

Professor Elaine Craddock
Department of Religion and Philosophy

The Anatomy of Devotion: The Life and Poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar

In the southernmost Indian state of Tamilnadu, Shaiva Siddhanta developed over many centuries to become the dominant philosophical, theological, and ritual system associated with the god Shiva. The tradition was systematized between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, but draws its devotional perspectives from the stories and hymns of the Nayanars, or “Leaders,” the sixty-three devotees of Shiva who were canonized as saints in Cekkilar’s twelfth century hagiography, the *Periya Puranam*. Seven of these saints wrote poems to Shiva between the sixth and ninth centuries. Along with the Alvars who sang to Vishnu, these poets were part of the *bhakti* or devotional movements that began in South India and spread the emotional worship of a personal god throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the “Mother from Karaikkal,” was the first poet to write hymns to the god Shiva in Tamil, in the mid-sixth century, when the boundaries between Shiva’s devotees and competing groups were just starting to be articulated in a self-conscious way. Speaking to god in one’s mother tongue, rather than Sanskrit, was pivotal to the triumph of Hindu devotionalism over the religions of Jainism and Buddhism that reach the apex of their popularity in South India during the fifth and sixth centuries.¹ Her powerful poetry is what Indira Peterson calls a “rhetoric of immediacy,” as it speaks to a particular community defining itself in a context of competing religious allegiances (1999, 165). Along with the hymns of the later saints, her 143

¹ On the interplay of multiple religions in medieval South India see in addition Sastri, 3, 130, 135, 137; Davis 1999; Peterson 1999; and Monius 2001. The great Tamil Jain epic *Cilappatikaram* and the Tamil Buddhist epic *Manimekalai* were composed during this period.

poems envision a world where devotees can dwell in perpetual bliss with Shiva, ridicules those who cannot see that Shiva is the only truth, and includes elements of the sophisticated philosophy that would be systematized as Shaiva Siddhanta centuries later.²

Her story remains popular in Tamilnadu,³ and vividly encapsulates notions of gender and devotion that are embedded in Tamil culture, while problematizing the connection between women's ritual activity and the domestic realm. Before Karaikkal Ammaiyar becomes a poet she is the model of a dutiful Hindu wife; her devotion to Shiva forms part of the continuum of her domestic life, in which she faithfully serves both her husband and her god. Yet it is her unswerving devotion to Shiva that ultimately ruptures her orderly domestic world and drives her to restructure her life outside the ordinary domestic realm. The ascetic path she embodies and praises forms a critique of her previous life as a devoted wife. Karaikkal Ammaiyar's story and poetry portray a life lived as a ritual offering to Shiva as the only true life, wherein rituals are not performed to achieve specific goals as in the domestic sphere, but where goal and ritual merge in perpetual devotion to Shiva alone: text is practice, and practice is text. Her praise poems are the central ritual activity of her life pursuing personal salvation, but they are also a record that transcends her individual path and communicates her knowledge of Shiva to the members of a newly emerging devotional community.

The devotional movements contained elements of social as well as religious reform, protesting brahmanical orthodoxy along with the heterodox faiths of Buddhism and Jainism. But this revivalist Hinduism was rooted in the temple, which depended on royal patronage and the

² See Monius 2001, especially Chapter One, for a discussion of imagined and imaginary community.

³ In addition to written versions, her story is told in a Tamil film, "Karaikkal Ammaiyar."

evolving socio-political alliance between Brahmins and agriculturalists.⁴ So, although the devotional ideology undercut caste and gender hierarchies in principle, in practical terms the patriarchal boundaries remained. Statistically women are not very visible among the Tamil devotional movements: Antal is the only woman Vaishnava saint, and out of the sixty-three Shaiva Nayanars, only three are women (Ramaswamy 1997, 120-121). However, the life and poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the only woman poet among the Nayanars, reveals a fascinating portrait of the localization of a pan-Indian god, and the potential space for women in this emerging tradition.

