkīrar and demanded an explanation for his insolence. Nakkīrar stood his ground and insisted upon the flaw, even when Śiva manifested his true form, complete with five heads and a third eye that threatened to burn the defiant poet to ashes. While the debate ends here for most versions of the narrative, Nilakaṇṭha inserted a few more choice insults, through which Nakkīrar foolhardily claims superiority over Śiva himself based on his encyclopedic knowledge of Sanskrit hermeneutics:

Although a devotee, seeing that great wonder Kīra rebuked him  
once again.

Stronger yet than the innate delusion of fools is the delusion contained in the semblance of intellect:

“Given that your own works, which have attained the great audacity  
of being called ‘scripture,’

Are intelligible only when those such as myself describe another  
intentionality [*tātparyāntaravarṇanena*]

And applying suppletion, inversion, contextualization, extraction,  
and conjunction, [*adhyāhāraviparyayaprakaraṇotkarṣāṇuṣāṅgā-  
dibhiḥ*]

Keep this in mind and don’t look to find fault with my poems, O  
Paśupati!”<sup>84</sup>

Hearing Nakkīrar's audacity, it is no wonder that Śiva responded by scorching his assailant with his third eye and sending him flying into the Golden Lotus Tank of the Madurai temple. The interpretive techniques Nilakaṇṭha enumerates here, drawn from the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā school of Vedic exegesis—*adhyāhāra*, *viparyaya*, *prakaraṇa*, *utkarṣa*, and *anuṣaṅga*<sup>85</sup>—are highly specific terms of art, by no means common knowledge to those who are not thoroughly acquainted with Sanskrit philosophical discourse. One can only imagine that this misrepresentation of Nakkīrar's identity would have struck Nilakaṇṭha's audience as intimately familiar, evoking the resonances of their own discursive community, while simultaneously comically absurd when applied to a legendary figure of the Tamil academy. I contend that Nilakaṇṭha's ambition in this passage is not one of simple cultural translation, replacing Tamil idiom with terms more familiar to an audience of Sanskrit scholars. The terms in question, first of all, are not equivalent; hence, "translation" as a category is an unlikely candidate for the situation at hand. What we witness here is more of a full-scale recoding of the narrative context, as Nilakaṇṭha deliberately divorces the characters from a cultural context that is not merely original to the legends but also fundamental to their rhetorical intent, the reinforcement of the intrinsic Tamil-ness of the history and sociality of the city of Madurai.

What is at stake, then, in Nilakaṇṭha's attempt to remove the Tamil from the Tamil Caṅkam? His motivation certainly appears to be more complex than sheer antagonism or cultural bigotry, as he quite readily asserts in passing that the Caṅkam poets are learned in the *draṃiḍasūtrarahasya*, the "secret of the Southern Sūtra" (possibly referring to the *Tolkāppiyam*). Further, despite his incisive wit, Nilakaṇṭha never abandons his core stance of reverence toward the sacred site of Madurai, the abode of his chosen deity Mīnākṣī, and its legendary history as manifested in the divine sports of Śiva. In fact, Nilakaṇṭha's interpretation of some of the TVP's outwardly devotional episodes illuminates more clearly his attitude toward distinctively Tamil cultural and religious motifs. A number of the episodes in the "Sacred Games" directly concern the central devotional figures of the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta tradition, including the Tamil bhakti saints Nānacampantar (Jñānasambandha) and Māṇikkavācakar, whose Tamil-language compositions form an integral part of the Tamil Śaiva canon. Once again, Nilakaṇṭha's portrayal of these saints in no way lacks the reverence one would expect him to display toward the foremost devotees of the local Śaiva tradition, whom the legends at hand portray as carrying out the miracles of Śiva and Mīnākṣī at the heart of the Madurai temple. He refers most commonly, for instance, to Nānacampantar with honorifics such as "Emperor among Spiritual Teachers" (*deśikasarvabhauma*). Nevertheless, Nilakaṇṭha's respect for their status as icons of Śaiva devotionism does not stop him from shifting the emphasis away from the Tamil language of the devotees' compositions and the distinctive regionality of their cultural legacy. That is, for Nilakaṇṭha, the Emperor among Spiritual Teachers was simultaneously

the Teacher of the Precepts of the Vedānta (*trayyantasiddhāntaguru*),<sup>86</sup> who comported himself like an orthodox Smārta-Śaiva (*atyāśramastha*).<sup>87</sup>

