

Polluted by a purifying text

The order of signs in a pre-modern literary Malayalam world

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Considered lost until the latter part of the twentieth century, the *Tiruniḷalmāla*, “The garland of sacred shadows,” has been defined as a “ritual text” and as an account of rituals performed in the Āranmuḷa temple of central Kerala. Yet the manuscripts that came to light were preserved in the northern part of Kerala. On the one hand “The garland of sacred shadows” raises fundamental questions about its composition and transmission, and more fundamentally about the relation between textuality and performativity. On the other hand, it invites a reflection on the interpretative and epistemic approaches that scholars adopt towards forms of text which include an oral and visual dimension at their core. In fact, this poetic work that has been dated to the 13th/14th centuries intersects with two ritual and performative practices from contemporary Kerala. The first is the Uccabali-Teyyam, a particular form of Teyyam or possession worship performed by low-caste communities in parts of coastal Karnataka and northern Kerala, and the second is the deliverance ritual called Kaṇṇēruppāṭṭu.

This article aims to analyse how the rituals are presented and reproduced within the *Tiruniḷalmāla* in dialogue with the contemporary rituals. By highlighting how the text’s author refers to a religious and social world altogether different from his own, I argue that the *Tiruniḷalmāla* as a whole might have been conceived as the poetic re-creation of a ritual. In this sense, the text can be understood as a linguistic endeavor to conjure up something that resembles a ritual while openly stating, by its own textual nature, its disconnection from the reality it is supposed to depict.

In other words, I take the performative nature of this text to be understood in terms of reproduction and simulation. If the “Garland of Sacred Shadows” was conceived for the high caste communities, then its intended audience was allegedly meant to keep a distance from the same practices that represent the core of the text. In this sense, the text, which has at its core the purification of the main deity of Āranmuḷa, might act, by way of inversion, as a source of pollution for its audience.

Keywords: Textuality, performativity, Kerala, possession, ritual, reproduction, simulacra

The simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth
that hides the fact that there is none.

The simulacrum is true.

Ecclesiastes.

Simulacra and Simulation, Jean Baudrillard

1. Introduction¹

The present work will focus on the intersection of the *Tiruniḷalmāla*,² a pre-modern text considered lost until the latter part of the twentieth century, with two ritual and performative practices from contemporary Kerala. The first is the Uccabali-Teyyam, a particular form of Teyyam or possession worship performed by low-caste communities in parts of coastal Karnataka and northern Kerala, and the second is the deliverance ritual called Kaṇṇēruppāṭṭu. A brocade of mythological stories and ritual narratives in a refined mixture of Tamil and Malayalam, the *Tiruniḷalmāla* is, as the title suggests, a *māla*,³ a necklace that links beads of a variety in colors, material, and nature. The ethnographic fieldwork⁴ carried out by the author over the last years at Teyyam performances has time and again illuminated the textual analysis of the *Tiruniḷalmāla* (henceforth TNM) and the ritual context that is inside and beyond the text. This article aims to demonstrate how the ritual is presented and reproduced within the TNM. By highlighting how the text's author refers to a world altogether different from his own, I argue that the TNM as a whole might have been conceived as the poetic re-creation of a ritual. In other words, I take the performative nature of this text to be understood in terms

¹ This research was carried out as part of the ERC-funded project, NEEM (The New Ecology of Expressive Modes in Early-Modern South India). I thank the people who shared the pleasure of reading the *Tiruniḷalmāla* and helped me greatly in this task: Venugopala Panicker, Cezary Galewicz, SAS Sarma, and Dominic Goodall. This article would not be what it is without the support of my colleague Chiara Caradonna and the constant inspiration of David Shulman. Finally, my sincere gratitude goes to the anonymous reviewers whose questions and comments pushed me to reflect more on my hypothesis and deeply enhanced my understanding of both the textual and ritual phenomena.

² There are three editions of *Tiruniḷalmāla*. The first edition was compiled by Puruṣōttamannāyar in 1981 (henceforth PN 1981), and a second edition by the same scholar was published in 2016 (henceforth PN 2016). In 2006 R.C. Karipath produced another edition (henceforth KP 2006). On the history and the cultural substrata of the three editions, see Galewicz 2022 forth. In this article I refer to the edition by R.C. Karipath. The variants are noted in the footnotes as PN: Puruṣōttamannāyar (from the MS in Calicut University); K: emendation by R.C. Karipath; B: 2nd MS (belonging to R.C. Karipath).

³ Puruṣōttamannāyar comments on *māla* as technical narratological term (PN 2016: 17–18).

⁴ I wish to thank here Cezary Galewicz. He opened for me the rich world of the *Tiruniḷalmāla* and with him I did fieldwork both in 2019 and 2020. I also want to thank K.P. Sreeranganathan and R.C. Karipath who guided us in the encounter with Teyyam, and finally the ERC-funded NEEM project for making it possible to venture into this field.

of reproduction and simulation. By way of inversion, then, the TNM, which has at its core the purification of the main deity of Āraṇmuḷa, might become a source of pollution in itself.