Her Story

Karaikkal Ammaiyar was born in the sixth century into a well-to-do trading family in the coastal town of Karaikkal and originally named Punitavati.⁵ In the well-known story about her, she was a beautiful girl who was married to the rich merchant Paramatattan, to whom she was a faithful wife, although this role proved to be at odds with her ardent devotion to Shiva. One day Paramatattan's customer gave him two mangoes which he told his wife to serve him later for his midday meal. But before he returned home for lunch, a Shaiva holy man came to the door for alms, so Punitavati gave him one of the mangoes and some rice. When her husband came home she gave him his meal along with the remaining mango. He thought the mango was

⁴ See Stein 1980; Davis 1999; Peterson 1999; Mahalakshmi 2000, 17-19; Ramaswamy 1997, 118-121. On the development of the Shaiva Siddhanta tradition, which is beyond the scope of this essay, see Davis 2000 and Prentiss 1999. Shaiva Siddhanta was originally a pan-Indian tradition that for a number of reasons survived and thrived in Tamilnadu. On the bhakti movements in South India, see Peterson 1989, Hardy 1983, and Champahalakshmi 2004.

⁵ The story is originally told in Cekkilar's *Periya Puranam*, which is retold in many versions. I am also drawing here on the *Tiruvallankattu Talavaralarum*, the temple history book sold at Tiruvallankatu.

delicious and asked for the other one. Punitavati went to the kitchen to pray to Shiva for help; another mango appeared, which she served to her husband. This one was so much more delicious than the first, her husband was suspicious and asked his wife where she'd gotten it. She reluctantly told him, but he doubted her story and asked her to repeat the miracle in his presence. Again Punitavati prayed to Shiva, and another mango appeared; her husband was terrified of her power and fled without releasing her from her wifely duties.

He set up another household in another city, while Punitavati continued to keep up his house and her appearance in anticipation of his return. Eventually her parents found out where he was and took their daughter to him. He and his second wife and daughter, named Punitavati, fell at her feet in worship, calling her a goddess. When Punitavati learned that her husband didn't want her as a wife anymore, she begged Shiva to take away the beauty she no longer needed and give her a demon form. He granted her wish; she then made a pilgrimage to the Himalayas, walking on her hands so as not to defile god's heavenly abode with her feet. Shiva was so moved by her devotion he called her "Ammai" or mother, and allowed her to join his troupe of ghouls, his *ganas*, and to perpetually witness his dance at Tiruvalankatu, where she lived as his adoring slave.⁶

⁶ Shiva at Tiruvalankatu is called Vatanaroshvara, and the temple is called Vatanaroshvara Swamy Tirukoyil. On the back cover of the temple's official history is an upside-down picture of Mt. Kailash, which is the view Karaikkal Ammaiyar had as she walked down from Mt. Kailash to Tiruvalankatu on her hands. The last part of the temple book contains the story of her life from Cekkilar's hagiography, and a few verses of her poetry. There is a sculpture in the temple of Karaikkal Ammaiyar climbing to see Shiva and Parvati on her hands. This is the only instance when Shiva called anyone "mother" (*Periya Puranam* 539).

Karaikkal Ammaiyar is most closely associated with Tiruvalankatu, but there is a yearly mango festival in her honor during the month of *Ani* (June-July) in her home town of Karaikkal; see Ramaswamy 1997, 132.

This story upholds the traditional notion that a woman's religious duty is to be devoted to her husband and her home: Punitavati does not forsake her wifely role until her husband has officially renounced her.⁷ Punitavati's husband acknowledges her as a goddess, but cannot accept her as a wife; Punitavati's dramatic role reversal begins with her husband falling at her feet. Punitavati's gift for sincere devotion is, paradoxically, what disrupts the household's harmony; the boundaries of the domestic realm prove to be porous. Punitavati can finally indulge the true focus of her unswerving devotion: the god Shiva.

Ritualization and Asceticism

The story and the sculptures of Punitavati before her transformation stress that she is beautiful (Dehejia 1988, 135-137), but as soon as her husband releases her from her wifely role she asks Shiva to take away her beauty, her femininity and sexuality, and give her the demonic form she considers worthy for worshiping him.⁸ Ammaiyar is also called "Pey," or Demon; she identifies herself as the Demon from Karaikkal in several stanzas among her four works.⁹

⁷ There is a large literature on women's roles in Hindu life; see for instance Harlan and Courtright 1995.