Take, for instance, the ubiquitous legend of the confrontation between the Śaivas and Jains in ancient Madurai, a narrative most commonly associated with Cekkīlār's Periya Purāṇam but retold in the TVPs of Nampi and Parañcōti as well. In this episode, misfortune had befallen the Śaivas of Madurai as the city was overrun by Jains; even the king himself had converted to Jainism. And yet, when the king was overtaken by a seemingly incurable fever, only the Śaiva saint Nānacampantar was able to bring him relief by anointing him with sacred Śaiva ash. Upon witnessing the extent of Jain domination in Śiva's sacred city, Nānacampantar resolved to shed light on the errancy of their doctrine by challenging them to an ordeal, failing which the Jains were to willingly commit suicide by impaling themselves on stakes. According to both Parañcōti and the HM, Jñānasambandar and a representative of his Jain rivals each released a palm-leaf manuscript into a fire; on Nānacampantar's leaf was written one of his own devotional poems, which are now preserved in the Tēvāram, the first seven books of the Tirumuṛai, while the Jain representative cast into the flames a palm leaf with an array of magical mantras. Unsurprisingly, the Jain palm leaf was incinerated, while Nānacampantar's poem survived unscathed.

Nilakaṇṭha's version of this particular ordeal proceeds similarly, but with one crucial modification:

Abandoning all their exempla, fortified by hermeneutics and logic,  
Overstepping the bounds of all reason, those fools came together,  
desiring to conquer him [Nānacampantar] by ordeal.

"The Śākya seer has seen that nonviolence alone can dispel all the  
afflictions of *saṃsāra*.<sup>88</sup> Maheśa must not be worshipped; ash is  
not auspicious."

Thus, the Arhats wrote their own thesis.

"The Vedas are the authority, along with the Kāmika and so forth.  
Śaṅkara alone is the One Lord of the universe. Those desiring  
liberation on earth must bear ash alone."

Thus, the teacher wrote his own thesis.<sup>89</sup>

By shifting the ordeal to a test of doctrinal confession alone, an important detail has been elided from the narrative. Now that Nānacampantar (or Sambandhanātha, as Nilakaṇṭha refers to him) no longer wins the ordeal on the strength of his own composition, nothing in Nilakaṇṭha's version signals that Nānacampantar was revered primarily as a devotional poet, much less that his compositions were written in Tamil rather than Sanskrit. To the contrary, we find the bhakti saint endorsing the inerrant validity of the Sanskrit scriptures,



ranging from the Vedas themselves to the Kāmika Āgama and other scriptures of the Sanskrit Śaiva Siddhānta tradition, which Nilakaṇṭha himself considered indispensable for the Advaita-inflected Śaivism growing in popularity among the Smārta Brahmins of his circle. Given that the Sanskrit and Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta lineages had maintained institutionally and doctrinally distinct profiles for centuries before Nilakaṇṭha's own floruit, conflating the scriptural corpus of the two is no mere oversight. Rather, Nilakaṇṭha has transformed Nānacampantar's character into that of a Sanskrit-educated scholastic ritualist rather than a Tamil devotional poet, a profile we would expect to see attributed to an Aghoraśiva rather than a poet of the Tēvāram.