2. The TNM: Ritual and literary textures

Situated on the banks of the majestic river Pampa, the temple of Āraṇmuḷa has served since early times as a hub of socio-religious performative practices and belief systems. Listed in the Tamil Bhakti text *Tiruvaimoḷi* (9th cent. B.C) as one of the divine seats of Viṣṇu (*divyadeśa*), Āraṇmuḷa is mentioned as an early Brahmanic settlement (*grāma*) in many versions of the mytho-poietic history of Kerala known as *Kēraḷōḷpatti*. In addition, its location made it part of a riverine cultural network that in the last two centuries has produced a renowned boat-race religious festival (*vallamkali*).⁵ The temple of Āraṇmuḷa and its main deity, Kṛṣṇa, feature prominently in a most puzzling and enigmatic text of Malayalam literary and cultural history: the *Tiruniḷalmāla*. We possess little to no information about its author's social background, apart from his name, Gōvinēn; nor can we offer a positive answer as to the dating of the text.⁶ Yet a number of linguistic and thematic features within this poetic composition suggest that it can be placed within the milieu of educated, high caste communities of Kerala in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁷ In this sense,⁸ we might speculate that the intended audience of the TNM included Brahmin, Nayar, and some Ambalavasi communities such as the Cākyār, who were the addressees and actors of the emerging Maṇipravāḷam⁹ literature as well as of the theatre practice of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.¹⁰

⁵ See Sreeranganathan (2018) and Galewicz (2019) for a study of this festival and the songs (*vañcippāṭṭu*) performed during the festival.

⁶ See Freeman (2003b: 163) and PN 1981 who argue for the 13th /14th century. Venugopala Panicker is more inclined to trace the text to the sixteenth or seventeenth century (see Galewicz-Panicker 2023 forth).

⁷ See Freeman (2003a: 459) for the presence of Puranic elements in TNM, and refer to PN 1981: 33 with regard to authorship. Apart from the various references to Puranic mythology, it is the nature of the literary endeavor itself that exposes the socio-cultural frame of the TNM.

⁸ The author inserts the TNM within the Sanskrit and Tamil poetic traditions in the first *bhāga*. Additionally, echoes from the TNM can be found in the *kāvya* literature of the region, such as *Kokilasandēśa* and *Śukasandēśa*. I am indebted to Keshavan Veluthat for bringing these intertextual to my attention.

⁹ Lingual genre or literary practice of early non-Sanskrit texts in Kerala. For a discussion on the nature of Maṇipravāḷam, see Goren Arzony 2019b, Freeman 2003a.

¹⁰ On the connection between Maṇipravāḷam and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, see Goren Arzony (2019a) and Veluthat (2013). The performative nature of the TNM also warrants for a comparison with the text performed during the last day of Kūṭiyāṭṭam's Anguliyāṅkam and called by the performers *Tamiḷ Nambyar*.

Composed in a highly literary idiom that places itself alongside the Tamil literary tradition, the TNM is, at the same time, porous to the voices of ritual practices and beliefs performed by low caste professionals on the polluted body of the main deity of Āranmuḷa's temple (Freeman 2003b: 163-164). The literary nature of the TNM is highlighted in the first *bhāga* that functions as a sort of preamble, where Gōvinēn presents his tripartite composition as a *kavi*, a poet, positioning himself within a self-created poetic genealogy.¹¹ Yet, several lines later he declares to have composed the text (*kavite*) as a vessel, a *kalaśam*, of fragrant water.¹² Vessels, *kalaśam*, of toddy are used in the institutionalized possession-worship of Teyyam practiced in northern Kerala. Whereas the term *kalaśam* does not point exclusively in the direction of Teyyam, a stronger indication towards a connection between this religious practice and the TNM is the fact that the only extant manuscripts of the TNM were retrieved in this same area and two out of three belong to members of one of the caste communities called Malayars that perform Teyyam.¹³ Yet, the TNM is deeply anchored to the temple of Āranmuḷa, far more south than the area of Teyyam performances. This geographical aporia is not the only link between the TNM and Teyyam. As I will try to show in the course of this article, in various ways, the TNM showcases meaningful connections and inversions with respect to the dichotomies of pure/impure, high/low and, as it were, ritual/poetry, that are mostly related to Malayar (*malayar* or *mārāyemār*) ritual experts.

