

Bulls for St. Anthony

Religio-Cultural Syncretism in a Ceṭṭināṭu Village

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Introduction

The tiny village of Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi lies deep inside the arid zone of Ceṭṭināṭu, not far from Naṭarācaṅkōṭṭai, on one of the roads that connect Civakaṅkai to Kāraikkuṭi. I first became aware of this village a few years ago, through a wall-poster in Kāraikkuṭi, announcing a *mañcuviraṭṭu*¹ to take place in Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi on the 5th of the Tamil month *Tai*². On arrival in the village, the morning of the *mañcuviraṭṭu*, I was confronted with a poster welcoming participants and spectators of the event. The first line of the poster read: “*Antōṇiyar tuṇai*” (“With the help of St. Anthony”) — and I understood that I was going to watch a Christian *mañcuviraṭṭu*³.

The cultural background of Tamil tauromachy

Bull-baiting is known in Tamil culture even in the earliest documented times. As is evident from *Kalittokai*,⁴ it was a custom within the ancient cowherd-communities, that a young man proved his eligibility as a bridegroom by subduing a ferocious bull owned by his chosen girl's father. This custom is also referred to in several other Tamil- and some Southern Sanskrit-texts which tell the myth about Kṛṣṇa and his beloved Nappinnai⁵ whom he can win as his bride only by subduing seven bulls. Warriors in ancient Tamil-culture, on the other hand, declared war by lifting cattle from the enemy's villages⁶.

¹ *Mañcuviraṭṭu* is one of the three main forms of Tamil bull-baiting, the most famous of which is *jallikkaṭṭu*. For details on these ritual sports, cf. Niklas [2000]. In what follows, I use the term *jallikkaṭṭu* as a general reference to Tamil tauromachy, whereas *mañcuviraṭṭu* refers to the specific form of this ritual sport.

² *i.e.* January 19th.

³ This article constitutes, in fact, a very preliminary treatment of the topic. I do not possess, at this point in time, all the material necessary for a more elaborate account and analysis, for which more field-research is needed. In particular, I am waiting for the copy of a palm-leaf manuscript kept in the chapel, which is said to contain, so to say, the *sthalapurāṇa* of the place. The copy of the manuscript is in preparation and is likely to come into my hands in a few months' time. Yet unsure is moreover, in how far the Christian tradition of Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi is connected to the Christian network of the Rāmanāthapuram/Ceṭṭināṭu region as described, for instance, by Mosse [1997]. More investigation is necessary on this point, too — I still felt it appropriate to contribute in this volume on this particular topic, since the jubilarian and I share a common passion for Tamil tauromachy, and we spent many interesting hours exchanging ideas and experiences concerning this cultural element.

⁴ *Kalittokai* is one of the younger anthologies of so-called Caṅkam poetry which forms the earliest available layer of Tamil literature. Poems 101-105 of this anthology treat the ancient bull-baiting events, there called *ēṟutaḷuvutal*.

⁵ On this legend being a “typically Southern myth about Kṛṣṇa” cf. Hardy [1988].

⁶ According to the descriptions of “heroic poetry” (*puṇam* in contrast to *akam*, *i.e.* “love poetry”) in classical Tamil works on literary theory, as *e.g.* the *Poruḷatikāram* of the earliest Tamil grammar, *viz.* *Tolkāppiyam*, cattle-lifting was the common way to declare a war.

In today's Tamil taumachy, both elements are present, as I have tried to show in a previous article (Niklas [2000]) on *jallikkaṭṭu*. It is only curious to observe that in the course of time taumachy has migrated from the cowherd-communities and is nowadays mainly a ritual sport of the *Mukkulattōr*⁷. Complying with the culture and mentality of this community, the heroic aspect of the games is nowadays predominant, while the connection to marriage-rites has slid into the background. Furthermore, this ritual sport is now closely connected to the worship of Karuppan and other ferocious village-guardian deities. It should not be overlooked that Karuppan, an important deity for the *Mukkulattōr*, is often identified with Kṛṣṇa⁸. And this identification, again, may have led to the transposition of the bull-baiting lore from Kṛṣṇa to Karuppan.

Another important aspect of *jallikkaṭṭu* is that this ritual "sport" has in many villages replaced blood-sacrifices and can thus be understood as a sacrificial substitute for non-vegetarian deities whose worship can or should no more be carried out in the original manner. Evidence for this development is available in ballads and stories of the region around Maturai⁹.