In fact, the deliberateness of Nilakaṇṭha's recasting of Nānacampantar's legacy becomes unmistakable as this narrative continues, when the Pandian begs the Śaiva preceptor for initiation upon seeing the humiliating defeat of his Jain advisors. Although no previous version of the episode recounts any details of this initiation, Nilakaṇṭha inserts a technically accurate account of a Saiddhāntika initiation as typically described in the Sanskrit Āgamas:

The Pāṇḍya, who had surrendered in refuge to Sambandhanātha  
upon seeing this ordeal,  
Asked for the initiation that cuts through all sin, capable of bestow-  
ing the knowledge of Śiva.  
  
Purifying his six paths [*ṣaḍadhvanah*] and his five *kalās*, that em-  
peror of preceptors  
Entered his body effortlessly, although it had been defiled with a  
heterodox initiation.  
Having entered his body, purifying him by uniting with his channels  
[*nāḍīsandhāna*],  
That guru, an ocean of compassion, extracted his caste [*jātiṃ*  
*samuddhṛtya*] and installed in him the knowledge of Śiva.  
  
Having bestowed his own body, wealth, and heart at his lotus feet,  
the Pāṇḍya  
Ruled the earth on the Śaiva path, worshipping the Lord with the  
Half-Moon Crest.  
  
When that Lord of the people ascended to the state of Śiva, all his  
offspring were  
Devoted to Śiva, intent on Śiva's mantra, and proficient in the nec-  
tarous essence of the knowledge of Śaiva Āgama.<sup>90</sup>

Through Nilakaṇṭha's erudite attempts at inversion, Nānacampantar is transformed from a bhakti saint into a ritually accomplished Śivācārya of the Sanskrit Śaiva Siddhānta, effortlessly performing the esoteric procedures for entering the

body of his pupil through the subtle channels (*nāḍīsandhāna*) and removing his birth caste,<sup>91</sup> replacing the core of his identity with the knowledge of Śiva. His emphasis on the removal of caste, *jātyuddharaṇa*, as integral to Śaiva initiation is particularly intriguing, as the concept had fallen out of favor with the more conservative branches of the Sanskrit scholastic tradition, who preferred to align the Siddhānta with orthodox Brahminical social values. Nīlakaṇṭha, for his part, does not hesitate to endorse the practice, which entails the belief that all Śaiva initiates of a certain stature<sup>92</sup> have been ontologically elevated above caste distinctions.<sup>93</sup> Evidently, although Nīlakaṇṭha's literary aesthetic endorses the near-exclusive valuation of the Sanskrit language and intellectual tradition, his conservatism in language choice does not equate with a conservatism in caste consciousness. The polemics of twentieth-century Tamil politicians notwithstanding, Sanskrit in Tamil Nadu did not always herald a social agenda of outright Brahminical supremacy. That is, the structure of multilingual literary practice does not correlate simplistically with social structure.

In fact, it is precisely the issue of caste, and its removal, that most directly unites Nīlakaṇṭha with his institutional rivals of the Tamil Śaiva lineages. Owing to the social constituency of the Tamil Śaiva community in Nīlakaṇṭha's day, ascetic preceptors traditionally hailed from a Vēḷāḷa background, technically a Śūdra caste, which rendered them ineligible for preceptorial initiation according to the traditional strictures of Brahminical legal literature.<sup>94</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Vēḷāḷa lineages were keen to defend their legitimacy on textual as well as de facto political and economic grounds. One unique textual artifact of the mid- to late seventeenth century makes this case explicitly: the *Varṇāśramacandrikā* of Tiruvamṇāṭāṭēcīkar (a near contemporary of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita),<sup>95</sup> the only known Tamil Śaiva treatise to be written in Sanskrit. In this intriguingly belligerent work, Tiruvamṇāṭāṭēcīkar openly advocates the ordination of Śūdras to the lineage seat, scouring the textual history of Śaivism in Sanskrit to identify a vast array of precedents for this practice. The evidence he assembles aligns perfectly with Nīlakaṇṭha's own views of Śaiva initiation, suggesting that Nīlakaṇṭha was far more aligned with his times than language politics alone might lead one to suspect:

The *homa* for extracting caste [*jātyuddharaṇa*], whether individually  
or by the hundreds,

Indeed incinerates Śūdra caste identity with fire, O six-faced one.<sup>96</sup>

Ironically, it is not only traditional Āgamic sources that figure prominently in the Sanskrit citations of Tiruvamṇāṭāṭēcīkar. The *Varṇāśramacandrikā* is also the earliest known work to cite the Hālāsyā Māhātmya, a text that, as we have seen, had recently entered the Sanskrit textual corpus through the mediation of the "Tamil vernacular." And yet, writing in the late seventeenth century, a Vēḷāḷa preceptor could cite the HM as an authoritative reference grounding the doctrines of the

Tamil Śaiva community in the purported legal standards of a transregional Śaiva orthodoxy. Owing in no small part to the cross-linguistic circulation of works such as the HM and Nilakaṇṭha's *Śivalīlārṇava*, the Sanskrit-vernacular dichotomy in the Tamil country had truly come to function as a circular network of intertextual influence, resulting in a multicentric discursive sphere that reconstituted the shape of social and religious communities, such as the Tamil and Sanskrit Śaiva Siddhānta.

FROM TEXT TO PUBLIC RELIGIOUS CULTURE: THE  
TIRUVIḶAIYĀṬAL PURĀṆAM IN SEVENTEENTH-  
CENTURY MADURAI

In the introduction to his edition of the *Cokkanātar Ulā*, U. Ve. Caminataiyar, father of the modern renaissance in Tamil literary studies, recounts a popular anecdote concerning how the text's author, Purāṇa Tirumalainātar, came to receive his rather peculiar nom de plume.<sup>97</sup> Far better known for his other surviving composition, the *Citampara Purāṇam*, Tirumalainātar is said to have been petitioned by the elders and devotees of the Cidambaram Śaiva community to translate the surviving Sanskrit scriptural canon recounting the sacred history of Cidambaram into Tamil. Not having access to a suitable Sanskrit original, our would-be translator set off for the mountain country (*malaināṭu*), where he discovered a single, incomplete manuscript of the Sanskrit *Cidambara Purāṇa* and proceeded to translate the extant portion into the form of an equivalent Tamil *talapurāṇam*. Although Tirumalainātar remained grievously disappointed at being unable to locate the entire Sanskrit original, the temple priests were so gratified by his efforts and the quality of his final product that they appended the prefix "Purāṇa" to his title in commemoration of the *Citampara Purāṇam*.

While we sadly lack any documentary evidence to confirm that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Tamil poets actively sought out Sanskrit manuscripts on which to anchor the authority of their Tamil compositions, more recent accounts confirm that such was common practice in the nineteenth century. For instance, a similar anecdote recorded by U. Ve. Caminataiyar outlines the process by which his own teacher, Minatcicutara Pillai, renowned scholar of Tamil literature, set out to produce a Tamil *talapurāṇam* of Kumbakonam at the request of local monastic authorities:

At that time Civakurunātapillai, who was the *taḥṣildār* [collector] in Kumpakoṇam, and other Śaiva dignitaries thought, "Let us ask this master poet to compose the purāṇa of Kumpakoṇam in Tamil verse." At their request, he [Tiricirapuram Miṇāṭcicutaram Pillai] came to Kumpakoṇam from Tiruvāṭuturāi in 1865 and took up residence with his retinue in the building of the Tiruvāṭuturāi mutt in Peṭṭai Street. He first had the Kumpakoṇam purāṇa translated from Sanskrit into

Tamil prose; in this he was aided by Maṇṭapam Nārāyaṇa Cāstirikaḷ Mutaliyār, a scholar of the Caṅkarācāriyar Mutt. Afterward he began to compose the purāṇa in verse form. He would compose the verses orally, and from time to time one of his pupils, Tirumaṅkalakkuṭi Ceṣaiyaṅkār, would write them down. Short parts of the purāṇa used to be prepared each day in the morning and given their first formal recitation in the afternoon in the *maṇḍapa* in the front of the shrine of Ādikumbheśvara [Śiva at Kumpakoṇam]. Many came to take pleasure in the recitation. . . .