Defined as a “ritual text” (Freeman 2003b: 163) and as an account of rituals performed in Āranmuḷa temple (Devadevan 2010: 88), the TNM confronts the reader with an overwhelming number of questions, with regard to its metatextual form, to its editorial history and, more specifically, to its circulation.¹⁴ More fundamentally, however, the text poses a question about the very nature and effect of literature, its ontological status. As Shulman (2016) has argued in his biography of Tamil, there might have been a moment in the intellectual history of South India when the spoken, uttered word gained a new relief, when speech came to be understood as a powerful tool to modify reality. But what order of reality is speech able to transform? When the author of TNM states that his poem is a *kalaśam* of fragrant water which he has just poured,¹⁵ he is referring to the ritual act of pouring a pot of fragrant

¹¹ TNM 1.47 *tamiḷkavi punayunnēnē* (PN 1.42 *tamiḷkkavi pukaḷunnēnē*. As for the poetic genealogy, see TNM 1.36-47 (PN 1.31-42) where the author mentions both Sanskrit and Tamil poetics traditions.

¹² TNM 1.207 (PN 1.198) *ñān-innen kavite-yennuṃ naṟuṃpunel kalacamāṭi*.

¹³ See PN (2016: 17) and Sreeranganathan (2018: 55-56) who speaks of *pērumalayanmār* and mentions fragments of the text belonging to this community.

¹⁴ On these issues see Galewicz (2022 forth.). The basic difficulty is that the reading practice of the TNM is broken and we have to find a way to reconstruct it.

¹⁵ TNM 1.207 (PN 1.198) *ñān-innen kavite-yennuṃ naṟuṃpunel kalacamāṭi*.

substances over the head of the person who needs to be purified.¹⁶ This metaphor seems to suggest an identity between the poem and the ritual performance; yet, by establishing the two components of the equation he also states their intrinsic difference. What kind of relation does the poet create between ritual practices and the lines of his poem? Does he suggest that the ritual speech of the poem is able to transform the same order of reality as that of the accompanying ritual acts?

In his poetic composition the author refers to various practices, terms, and images that allow the ritual context to manifest against the background of his literary world. In fact, in the TNM, we observe recurring references to ritual activities, such as the divine ritual procession to and away from the god of Āṛanmuḷa, which act as the ordering principle of the work.¹⁷ Yet, it would be misleading to rely on such elements when trying to make sense of the relationship of ritual text, speech, and action in the TNM. In and of itself, the wealth of references to ritual practices within a literary composition is hardly surprising. It is, on the contrary, quite surprising that the rituals the TNM accounts for, such as *niḷal*, *nākkuru* and *bali*,¹⁸ belong, as Freeman (2003a) has already noted, to a system of knowledge that does not pertain to the Brahmanical temple-based liturgy, but rather ties in with the marginalized religious space of possession rituals and “exorcism” practices.

3. Correspondences with the world of Teyyam

Through the investigation of the TNM’s non-Brahmanical cultural context, scholars have brought to light a possible connection between the TNM and the Malayars, a low-caste community that practices Teyyam in present-day northern Kerala.¹⁹

¹⁶ The ritual pouring is described in the *Kuḷikāṭṭu pacca* (Bhaṭṭatirippāṭu 2014: 253), the 16th cent. reference text for Kerala temple-worship (Freeman 2016). With a similar purifying function is also mentioned in the 15th century Maṇipravāḷam poem *Candrōtsavam* (Kunjanpillai 1984: I.74 and I.106).

¹⁷ Furthermore, the rites of *nākkuru*, *paḷḷippaṭṭu* and *nalaṃkoḷ* (or *niṛaṃkoḷ*) *kuttiravu* are listed in an almost identical sequence at the beginning and at the end of the TNM. In the first *bhāga* (TNM 1.205 = PN 1.197), the author mentions them before his declaration that his *kavita* is a *kalaśam*, while they mark the end of the *uccabali* ritual in the third *bhāga* (TNM 3. 482=PN 3.455).

¹⁸ Cf. TNM 3.475. *Niḷalkuttum*, used to define the Malayars, refers to ritual practices of “shadow piercing” that are connected with the goddess Kuratti; *bali* is used as taxon for blood sacrifices. Finally, *nākkuru*, as we will see more in details below, is a ritual to deliver from the evil tongue. This last practice is connected with the world of “sorcery” (*mantravāda*), that, albeit not completely separated, is kept at a certain distance by the institutionalized world of high caste Brahmins. A further investigation of the connection between the *mantravāda* tradition and the TNM exceeds the scope of this article and it is part of an ongoing research.

¹⁹ Freeman (2003c: 308-10), Sreeranganathan (2018), Karipath (2019).