Jallikkaṭṭu is thus deeply embedded in the *Mukkulattōr*'s heroic heritage and their manner of worshipping their village guardian-deities. It is hence greatly astonishing to find this ritual sport in a Christian context, as in Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi.

Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi – the village

Arriving at Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi, only one or two houses of the village are visible from the road, at the right margin of a large open space. This space stretches between the road and the slope of an embankment which delimits a small lake – one of the village's seasonal water-sources. In the middle of the open space stands a small Christian chapel – unexpected at first, since the location near water and at the outskirts of the village rather makes one expect a shrine for the village-guardian deity Aiyaṇar – but not astonishing altogether, since the region possesses a sizeable Christian population.

Following the path that leads into the interior part of the village, one passes along a couple of *kārai-viṭu* – well-constructed houses in durable materials like bricks, mortar, etc., some of them sporting an elaborate first floor with one or two rooms and a roof-terrace. But most of the houses of this village

⁷ The *Mukkulattōr* - "those of the 3 families" - are a caste-group comprising the *Maṇavar*, *Kaḷḷar* and *Akaṇṇaiyar*. *Maṇavar* and *Kaḷḷar*, moreover, share the caste-title *Tēvar*, while *Akaṇṇaiyar* call themselves *Cērvai*. They are warrior-minded people who have in former times been feared by other communities in the region around Maturai. Only when the British administrators declared them as "criminal castes" and laid upon them a number of restrictions, they were forced to give up their traditional life-style and started to make a living out of agriculture - either as landowners or as agricultural labourers.

⁸ Both the names, one being Tamil (Karuppan), the other Sanskrit (Kṛṣṇa), have the same meaning ("the dark one"). This fact might have helped in the identifying process of these otherwise incongruous deities.

⁹ I am at present editing and translating one such ballad, the *Aḷakattēvarkatai*, which will soon appear in print. This text gives clear evidence for *jallikkaṭṭu* having been instituted as a sacrificial substitute in certain cases. The text relates in one episode how Karuppan, the guardian deity of the village Kīlakkuṭi, orders his devotee to prepare a human sacrifice for him, as recompense for a favour granted by the deity. The devotee refuses, offering instead to sacrifice a number of goats and roosters since he could not kill a human being for the god. In return, Karuppan orders him to instead organize a *jallikkaṭṭu* in his - Karuppan's - name.

are huts with mud-walls and thatched roofs—though some with wooden roof-constructions and tiles. The small houses are arranged in several clusters which were originally the living-quarters of different communities. This differentiation is no longer followed strictly in Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi. The last cluster of houses at the eastern border of the village is constructed around one more small Christian chapel. It is this chapel, in fact the older of the two, which organizes the *mañcuvoiraṭṭu* in the name of its patron, St. Anthony.

The population of the village consists for the largest part of Hindu-*Maṛavar* (*Tēvar*) and -*Akamuṭaiyar* (*Cērvai*), besides a few Mutaliyar-families and two groups of Christians (mainly hailing from the *Akamuṭaiyar*-community) who are attached to either the one or the other of the two chapels of this place. At a small distance from the main village, a settlement of scheduled castes is found. Though situated in the heart of Ceṭṭināṭu, the village does not have a *Ceṭṭiyār*-population.

The main occupation of the villagers is agriculture. Mainly dry-land crops, as e.g. peanuts, sesamum, etc., are reaped. With a few exceptions, the entire population of the village is engaged in this activity. The land belongs largely to a few rich *Mukkulattōr*-families, identifiable in the village by their *kārai-viṭu* houses.

The History of the older St. Anthony chapel in Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi

I have visited Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi several times, and each time I have tried to gain detailed information about the Christianisation of the village and about the strange incorporation of *jallikkaṭṭu*-culture into the Christian setting. Curiously enough, the story changed each time I enquired, and each time with the aim to consolidate the Christian tradition and heritage of the family of the chapel's founder. The very first version of the story, told in an unpremeditated *ad hoc* manner appears to me to be the most plausible and authentic one. It was told by Yākappaṇ Cērvai (then ca. 65-68 years old), the present caretaker of the older St. Anthony chapel. According to this version, Yākappaṇ's grandfather – an *Akamuṭaiyar* Hindu – wanted to construct a new house for his family. While digging to make a foundation for his new house, he unearthed a strange statue. He searched in the region for someone who could tell him the significance of the statue. Finally, a Christian priest from a nearby church identified the figure as that of St. Anthony. The *Akamuṭaiyar*-family took this as a sign, converted to Christianity and built a chapel instead of a house. It was the founder of the chapel himself who took care of it and carried out worship. Later on, his descendents took over the office – first Yākappaṇ's father, then Yākappaṇ himself, and nowadays Yākappaṇ's eldest son. No regular Christian priest was ever installed, and – in fact – the chapel appears not to be formally consecrated. The caretaker carries out a form of *pūjā*, in which candles are used instead of camphor-flames and holy water instead of ashes.