When the *araṇḱeṇṇam* [debut] of the Kumpakoṇam purāṇa was completed, the dignitaries of that city gave him a shawl, a silk upper garment, [other] garments and gifts, and two thousand rupees collected from the public. They had the manuscript of the purāṇa mounted upon an elephant and taken around the town instate. Then several of the dignitaries purchased and donated a covered palanquin, made Piḷḷai sit in it, and carried it themselves for some distance. Thus they demonstrated the love they felt for the Tamil language and the custom of olden times.<sup>98</sup>

What is the significance, then, of Minatcicuntara Pillai's story to our understanding of public religious culture in seventeenth-century Madurai? What we witness in this vignette is nothing less than the creation of public canon, narrated from the perspective of onlookers who witnessed the debut of his Tamil Purāṇam and accepted its legends as an authoritative précis of Kumbakonam's sacred legacy. For Pillai as well as for the seventeenth-century Parañcōti, the birth of a *talapurāṇam* was a social affair, imbricated with the monastic and temple institutions where the text was composed, debuted before a public audience, and commemorated by local elites with the bestowing of ritual honors. It is a process that takes place in time and space, fusing new meaning onto the sites it commemorates, which become legible for future generations of devotees. Space itself, in temple and monastic complexes, becomes entextualized with the emergent public canon—what previous generations of scholars have described as “sacred space.” And yet, this sacred space is anything but the hermetically sealed “sacred,” set apart from the phenomenal experience of the mundane realm. It remains, rather, a *public* space—a site for the reproduction of public religious culture, available for response, reenactment, and contestation.

Indeed, religious spaces across the Tamil country were in the midst of a radical reentextualization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the materiality of religious sites itself was transformed through massive temple-building campaigns, and the newly refurbished temple complexes were indexed with fresh mythological narratives. Succinctly, we witness a remarkable upsurge both in the production and renovation of Hindu temples and in the composition of *talapurāṇams* in Tamil to invest them with canonical meaning. In excavating the history of the *talapurāṇam* genre, David Shulman (1976) notes that the vast majority of these texts lack the pedigree of the Tamil classics but were composed, primarily, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the very moment when the Nāyaka

regents of the Tamil country were renewing their alliance with sacerdotal power by endowing new temple building projects at the heart of their domains. The Madurai Minākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple is no exception: after the succession of Viśvanātha Nāyaka to the throne of Madurai in the mid-sixteenth century, the early generations of Nāyaka rulers set to remapping the sacred landscape at the center of Madurai, transforming the architectural visage of the temple with the addition of new temple towers (*gopurams*) and pavilions (*maṇḍapams*), but imprinting it with signifiers of an entirely new mythology: namely, the sixty-four “Sacred Games of Śiva” in Madurai.

Broadly speaking, the expansion of the Minākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple under the Madurai Nāyakas took place in three principal phases.<sup>99</sup> Between 1570 and 1600, the temple attained its present shape with the construction of the external wall and four *gopurams* of the outermost third *prākāra* along with the four *gopurams* of the second *prākāra*. Subsequently, the early decades of the seventeenth century witnessed further accretions, such as the Thousand-Pillared Pavilion (Āyirakkāl Maṇḍapam). The remaining structural innovations that grace the temple today were commissioned during the reign of Tirumalai Nāyaka (1623–1659), whose efforts earned him a reputation as the chief architect behind the entire program of temple expansion. Tirumalai Nāyaka’s innovations include the Putu Maṇḍapam, or “New Maṇḍapa,” an external festival pavilion adjacent to the eastern side of the temple complex, and the towering Rāya Gōpuram, which although never completed was intended to upstage all similar temple *gopurams* across the southern half of the subcontinent.