As public event, Teyyam is both a religious institution and an artistic product hinging on the worship of gods as they manifest themselves in the possessed body of the medium.²⁰ There is a formidable number of gods that are routinely invoked into the body of the performers —each representing a different Teyyam. Over the course of the ritual, local forms of Puranic gods, village deities, and family gods gradually take possession of the body of the medium through the application of the make-up, the wearing of the costume and of the headgear. This process is activated by the singing of divine stories (*torram*), which transpose by way of indexing the gods onto the body of the performer and it ends in the moment when the medium looks into the mirror he holds in his hand and recognizes the deity in himself.²¹

Whereas Teyyam, in the form we see it today, cannot be traced back to a period earlier than the eighteenth century, we do have records that point to a form of possession-worship around the fifteenth century in northern Kerala (Kolattunatu). Moreover, divine possession involving medium-performers seems to be attested in early times across the Tamilakam, the area of today's Tamil Nadu and Kerala (Freeman 2003c: 308).²² By thinking of the religious practice of Teyyam in terms of the historical trajectory of the concept of possession and medium-dance ritual up to the present, the ritual practices we find in TNM can be understood as a moment in the process of transformation of Teyyam. Analyzing specific passages of the TNM we find similarities and echoes that prove quite clearly the connection between the medieval text and the modern possession-worship, and I argue that these two artistic products, despite their chronological distance, can shed light on each other.²³ Through Teyyam we might better grasp some of the text's objective correlatives, and the TNM might shed some light on the history of the ritual practice.

Teyyam, as a religious institution, is organized around groups of performers and oracles belonging to low castes. This aspect colors the whole practice with a sort of lasting unbalance: throughout the performance of Teyyam, the site of power keeps shifting, giving a sense of fluidity to society's otherwise hierarchical structure. In this dynamic, we might, following Freeman (2011), detect a cultural irony. The performers who belong to low-caste communities position themselves on a higher level during the performance. They lead, guide and orchestrate most of the ritual procedure. They become the ritual leaders of the community for as long as the possession worship lasts and, in this way,

²⁰ The fact the gods are invoked into the body of the medium speaks to the fact that Teyyam has to be understood in the context of the tantric traditions of Kerala.

²¹ On this process, see Freeman (2003c: 315).

²² Cf. also Zvelebil (1974) and Hart (1975).

²³ On the pertinence of ethnohistorical reconstruction for the understanding of textual production see Freeman (2003a: 453).

they rise to a status that goes beyond their social position, as they operate on a higher social level than their high-caste patrons.²⁴ Similarly, in the TNM, the god Kṛṣṇa is reprimanded for his evil, dubious actions by low-caste Malayars who feature as central actors and ritual experts. Whether today's Malayars represent a point within the same historical trajectory as the one of the Malayars from Gōvinēn's composition is difficult to establish, but this literary text posits a higher ethical and social status for the Malayars who, in turn, are described practising blood sacrifices strikingly similar to today's Malayar ritual specialists.

The correspondences between contemporary ritual practices of Malayars as observed in ethnographic research²⁵ and the ritual narration of Gōvinēn pertain not only to the subversive socio-cultural context, but also some specific and crucial ritual actions. In Teyyam, the apical moment in the process of possession occurs when the performer-medium looks into a mirror that he holds in front of his own face. In this very moment the medium recognizes himself as the god. The act of gazing in the mirror and finding there what is for him and for all the devotees the true form of reality results in a complete identification with the deity.²⁶ In TNM 3.489–490 (PN 3.461–462), a Malayar is described as performing an act that is not only isomorphic to this apical ritual gesture, but whose implications also echo those of Teyyam:

taṅpīli muṭikkaṇintu kaṅṅāṭi paricaram kol
*uṅkaiyyil piṭittu nokki uṅṅāṭi mukeḷil kāṅuṃ*²⁷ 3.489
cotiye civena-kkūppi coll-eḷum-uṅarvum-eṅṅu
*nīnicer kuṛatti-tteyvaṃ niraṃpeṛa viḷiccār-ottē*²⁸ 3.490

He put the feather in his hair,
 took in his right hand²⁹ the beautiful stick and the mirror.
 Once he looked in it,
 the light he saw on the surface of the mirror³⁰

²⁴ On social implications of Teyyam, see Menon (1993).

²⁵ Most of the observations stem from the field work we did in February 2019 and February 2020.

²⁶ On the reflective nature of mirrors, see Shulman's *Tamil* p. 156 and Shulman (2006: 18).

²⁷ 489b *mukeḷil kāṅuṃ*] *mukaḷil tonnuṃ* PN.

²⁸ 490b *uṅarvum-eṅṅu*] *uṅarvu-peṅṅu* B, PN; *viḷittār-ottē*] *viḷiccār-ottē* B, PN.

²⁹ *uṅ-kai*: the hand for the food; Venugopala: the inside of the hand.

³⁰ Reflected from the inner-*naḍi*- from the *garbhagrha*, *uṅṅāṭi**] *uḷ-nāṭi*. On a similar compound construction in Tamil (*uṅṅāḷikai*), see Orr 2013.

that he worshipped, that is Śiva;
He obtained the intuitive knowledge³¹ that comes from the emerging of speech.
Dazzling they called in unison the righteous goddess Kuṛatti.