⁸ Mahalakshmi R. (2000) discusses the notion, raised by other scholars, that Karaikkal Ammaiyar renounced her body as a reaction to her husband abandoning her. She maintains that Karaikkal Ammaiyar's evocation of the demonic figure "suggests a deliberate evocation of certain symbols, and the denial of still others" (33).

⁹ These four works are *Arputattiruvantati* with 101 *venpa* verses; *Tiruvirattai manimalai* with 20 stanzas in *venpa* and *kattalaik kalitturai*; and the two *patikams* called *Tirivalankatu mutta tirupatikankal* with 11 verses each. She probably wrote the first *prabandha* literature, and invented the *antati* form. See especially Zvelebil 1975, 136-137. Zvelebil states that Karaikkal Ammaiyar likely introduced the *kattalaik kalitturai* form. Accounts of her life suggest she wrote the first two works before going to Mt. Kailash, then she wrote the Tirivalankatu poems when she arrived there; see Dorai Rangaswamy 1990, 972-3.

A female ghoul with withered breasts, bulging veins, hollow eyes,
 white teeth and two fangs,
 shriveled stomach, red hair, bony ankles, and elongated shins,
 Stays in this cemetery, howling angrily.
 This place where my Lord dances in the fire with a cool body,
 his streaming hair flying in the eight directions,
 is Tiruvalankatu. (*Tiruvalankattu mutta tirupatikam* 1.1)¹⁰

In another poem she says:

The One who has kept another eye on his forehead,
 Has made me understand a little of him.
 I am one of the ghouls among his good ganas.
 Whether or not this grace lasts,
 I don't want anything else. (*Arputattiruvantati*, 86)

Many of the Nayanars performed dramatic feats of self-sacrifice out of devotion to Shiva, but Karaikkal Ammaiyar's transformation from ideal wife to ideal demon devotee is particularly transgressive and serves to highlight the rupture between the domestic world of ordinary rituals and a life lived entirely as a ritual offering to Shiva. Karaikkal Ammaiyar's renunciation of domestic life to live in the cremation ground praising Shiva is an example of "ritualization," a term used by several theorists, and defined by Catherine Bell as ritual as lived practice, as a way

¹⁰All translations are my own, which I made in partnership with Dr. R. Vijayalakshmy, Professor Emeritus at the International Institute of Tamil Studies. This text is from *Tiruvalankattu Talavaralarum Tirupatikankalum*.

of acting that uses diverse strategies to differentiate meaningful, powerful or sacred action from ordinary behavior (Bell 1992, 88-93). Ritualization creates a spatial/temporal environment in which an individual embodies and enacts structures of personal and social meaning within a perceived field of possibilities. Bell writes:

Ritualization always aligns one within a series of relationship linked to the ultimate sources of power. Whether ritual empowers or disempowers one in some political sense, it always suggests the ultimate coherence of a cosmos in which one takes a particular place. This cosmos is experienced as a chain of states or an order of existence that places one securely in a field of action and in alignment with the ultimate goals of all action. (Bell 1992, 141)

Through her poetry Karaikkal Ammaiyar delineates the only realm of action that has ultimate meaning: sublimating herself as one of Shiva's adoring, ghoulish attendants. Her poetry expresses in literary Tamil a life of perpetual, spontaneous worship of Shiva in which all thought and action fuse in a ritual offering of pure awareness of god. Unlike female devotional poets who relate to god as their beloved, such as Antal relates to Krishna, Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not violate rules regarding chastity. In one sense her life has moved along a continuum of devotion to others, with the others simply changing in importance.¹¹ But ultimately Karaikkal Ammaiyar rejects the entire social and domestic world of rules and obligations to pursue personal salvation, relocating her sphere of activity on the periphery of the social world (Mahalakshmi 2000, 33). This is not the classic renunciation called *sannyasa* that is typically

¹¹ Caroline Walker Bynum's works on Medieval European Christianity have addressed women's spiritual lives as continuous with their domestic lives, and their explorations of the connections between femaleness and physicality. See, for instance, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*.

undertaken at the end of life after fulfilling one's obligation to a family; the severe asceticism she undertakes in the prime of her life implicitly critiques the location of women in a domestic space of family relationships.¹² Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry dismantles the paradigm of human order and duty rooted in the household not by focusing on gender roles, but by extolling devotion to Shiva in a community of devotees in which gender is irrelevant.