The conversion to Christianity was obviously not limited to Yākappaṇ's close family but covered almost the entire clan, so that Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi has now a Christian population of approximately 20-25 houses. About one generation ago,

a split occurred within this Christian population which resulted in one faction building another chapel—the one at the entrance of the village, seen from the main road—which was also dedicated to St. Anthony. Since then, a rivalry appears to exist in the village between these two places of worship.

“I'm a Hindu – my family deity is Jesus”

The younger St. Anthony-chapel of Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi profits largely from its location near the main street and next to the *mañcuviratṭu*-ground: the greatest part of the crowd of devotees comes to worship here—rather than to cross the entire village in order to reach the other chapel. In the crowd there are many Christians who come from more or less far-off places to attend the festival here. But a very large percentage of the devotees of Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi's St. Anthony are Hindus, and they worship the Christian saint in the same manner as they would a Hindu village-deity. In fact, when I visited the chapels on the day of the *mañcuviratṭu*, the leftovers of the previous day's festivities showed that a *karumpu-toṭṭil* ritual¹⁰ had taken place – as usual in this region during the festivals of Hindu village-deities.

Still, there is an important difference between the visitors and the villagers, in their attitude towards the Christian elements and their sincerity in worshipping the Christian saint. It became obvious from conversations with Hindu-devotees who came from other places to attend Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi's St. Anthony-festival, that the main attraction for them was the saint's close association with *mañcuviratṭu* which made it easy for them to identify with him as just one more village-god. The Christian background of St. Anthony was of no consequence for them.

On the contrary, for the inhabitants of Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi – whether Hindu or Christian – St. Anthony holds a much deeper meaning. The statue buried in the ground was understood as the saint's manifest wish to abide in this village¹¹. He is regarded as a communal deity of the entire village and his presence here led to a general merger of Hindu and Christian elements and identities for most of the inhabitants¹². As a teenage girl from Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi expressed it: “I'm a Hindu – my family deity is Jesus.”

Bulls for St. Anthony

Next to the old St. Anthony-chapel, firmly fixed into the ground, is a stone-pillar. It serves to tie the “temple-bull” of the chapel. On a wall in the small entrance-hall of the chapel hangs a photo of a heroically looking Cērvai and his

¹⁰ *i.e.* “sugar-cane cradle”: to a few canes which serve as a yoke carried by two men, a sari is tied in such a manner as to form a hammock-like cradle. In this cradle, a baby is carried three times around the temple or shrine of the deity worshipped. Then, the sugarcane are left as an offering in the shrine.

¹¹ Comparable elements are often found in the stories of the origin of popular Hindu-temples. Hence, in this respect, too, St. Anthony is easily identifiable with other village-deities.

¹² This is not a contradiction to my earlier remark about the endeavour of Yākappaṇ Cērvai to consolidate a Christian identity for his family. A Christian identity is for this family a question of credibility and authority as founders and caretakers of the original chapel.

Jallikkaṭṭu-bull. The Cērvai is one of Yākappaṇ's ancestors who was famous in the region as a great *jallikkaṭṭu*- or *mañcuvirāṭṭu*-hero – an expert in catching bulls. According to Yākappaṇ, the *mañcuvirāṭṭu* in his chapel was installed in memory of this ancestor. Hence, the reason for this uncommon combination of Tamil tauromachy and Christian culture clearly lies in the pre-conversion family-tradition of the caretakers of the chapel and has no inner connection to St. Anthony and his worship.

The chapel is kept and served like an Aiyaṇar- or Karuppaṇ-shrine: St. Anthony is surrounded by a number of secondary saints¹³; his worship is carried out by a *pūcāri*-priest, the office of whom is hereditary in the family of the founder of the chapel; the annual festival, which starts on January 17 – St. Anthony's day – culminates with the *mañcuvirāṭṭu* which is held on its third day (January 19). Every year, for the occasion of the festival, the chapel buys a "temple-bull" which is then kept for a short time and soon sold again¹⁴.