While in line 3.489, the Malayar medium performs the necessary actions to invoke the deity, in the last line of 3.490 the goddess is called by all Malayars. But it is in the first line of 3.490 that the most important event takes place, though invisibly. The primordial moment when speech emerges, the speech that articulates Śiva,³² has to be experienced by looking into the mirror. Śiva is the final form of reality that encompass all. Only through this act of looking can the god be invoked. As already mentioned, the invocation of the god into the body of the performer bespeaks the Śaiva nature of the text and the coalescence of Śiva and the speech points to the same direction.³³ The presence of Śiva ties in with the mutually symbiotic worship of Śiva and Viṣṇu, not a rarity in pre-modern Kerala. This is also reflected in the TNM that, while centred on Kṛṣṇa, portrays Śiva already in the opening lines as Hari accompanied by Umā. Umā is the name often attributed to the goddess in the Śrīvidya śaiva tradition that sees the speech as the ultimate form of consciousness. This conceptualization of the efficacy of speech plays a central role to understand the intersection of the TNM with the Uccabali-Teyyam and the Kaṇṇēruppāṭṭuuppāṭṭu.

4. The Uccabali-Teyyam

Along with socio-cultural features and ritual acts, the TNM and Teyyam share also a fierce local deity that traverses the cultural landscape of South India in different forms.³⁴ The figure of Kuṛatti features in Teyyam as one of the goddesses that possesses the body of the performer, and the Kuṛatti-Teyyam is mostly performed immediately after the Uccabali-Teyyam, a specific and rare form of Teyyam.³⁵ In the TNM, Kuṛatti's story and her mythical travel across India constitute one of the main topics of the third *bhāga*. Kuṛatti is invoked to the sacrificial ground by the Malayars following a long description of

³¹ On *uṇarvu* as intuitive feeling and knowledge and its connection with self-knowledge and speech, see Shulman (2016: 167).

³² The identification of Śiva with language or the potentiality of language is a diagnostic feature of Śakta tantric tradition.

³³ Śaiva and tantric traditions had a fundamental role both in the formation of temple practices (as shown, for instance, by the *Tantrasamuccaya*) and in more esoteric forms of knowledge systems along Śaiva lineages (such as the practice of *mantravāda*). The relation between Teyyam and the Śaiva traditions needs to be studied further and constitute the core of a research project in collaboration with Ma'ayan Nidbach.

³⁴ On the figure of Kuṛatti / Kuṛavañci in Tamil literary and performative worlds, see Peterson (2008).

³⁵ On Uccabali-Teyyam still sponsored today only by ten families, see Karipath (2019).

what both editors of the TNM label as Uccabali, the blood sacrifice performed at midday when the sun is at its zenith. Here is how her invocation starts:

*valamiṭṭu*³⁶ *katirevan poỵ marimarikaṭelaṇeya-kkaṇṭu*
kaḷamūṭṭuveli koṭuppān kaḷamoli maleyer-ellām 3.485

After the ritual circumambulation, once they saw the sun vanishing in the roaring sea, all the Malayars of beautiful voice offer the sacrifice of the marked spot³⁷.

In the area of Kolattunatu, northern Kerala, in the small town of Annur, every year, between the end of February and the beginning of March, the Cūvvaṭṭu family from the Ambalavasi community of Poduvar organize and finance Uccabali-Teyyam performance. The head of the family, the *kāraṇavan*, acts as the beneficiary of the purification rites performed during the second day. Performers from the Malayar community carry out the rituals. This religious practice lasts up to three days and features more than one god and involves many ritual agents acting in different locations. According to the evidence collected during the last field work in February 2020, during the second and central day of the Uccabali-Teyyam, ritual props are prepared in the area in front of the *garbhagr̥ha* and a sacrificial area is created just outside the temple.³⁸ The photograph below captures the sacrificial ground that is constructed ad hoc on the ground right in front of the temple and oriented perpendicular to it.

³⁶ *Valamiṭṭu* = *pradakṣiṇaṃ vecc̣*.

³⁷ *kaḷa* = drawing or marked place.

³⁸ These are my observations and notes from a field trip in February 2020 done with C. Galewicz.



Fig. 1 Sacrificial ground, Uccabali Teyyam, 27.02.2020. Annur, Kerala. Photo by the author.

A similar disposition of ritual props is depicted by the TNM in 3.7.2 where also the proper time -the midday- plays an decisive role:

meccamē maleyenmārē virant-ini-ppaleruṃ-kūṭi
uccanēr velikoṭuppān-uyerkkaḷa camappin-enna 3.471
varan-tikeḷ maleyer cenn-aññ-aṇi-ñilaṃ niratticetti
*tarantaraṃ-kaḷeyuṃ ñeḷukuṃ catiramāy nirattikkutti*³⁹ 3.472
kurutiyum-uruḷaccōruṃ kuttuvāl-kalavuṃ pinne
*caramēṭu-vāluṃ pīṭaṃ camappoṭu-nirattiveccu*⁴⁰ 3.473

³⁹ 472b varan-tikeḷ] barantikev̄ K; arantikeḷ PN

472b nirattikkutti] niṛuttikkutti PN

⁴⁰ 473b caramēṭu] caramōṭu PN; vāluṃ pīṭaṃ] pīṭaṃvāluṃ B, PN

“O best (well praised) Malayars, all that you are!