Localizing God

Karaikkal Ammaiyar descends from her vision of Shiva and Parvati on Mt. Kailash to spend the rest of her life singing to Shiva dancing in the cremation ground at Tiruvlankatu, or "Sacred Banyan Tree Forest," where he performs his fierce dance called *kalikatandava* or *urdhvatandava*, in which he defeats Kali by lifting his leg up to the sky (in this case, his left leg¹³). The Tiruvalankatu temple, north of Chennai, must have originally been a banyan tree (Dorai Rangaswamy 1990, 825). But now, in the Tiruvalankatu temple Shiva dances in the Ratnasabhai, one of the five *sabhais*, or temple halls in Tamilnadu associated with Shiva Nataraj, Shiva as Lord of the Dance.¹⁴ Karaikkal Ammaiyar is shown at the feet of Shiva, playing cymbals and singing her praises to him. She is buried behind this main image, not far from the giant banyan that is the temple tree (*sthala vriksham*); some of her verses are inscribed inside the temple. There is a separate shrine where Kali is seen dancing.

¹² See Denton 1992 on women's asceticism.

¹³ For a discussion of whether the *urdhvatandava* pose requires the right leg, see Dorai Rangaswamy 1990, 456.

¹⁴ The others, represented and labeled at the Tiruvalankatu temple, are Chidambaram, Madurai, Tirunelveli, and Kutralam. Dorai Rangaswamy lists them as Kanchipuram, Tirucentkattangudi, Tenkasi, and Taramangala (1990, 452).

In the cemetery where you hear crackling noises
 and the white pearls fall out of the tall bamboo,
 The ghouls with frizzy hair and drooping bodies,
 shouting with wide-open mouths,
 Come together and feast on the corpses.
 In the big, threatening cremation ground,
 When The Lord dances,
 The Daughter of the Mountain watches Him,
 In astonishment. (*Tiruvallankattu mutta tirupatikam*, 2.8)

Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry reveals an early stage in the process of the transcendent, pan-Indian deity Shiva taking up residence in a landscape dense with local, and sometimes competing, religious and cultural meaning. Anne Monius has written eloquently about how a community can be constructed through rhetoric. She says, a text "may constitute community: through creating an imaginary world – an imaginary landscape of particular characters, concepts, and values – that allows the reader or listener to envision himself as part of a larger, if not directly seen or encountered, collective" (Monius 2001, 10). Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry is filled with vivid images of Shiva as the heroic god whose grace rescues his devotees from the sorrows of the world, sometimes conveyed through detailed descriptions, and at other times through metonymic references that imply that Karaikkal Ammaiyar's audience was at least minimally acquainted with Shiva's stories.

I thought of only One.

I was focused on only One.

I kept only One inside my heart.

Look at this One!

It is He who has Ganga on his head,

A moonbeam in his hair,

A radiant flame in his beautiful hand.

I have become his slave. (*Arputattiruvantati*, 11)

Her poetry conveys to her audience a conception of Shiva drawn from the Sanskrit culture that began to permeate South India in the early centuries of the Common Era. She refers to several of Shiva's most famous deeds and manifestations: his heroic destruction of the Three Cities of the Demons; his burning of Kama; his crushing Ravana with his big toe when Ravana tries to lift Mount Kailash; his swallowing the poison during the churning of the ocean so that his throat is blue; his rescuing of Markandeya from death; his killing of the elephant-demon; his manifestation as the fiery linga; his terrifying Bhairava form, forced to wander as a beggar in penance for brahminicide; and most centrally for Karaikkal Ammaiyar, dancing with Kali in the cremation ground. She refers to Shiva as the Knower of the Vedas, indeed as the Vedas.¹⁵ She thus builds a detailed iconography that unites the emerging Shaiva community and links it to the broader Indian traditions surrounding Shiva. It seems clear that even at this early date Karaikkal Ammaiyar and the emerging community of worshipers were seeing iconographic images of

¹⁵Such as in *Arputattiruvantati* 15.