The *mañcuvirāṭṭu* itself is held on the *perumpōkku*-ground of the village, a large ground common to everyone, where cattle can be grazed and firewood can be collected. Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi's *perumpōkku*-ground lies beyond the main road passing by the village. It is a large ground with clusters of acacia-trees which, on the festive day, are used to tie the bulls. The event has earned fame in the region, and as a result, several hundreds of bulls are brought here to participate in the ritual sport. Naturally, most of the owners of the animals are Hindus and belong to the *Mukkulattōr* community.

The *mañcuvirāṭṭu* takes place in two different forms and phases: most of the bulls are released on the open ground, from wherever they stood tied to an acacia-tree. Thus, from the late morning onwards, the entire ground is one pool of activity, with bulls and their owners running here and there, and crowds of people – participants and onlookers – rushing for shelter in case a great bull approaches the place where they stood. In the early afternoon, the organized *mañcuvirāṭṭu* begins. Here, bulls are released in smaller numbers from a stable (*toluvu*) – made up by earthen walls, without roof – and young men try to catch the animals. This event looks almost like a *jallikkaṭṭu*, in which the bulls would be released one-by-one, and in which the catchers could earn prizes. Here, though, there are no prizes to be won – and the young men engage in their

¹³ The most interesting among them was called by our informants "Cevittiyārcāmi". He rides on a horse, wields a knife in his right hand, and he is said to drive away evil spirits (*pēy*). The way Yākappaṇ described this saint rather gave the impression that he had the function of a *kāval* deity—This saint appears to be the same as Cantiyākkāppār ("St. James") mentioned by David Mosse in his article on Alapuram. Also the fact that the present caretaker of the chapel is called Yākappā, hints to an affinity towards St. James. Whether the Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi Christians have any connection to the cult of Alapuram could not be established but will definitely be a topic in further fieldwork.

¹⁴ Such a frequent exchange of bulls is also found in the worship of Karuppaṇ and other guardian-deities. *Jallikkaṭṭu*-bulls are kept in fulfillment of a vow to the deity, and sometimes the vow includes an annual exchange of the animal which bears a great financial risk for the devotee: the price of a *Jallikkaṭṭu*-bull depends on its performance in the ritual sport. If a bull does not perform well in one year, its price will fall drastically so that the devotee might not get back half of what he spent on the animal. On the other hand, he has to make sure that the new bull he is going to buy is a flawless animal with good qualities, for which he has to pay a high price.

activity just for the fun and fame of it, and in order to earn a reputation in the region.

Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi's "*Mañcuviraṭṭu* for St. Anthony" exists for more than half a century¹⁵. It is one of the great events of tauromachy in the region and it takes place regularly, every year. Notwithstanding its obvious non-Christian background and tradition, this *mañcuviraṭṭu* has exerted strong influence on orthodox catholic centres in the surrounding area. For example, about 35 years ago, a major St. Anthony church¹⁶ near Kāraikkuṭi has introduced a *mañcuviraṭṭu* as a regular element of its annual church-festival – explicitly influenced by the great success of the event in Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi.

St. Anthony, in Ceṭṭināṭu, appears to become closely associated with the ritual sport of *mañcuviraṭṭu*.

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[The article is mainly based on my own field-notes]

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The old St. Anthony chapel of
Kaṇṭuppaṭṭi



The interior of the old chapel

¹⁵ I could not yet establish the entire historical data of the event. I am confident, though, that a longer field-research in the region will yield data and insights that would finally allow to write the history of this interesting village and its syncretic religion.

¹⁶ The comparatively large church has been built with financial aid of "Missio Aachen", an international catholic missionary society.



The original St. Anthony statue



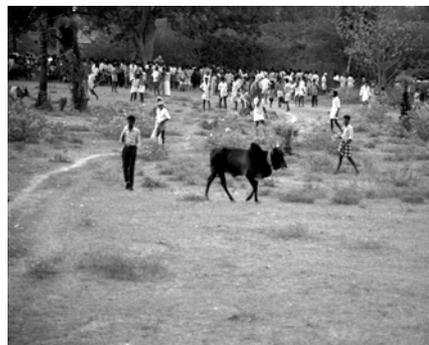
St. James



Yākappaṅ Cērvai's ancestor



The stone-pillar to attach the "temple-bull"



The mañcuvirat̃tu-ground

The new St. Anthony chapel of
Kaṇṭuppatti



“karumpu-toṭṭil” – the sugarcane-
cradle



The mañcuvirattu-poster



Yākappaṇ Cērvai



Yākappaṇ Cērvai's wife