It is the proper time! Quickly arrange the best diagram (kaḷi) in order to perform the midday sacrifice.” Said [by the leader of the sacrifice].

The strong Malayars came to the beautiful ground, cut it to make it straight, stuck one by one the bamboo stick and the sugar cane in a square;⁴¹

The items used for the ritual are spread in an arranged manner: the blood, the ball of rice, a dagger, a pot and, finally, a sword on a stool with arrows.

Furthermore, during the second day of the Uccabali-Teyyam the oldest among the two Malayars in charge of the Uccabali performance stands at the border of the small wall that circumscribes the temple, which he is not allowed to enter since he belongs to a low-caste community. He is accompanied by two drummers, while the *kāraṇavan*, the head of the family which sponsors the Teyyam, is seated inside the temple. The *kāraṇavan* emerges from the shrine with various agricultural products (uncooked rice, etc.) and ceremonially gives them to the older Malayar. The latter puts a rooster in a pit, which is then covered with stalk, large green banana leaves, and earth. Meanwhile, the younger Malayar turns into the Uccabali-Teyyam, as the deity takes possession of him.

The entire day leads up to the moment when the Uccabali-Teyyam, that is, the Malayar who acts as the possessed medium, together with the *kāraṇavan*, goes to the ritual space outside of the temple. While the *kāraṇavan* sits on the ritual ground, the older Malayar and the Uccabali-Teyyam stand near him and perform a series of actions⁴² that are meant to deliver the *kāraṇavan* from his physical and mental defects (*dōṣam*).

5. Deliverance from the evil eye: Kaṇṇēruppāṭṭu

This practice of deliverance represents the space of intersection of the TNM and Uccabali-Teyyam with Kaṇṇēruppāṭṭu. This final piece of the puzzle sheds a new light on the socio-historical context and, especially, on the nature of text. The discovery⁴³ of a direct link between a portion of the second *bhāga* of the TNM and a non-Brahmanical ritual called Kaṇṇēruppāṭṭu exposes traces of spoken ritual

⁴¹ Two readings: *catiramāy* or *caturamāy*.

⁴² *Bhāga* 2.6 is marked as *tulavūliyuka* = *tōlūliyuka*. According to Gundert 1872 it is a “ceremony of Malayars to remove sins by throwing them with leaves into the fire.” In the Uccabali a similar procedure was observed during the field work in February 2020. The *kāraṇavan* was purified and leaves were drawn over his body, up to down, and toward a pot of fire.

⁴³ We owe this discovery to the suggestion of Sreeranganathan (personal communication).

language. Such a discovery urges us to reflect upon a form of textuality where the borders between the literary and the ritual text disappear.

The songs from 2.21 to 2.40 are marked as coherent section by the editors of TNM, M.M. Puruṣōttamannāyar and R.C. Karipath. This part of TNM seems to constitute a thematic unit that centres upon the “evil eye” and the “evil tongue.” The first five songs of this unit are found almost in the exact same form⁴⁴ in a collection of songs entitled *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu* “Songs for the evil tongue.” As indicated by Sreeranganathan in his book on Āranmuḷa’s temple,⁴⁵ *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu* is used by Malayars in northern Kerala to get rid of evil influences. This form of “exorcism,” as the term “*olivu*” has often been translated, is obtained through a sequence of ritual actions, but these actions are activated by the recitation of the songs contained in the *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu*. According to Paṇikkar and Sreeranganathan, the text collected by K. P. C. Paṇikkar as *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu* is recited during rituals (*caṭaṇṇu*) that aim at delivering from the evil eye and evil tongue, forms of defects (*dōṣam*) and afflictions caused by spirits (*badham*). The songs 2.21–25 of the TNM are uttered as ritual language, and, as part of *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu*, are titled by Paṇikkar as *niṛanāli uliyal*.⁴⁶ This term refers to a ritual practice whereby rice and other articles are rubbed over an afflicted person’s chest and then brushed away, thereby casting away the evil influences. The ritual in turn is indirectly mentioned in the section of TNM that describes the midday sacrifice, the *uccabali*.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the decisive moment of deliverance from evil in the Uccabali-Teyyam as it was observed during our fieldwork in February 2020 appears to contain such rites, whereby the songs that are shared by TNM and *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu* should be recited during the act of deliverance. The first song with which the *niṛanāli uliyal* section of *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu* begins, which is song 2.22 in the TNM, is as follows:

ñānikaḷēttum ārenmuḷayappena
vānaverkon kaṇṭu nāvaleyittōn
tān oru māmuni mātinācapēṭṭu

⁴⁴ For the variants in *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu*, see Paṇikkar (2007: 107).