Shiva in temples, whether those temples were actual structures or open-air shrines.¹⁶ However, unlike the later poets she does not talk about temple worship, and in one verse even criticizes those who expect to see Shiva through empty ritual.¹⁷ Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not praise the Tamil landscape nor the Tamil language as the later poets do. Karaikkal Ammaiyar praises Shiva in the cremation ground at Tiruvalankatu. Through her powerful poetry, Karaikkal Ammaiyar reveals that the horrific cremation ground is really the cosmos, and the terrifying form of Shiva performing his dance of destruction is really the most sublime and blissful experience of the Lord. She makes the terrible beautiful (Dorai Rangaswamy 441, 387), and leads the devotee beyond the limits of ordinary awareness into a transcendent knowledge of Shiva as Truth, as the dancer who dances the world and into the heart of his adoring devotee.¹⁸

The Tamil word “*katu*” means forest, jungle, or desert, but it also means cremation or burial ground, as well as boundary or limit.¹⁹ In the life and poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the cremation ground encompasses the notion of the forest as the opposite of civilization (Tamil *natu*, city), in addition to the pollution, fear of death, and ghoulish forces traditionally associated with a burning ground. Her poetry is connected to the Shaiva tradition that develops after her, but it also resonates with the earlier Cankam *puram* poetry that praises heroes in war and provides detailed descriptions of the battlefield, gruesome places of death and sacrifice, where demons feast on the corpses lying on the field and dance, garlanded with intestines. Korravai, the Tamil goddess of victory, is described in Cankam poetry as surrounded by demonesses,

¹⁶ Dorai Rangaswamy 1990, 3-18; Hardy 1983, 202-213; Prentiss 1999, 51; Ayyar 1974, 211; Krishna Murthy 1985, 6-14, 42-47; Peterson 1982, 72.

¹⁷ See *Arputattiruvantati* 17.

¹⁸ See Narayanan 2003, especially 500-501.

¹⁹ *Tamil Lexicon* 1982, 855. See also Hart and Heifetz 1999, 362-363.

eating flesh and dancing with dead bodies on the battlefield (Hart 1975, 31-41; Ramaswamy 1997, 129-130; Mahalakshmi 2000, 24-27). Indeed, Karaikkal Ammaiyar uses a trope of the heroic warrior to describe Shiva as the conqueror of death for the devotee, and the ultimate sovereign of the universe:

Ghouls with flaming mouths and rolling, fiery eyes,
 Going around, doing the *tunankai* dance,
 Running and dancing in the terrifying forest,
 Draw out a burning corpse from the fire and eat the flesh.

The place where our Lord raises his leg in the *vattanai* posture with the *kalal* jangling and
 the anklets tinkling,
 Dancing so that the fire in his hand spreads everywhere and his hair whips around,
 Is Tiruvalankatu. (*Tiruvalankattu mutta tirupatikam* 1.7)

Here Shiva is dancing with Kali, and takes the *vattanai* posture with his leg in the air – his special posture at Tiruvalankatu -- to defeat her. The poem uses two sets of ankle bracelets to signify the divine competition: Kali's anklets jingle as she dances, and Shiva's *kalal*, or hero's victory anklets, jangle as he dances so dynamically his hair whips around in his frenzy, dancing as the god of destruction, but also the conqueror of death (Shulman 1980, 213-221). The *tunankai* dance is associated with Korravai; it was also danced at festivals,²⁰ and in fact can mean "festival." It is a type of village dance in which the arms are bent and struck against the

²⁰ Hart 1975, 23, 45, 142; Hart and Heifetz, 166.