The early Nāyakas did not restrict themselves, however, to expanding the physical edifice of the temple complex. Beginning around the early seventeenth century—that is, during the latter two phases of temple renovation—the Madurai Nāyakas began to enrich the symbolic face of the Minākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple as well with sculptural and pictorial representations drawn from unprecedented literary sources, particularly the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*.<sup>100</sup> In fact, no such image can be reliably dated to prior phases of temple construction.<sup>101</sup> In short, the early to mid-seventeenth century witnessed an explosion of interest in graphic as well as performative portrayals of the “Sacred Games” throughout the Madurai temple complex. Sculptural depictions of four of the games were displayed in the early seventeenth-century Āyirakkāl Maṇḍapam, and six in Tirumalai Nāyaka’s Putu Maṇḍapam shortly thereafter. The seventeenth century also witnessed the first complete sequence of mural paintings—a genre of representation popular in Nāyaka-period temple art—of all sixty-four sacred games, displayed quite prominently alongside the Golden Lotus Tank (*porrāmaraiḱ-kuḷam*) in front of the shrine of Minākṣī, the ritual heart of the temple. Moreover, an intriguing detail of the “Sacred Games” statuary reveals that the temple improvements took place simultaneously with, rather than subsequent to, the codification of the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal*

*Purāṇam* itself. In both the Āyirakkāl Maṇṭapam and the Putu Maṇṭapam, a statue appears depicting a game in which Śiva as a tiger feeds a deer, a legend that appears in early versions of the “Sacred Games” but which has been elided in Parañcōti’s *TVP* and the Hālāsya Māhātmya. The publicization of the “Sacred Games,” in short, was part and parcel of its canonization; it is very likely that Parañcōti composed his masterpiece while the statues were being erected, or afterward, and his work certainly had not been fully accepted as canon by the time of the construction of the Putu Maṇṭapam around 1630.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, as the *TVP* began to enter the visual landscape of the Madurai temple, Tirumalai Nāyaka instituted a series of calendrical festivals showcasing several of the “Sacred Games” in public performance. In terms of the codification of public religious culture, however, Tirumalai Nāyaka’s most influential innovation was the Putu Maṇṭapam itself, designed to host many of the temple’s festivals outside of the temple walls, externalizing a previously internal, delimited space that may not have been physically accessible to residents of Madurai in numerous caste communities. Indeed, these new calendrical festivals captured the attention of the temple’s ritual officiants when describing the contributions of Tirumalai Nāyaka to the Madurai temple complex. The *Stāṇikarvaralāru*, one of our most detailed sources of the temple’s history, chronicles the changing ritual duties within various factions of the temple priesthood over the centuries and, in the process, draws particular attention to the new centrality accorded to the performances of the sacred games under the leadership of Tirumalai Nāyaka:

Lord Tirumalai Nāyaka, having great devotion to Mīnākṣī and Sundarēśvara, on a day in which the goddess became pleased, established an endowment under the arbitration of Ayya Dikṣita, instructing that the sacred games be conducted in the manner established by the Purāṇas at the hands of the temple priests as follows: for Sadāśiva Bhaṭṭa, the Game of Chopping the Body, the Selling of Bangles, Carrying Earth for Sweetmeat; and for Kulaśekhara Bhaṭṭa, the Bestowing of the Purse [of gold coins], the Game of Turning Horses into Foxes,<sup>102</sup> the Raising up of the Elephant; and several other games divided evenly. Having granted an endowment ordering that several games be accomplished at the hands of the subordinates, he had them conducted such that happiness would arise at witnessing the spectacle.<sup>103</sup>