⁴⁵ According to Sreeranganathan copies or fragments of the TNM can be found in the family houses of Malayar practising *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu* (Sreeranganathan 2018: 56).

⁴⁶ *niṛanāli* literally means “rubbing (*uliyal*) a *nāli* (a unit of measurement consisting of a wooden or copper pot) of rice which is one of the *aṣṭamaṅgalya*, the eight auspicious objects often used at the beginning of rituals and performances.

⁴⁷ Cf. TNM 3.475 where there is a reference to *niḷalkuttu* ritual that Puruṣōttamannāyar (PN 2016: 113) connects with the singing of *niḷalkuttu pāṭṭu* (song) recorded in the *Kaṇṇērūppāṭṭu* (Paṇikkar 2007).

*mēniyellātavuṃ kaṇṇāyirippōn*⁴⁸ 22

The king of the gods, Indra, by watching, called down evil
on the god of Aranmula, who is extolled by the wise;
Indra, having defiled the wife of a seer,
will have his entire body covered with eyes.

The noun *nāvale* in the second line of this passage—literally “excess of tongue”—means “evil tongue.” It is used to refer to a speech that by praising something or someone beyond measure may bring misfortune upon the object of the speech. The phrase, “called down evil on the god of Aranmula,” is split among the first two lines and is reiterated in precisely the same position throughout the whole section. This phrase is built in the sequence of songs as a key formula that creates a beating tempo and turns the action of “calling evil” into an organizing syntactical and semantic principle for the rest of the song. But there is also a less visible kind of repetition in the way the narration is structured. In all the songs that are part of this self-contained unit, we observe that in the first two lines of each song, the god of Āranmuḷa is victim of the evil tongue (*nāv*). In the second two lines, the agent of the malediction is met with a sort of punishment.

In this instance, the punishment of eyes all over the body of Indra, connects the song to the Vedic myth of the king of gods who seduced the wife of the sage Gautama. The ṛṣi cursed him and as a result Indra’s body was covered with female genitalia, later transformed into “eyes.” Drawing upon a commonly shared mythological knowledge, the songs localize the well-known legend about Indra by framing it into the evil eye malediction that was cast upon the local god of Āranmuḷa. The same narrative technique is employed in all the songs of the unit. By way of prolepsis, the audience goes back in time to the point when a sin has been committed that will cause all the other sins to come. Thus, these songs establish a direct link between Āranmuḷa’s god, Indra, and all the other gods who are to follow. While the formulaic elements build a recursive structure, the narrative pattern is repeated through the section, creating a temporal inversion. In other words, the ancient pan-Indian myth becomes a secondary effect of the evil eye cast on the local god which, in turn, is represented as the first in the chain of causality. The Vedic and Puranic gods belong thus to a strain which originates in

⁴⁸ 22a *nānikaḷēttum ārenmuḷayappena*] *nānikaḷēttum ārenmuḷeyappena* PN

22c *oru*] *ori* PN; *mātinācapēttu*] *mātināsapēttu* Gra. Pā.

22d *mēniye*] *mēyiye* PN

the god of Āranmuḷa and their punishment turns from a mythical memory⁴⁹ into prediction of the future.

The formulaic nature of the TNM further illustrates the different receptions and uses of this text. It is not a novelty that formulas have been used both in ritual and bardic practices as mnemonic tools. But, as I suggest, there is more to it than a mere functionalist explanation. The formulaic structure gives voice to a shared conviction:⁵⁰ in the rhythm produced by the formulas, in their sonic dimension, lies the magic of formulas, their power to affect and change reality.⁵¹ In thinking of the nature of the TNM, we should then reconsider our understanding of the term ritual which features in this text as a mode of transforming reality.

6. Ritual simulacrum

As we make sense of the genealogy of the songs from the second *bhāga* of TNM, which are surprisingly also performed during Kaṇṇēruppāṭṭu, we are confronted with a multiplicity of possibilities. For one, we might imagine the author of the TNM drawing upon his quotidian yet marginal experience of or rather partial connection with the corpus of knowledge apparently recognized already in his time as a powerful alternative to the Brahmanical one. We could also argue that the type of descriptions and the poem's allusive language point to a shared understanding on the part of the audience with regard to the ritual practices referred to in the TNM.

We do not possess any knowledge regarding the exact form of the relationship between the Brahmanical milieu of the TNM and that of the Malayar community at the time in which the TNM was composed. More precisely, we cannot determine with certainty whether the author had access to a corpus of *pāṭṭu*-s (songs) that was part of the non-Brahmanical ritual repertoire. Conversely, we also cannot establish whether practitioners of the ritual found in Gōvinēn's composition borrowed elements that related to their practice and creatively incorporated parts of the literary composition into their own textual corpus.

⁴⁹ One could speculate here further on this poetic move as a philosophical shift from mythical to historical thinking.

⁵⁰ The idea that ritual or official speech can shape, modify and even recreate reality is part of a philosophical stance that can be traced back, albeit with important variations, to the Vedic ritual corpus. It is also present in the neighboring Tamil literary tradition (cf. Shulman 2016: 166-173). It would be tempting to try and connect these two moments in the intellectual history of Indian civilization (see Parpola 1999), but at the moment we are missing a history of the idea of speech in South India that could offer a socio-historical reconstruction.

⁵¹ For an anthropological analysis of the efficacy of ritual speech, see Lévi-Strauss (1963: 181-201).

Based on the intricate network of ritual practices that seem to crosscut around these songs, my tentative hypothesis is that the songs migrated from the collection of ritual language into the poetic composition, and that this is a case of poetry drawing on ritual material rather than of ritual quoting from poetry. Gōvinēn might have had some access to these songs, or a version of them, and incorporated them in his composition. Whatever the direction towards which we lean, this exchange reveals the contact between low and high caste communities. The TNM constitutes the axis where these two worlds met and partially merged, thereby representing an extraordinary cultural token in the history of Kerala.

When I state that the TNM represents an encounter between the high caste and low caste communities, I do not mean to offer a rationale for the literary composition, but rather its socio-cultural premises. I think that the rationale lies in its dichotomies and inversions. The author of TNM uses his literary skills and knowledge to tell a story that refers to an altogether different world than his own. It is the world of sorcery—of *mantravādin*—, of possession and blood sacrifices. Furthermore, this is a text that was probably conceived for the high caste communities that were allegedly meant to keep a distance from the practices that represent the core of the text.⁵² These practices were not part of the quotidian experience of the Brahmanical community. In trying to offer a possible interpretation to Gōvinēn's literary choices, I propose to think in terms of reproduction of signs⁵³ (hermeneutics of similarity). Indeed, the TNM as a whole might well have been conceived as the poetic rendition of a ritual.⁵⁴ But the next question would be as to the reason for such enterprise.

I would argue that, on a deeper level, this literary composition performs and enables an act of voyeurism through an act of literary recreation, which I also suggest is not a simple rendition. Through his poetry, Gōvinēn leads his high-caste audience towards and into the world of Malayars. He does not lead the audience there directly and in person, but rather through literature as a proxy. In this proxy mode, he sends the narrator to explore the world that the Brahmins were prevented from experiencing

⁵² I am well aware that high caste communities sponsored and still support Teyyam performances, and that there is no impenetrable fence between the communities. Still, the distance between the high castes and the low castes was extremely significant in the socio-religious system of the period. Suffice to mention a scholar who considers the fact that these kinds of rituals were at the core of TNM as definite proof that the TNM could not have been composed by a Brahmin (see Vijayappan 1995: 63-64).

⁵³ On the implications of reproduction of signs on the relation between signifier and signified, or the sign and the reality it supposedly denotes, see Baudrillard (1981).

⁵⁴ Salay (2022) has put forward a similar hypothesis about the rationale behind the formation of the poem *Kālavadhā Kāvya* of *Kṛṣṇalīlāśuka* composed in the same area in the 14th cent.

in a full-fledged manner, as it would pollute them. Through Gōvinēn's text, high-caste communities were thus offered the opportunity to experience an altogether different religious world.

In this sense, the text is a linguistic endeavor to conjure up something that resembles a ritual, while its own textual nature removes the poem (*kavita*) from the reality it is supposed to depict. Yet, the TNM reveals its performative nature both in the context of the ritual language used in the second *bhāga* and through other linguistic features—the frequent usage of the first and second person and the imperative to frame long narrative and ritual sequences.⁵⁵ Consequently, this experiment in creating a ritual by way of poetry reveals its nature as simulacrum of a ritual. We should then ask whether, despite the omnipotence of poetry, the simulacrum is indeed the final form of reality and what kind of consequences are implied by the text's oscillation between purity and pollution.

How shall we understand the logic of reading or listening to a text as a potential polluting activity? Is it sound, or message, or circumstances of reading that might engender pollution? A contact with the bodily presence of the low caste Hindu may be taken as a feared pollution, but here no contact seems to be implied. Albeit pollution is mainly thought of in terms of physical contact in relation to the senses, I would argue that the power of imagination (*saṃkalpa*) which plays a central role for ritual purposes can also cause a form of pollution. In this sense, one can think that the imagined and thus experienced ritual might also affect the person listening or reading it. A somewhat unsettling question may then accompany the next reading of the TNM: when the Brahmins read or listened to these songs that were composed for them, were they being polluted by the text that, as a simulacrum, still threatened their purity? And does then the reason for the partial oblivion of the TNM lie in this inversion of the pairing of pure and impure?

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⁵⁵ In the third *bhāga* the verb *kaṇṇīr* (“may you see” “you shall see”) is obsessively repeated projecting the ritual sequence into the future.

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