Spectacle, in fact, is just what the “Sacred Games” had become by the mid-seventeenth century, as visual and performative media rendered the narratives of Śiva’s miraculous exploits immediately accessible to a diverse and even nonliterate public. Among the numerous games reenacted in public ceremonies, however, it was the Sacred Marriage of Śiva and Mīnākṣī that would leave the most visible imprint on Madurai’s public religious culture. Tirumalai Nāyaka’s most radical adjustment to the festival calendar was, undoubtedly, to unite the wedding of Madurai’s divine

couple with the overwhelmingly popular Cittirai Festival—in which the city's resident Vaiṣṇava deity, Aḷakar, made his annual procession to the river Vaikai, pausing in his journey to bestow temple honors on the dominant caste groups of the Madurai region. According to prior legend, Aḷakar had journeyed from his temple home several miles outside of town to the middle of the Vaikai River for the express purpose of liberating the sage Muṇḍaka from a curse that entrapped him in the body of a frog, an act of grace that Madurai's Vaiṣṇava residents had previously commemorated each year in the month of Cittirai (April/May). When the annual Cittirai Festival was conjoined with the Sacred Marriage, Viṣṇu as Aḷakar, whom the "Sacred Games" represented as the brother of Mīnākṣī, was understood to be entrusted with the task of performing the marriage rites for Śiva and his bride. As local legend has it, Aḷakar reaches the center of the river Vaikai only to realize that the marriage has already taken place without him, and in retaliation he grudgingly returns to his temple without setting eyes upon the divine couple, pausing along the way to spend the night with his paramour, a Muslim courtesan.

By re-creating the Cittirai Festival, then, Tirumalai Nāyaka managed to draw unprecedented attention to the legend that best encapsulates the royal heritage of Madurai, whose kings are the descendants of Śiva and Mīnākṣī themselves. Simultaneously, he positioned Madurai's most popular religious festival as a virtually unprecedented site for social and religious integration, creating a festival space that accommodated the interests of diverse caste communities, from Smārta Brahmins to the Kaḷḷar devotees of Lord Aḷakar, and blended the theologies of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava devotionism. Other favorites among the sixty-four games must have also quickly entered the repertoire of Madurai's residents, as by and large the same games depicted in temple statuary—publicly available year round as sites of memory—were dramatized yearly with festival processions and even mimetic reenactments of Śiva's divine interventions.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, each of the minor festivals enacting Śiva's sacred games, managed by representatives of rival priestly families of the Madurai temple, provided substantive incentive among elite families to compete for the attention of a wider public.

Facilitated by Tirumalai Nāyaka's royal interventions, then, an increasingly popular literary motif rapidly achieved widespread circulation far beyond the literary domain. That the *TVP* legends did, in fact, circulate is evident from the rapidity with which sequences of the sacred games began to appear in temple mural paintings across the Tamil region, demonstrating the broad appeal the narratives had achieved even outside of their domain of immediate reference, Madurai, the city in which the miracles were originally enacted.<sup>105</sup> Similar mural sequences, for instance, mirroring the sixty-four panels emblazoned on the Madurai temple outside the Golden Lotus Tank, had appeared in the Naṭarāja Temple of Cidambaram by the late seventeenth century and in the Bṛhadīśvara Temple in Tanjavur by the eighteenth century. Likewise, the "Sacred Games" soon became a common





FIGURE 4. A temple priest prepares a festival image to commemorate the sacred game in which Śiva grants liberation to a crane.

fixture of the material culture of religion in Madurai and beyond, replicated on temple carts across the region, festival textiles for chariots (*tērcilai*), and miniature paintings. Succinctly, the “Sacred Games of Śiva” were legible, for the majority of Madurai’s seventeenth-century residents, not from the text of the *Tiruvīlaiyātal Purāṇam* but from the material culture of the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple and from participation in the collective reenactments of the legends in temple festivals. In the words of Kim Knott (2005, 43) on the production of religious space, the enactment of the “Sacred Games” does not “take place,” but “makes place,” encoding the temple’s visual facade with religious significance proper to multiple distinct communities.

What, then, does religious space—what the classical history of religions has referred to as “sacred space”—have to do with public religious culture, with the religious values or frames of reference cultivated by individuals from diverse social and sectarian backgrounds across the city of Madurai? Looking at the temple as public space—a space in which publics move, a space in which publics are created—is a crucial step in transcending both Western and modernist presuppositions that would unproblematically equate religion with the private sphere, the internal domain of



affect or belief. Discounting the truly interior spaces of ritual worship, such as the *garbhagrhas*, or inner “wombs” of the temple accessible only to trained priests, the temple pavilions (*maṇḍapas*) in which festivals are performed serve as physical sites for public gatherings and enactments of shared religious sensibilities. A temple in south India, it must be remembered, is constantly bustling with crowds in motion. Indeed, much of the physical space of the Madurai temple, as with the majority of sacred sites across south Asia, incorporates what the Western imagination has understood as nonreligious public space, from shopping complexes to casual gatherings for social conversation. As a result, the images inscribed on such a space, whether murals or statuary, create an ideal readership of visual media by cultivating a collective public frame of reference. Such images, in other words, are nothing less than social agents, exerting an active influence on the human agents who move through spaces inflected by their signifying capacity.<sup>106</sup>

To understand how new religious concepts and values come to be publicly accessible, or come to constitute a cornerstone of a particular public culture, then, depends fundamentally on theorizing the public as inhabiting a particular space, constituted in no small part by the visual signifiers that inhabit that space. Space, in its very materiality, as recent theorists have recognized, is by its very nature a socially imbricated category. Indeed, the materialist turn in religious studies and the humanities at large has become sensitive to space not simply as the Kantian precondition for human cognition but as a site for the signification and contestation of cultural values. From the vantage point of early seventeenth-century Madurai, space—both within the temple and throughout the city at large—was in the process of being overlaid with new conceptual resonance. With the visual inscription of the “Sacred Games of Śiva” in temple art and architecture, devotees of Mīnākṣī who traversed the temple halls and circumambulated the Golden Lotus Tank were now confronted with contested claims as to the significance of their spatial practice—that is, their lived engagement with socially significant spaces. But at this particular juncture in history, the “Sacred Games” did not yet fully belong to what Henri Lefebvre (1992, 33) would call “representations of space”—that is, the normative and fully articulated conventions for how temple space ought to be interpreted. To the contrary, the public space of the Madurai temple complex can best be characterized as “representational space”—a lived space of public contestation, capable of being contested by counterhegemonic interest groups who aim to overlay shared space with localized layers of meaning.

By the late seventeenth century, the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam* had become a household name, and yet the legends were able to permeate the religious ecology of Madurai without disrupting its delicate balance—that is, by appealing to the diverse religious publics of Madurai, whether Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava, whether Smārta, Vēlāḷa, or Kaḷḷar. The temple itself, then, did not homogenize the publics of Madurai, separated as they were by the boundaries of caste, language, and sect, but facilitated the

overlaying and intersection of parallel public spheres. Its explosion into literary fashion, as we have seen, took place across multiple literary publics, facilitated by media of performance and patronage centered on the temple site itself. Likewise, its departure from the textual form and entry into public culture was a process mediated by a transference of shared meaning from the written word to visual and performative text. What took place during this period in Madurai was not merely the birth of a narrative, or even the birth of a religious canon, but the *entextualization* of public space. The “Sacred Games of Śiva” were not simply encoded in the memory of a collective populace but were canonized in physical public space, accessible in that they can be read, reinterpreted, and reenacted over time. The temple became not a space outside of time but a nexus for the temporal and spatial encoding of meaning, a space in which people moved through and performed meaning—a spatial nexus for the overlaying of multiple parallel publics.