sides of the body. *Tunankai* is also a kind of Pey, or demon.²¹ The Tamil imagery that Karaikkal Ammaiyar uses in her poetry serves to localize the god in a familiar landscape, and to connect local sacred forces to the Shaiva pantheon. During the post-Cankam period (approximately 300-600 C.E.), Korravai is increasingly associated with Durga and Kali, and therefore with Shiva. It seems that Karaikkal Ammaiyar is consciously associating the powerful forces of the demons occupying Tiruvalankatu with the transcendent god dancing in the cremation ground. By becoming one of Shiva's *ganas* or ghouls, she assumes a kind of power familiar in the early Tamil world, and connects the indigenous demon tradition with one of the central myths of Shiva (Mahalakshmi 2000, 29). Karaikkal Ammaiyar is also linked closely to Tiruvalankatu because of Nili, the ancient and fierce goddess located in the nearby town of Palaiyanur.²² Despite the strong goddess tradition in the area, however, Karaikkal Ammaiyar remains focused on Shiva; Parvati appears in several of her verses, but Ammaiyar's single-minded devotion never wavers from the Lord.²³

Defining a Path

The cremation ground is the stage of Shiva's dance of life and death and salvation. It is also the space in the heart of the devotee where the ego is burned up as she surrenders to him.²⁴

²¹ *Tamil Lexicon* 1963.

²² The story of Nili is told in the epic *Cilappatikaram*, Canto 23. Nili's story is included in the temple's history, the *Tiruvalankatu Talavaralaru*, 178-196; her story continues to be important in the area. See Mahalakshmi 2000, 33-40; Shulman 1980, 194-197, 213-221; and Peterson 1989, 203.

²³ This pure focus on Shiva is contrasted in the film about Karaikkal Ammaiyar in which Parvati tells her she must first worship the goddess in order to get to Shiva.

²⁴ See Coomaraswamy 1999, 89.

Through vivid and jarring imagery, Karaikkal Ammaiyar reveals that the terrifying place of death is really the beautiful and blissful abode of the Lord, and the sacred grove of liberation from this world.

The *picacu*, wearing a white skull garland tied tightly,
 Swallowed up the congealed fat.
 Having named its child Kali,
 Bringing her up with comfort,
 She wiped the dust off the child, suckled it, then went away.
 The child, not seeing the mother returning, cried itself to sleep.
 The place where our Lord dances in the cemetery is
 Tiruvalankatu. (*Tiruvalankattu mutta tirupatikam*, 1.5)

Karaikkal Ammaiyar's close attention to mundane activities confronts the devotee's habitual understanding of the cremation ground as a threatening, marginal, "other" place. Here, the *picacu* ghoulish is a gentle mother caring for a child. The intimate scene plays out in the same space as Shiva's dance, breaking down the barrier between domestic space and the place of death. Karaikkal Ammaiyar attempts to shatter the illusions of ordinary awareness and show that ultimately, the cremation ground is a state of mind, where the true devotee who meditates on Shiva overcomes their fear of death and experiences him as the Beautiful Lord, with his upraised dancing foot pointing to liberation through him.

If, with wisdom,
 And without ridiculing his body that is garlanded with bones,
 They praise the one who wears a moon on his long matted hair, and
 Who conquered the three great cities of the powerful *asuras* who did not respect him;
 They will not be born here in this world in a body with bones. (*Arputattiruvantati*, 37)

As we see in this poem, bones are a central liberation motif in Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry. Shiva ornaments himself with a garland of bones he finds in the cremation ground, the bones of everyone and anyone; he does not discriminate, just as he responds to all devotees.²⁵ But devotees must get beyond terror and revulsion at his horrific form to see that he is the conqueror of death. If they are able to reach this point, Shiva will liberate them from life in this world "in a body with bones." Karaikkal Ammaiyar is an emaciated skeleton of a figure, an assemblage of bones at home in the cremation ground but liberated by it.

The other major symbol of liberation is fire. The cremation ground burns with funeral fires, signifying the end for all those whose ignorance clouds their vision of the Lord. Shiva's terrifying dance takes place in fire, and he holds fire in his hand. Whether that fire is terrifying and signals death and destruction, or is illuminating depends on the devotee's consciousness. The center of this crowded, gruesome scene is Shiva dancing in the fire of destruction, yet his yogi body is cool, not affected by the fire he creates. Karaikkal Ammaiyar promotes a vision of Shiva as the beautiful embodiment of the rhythm of life, burning away our illusions with the fire in his hand.

²⁵ See also *Arputattiruvantati* 30.

If you consider the One who has the complexion of the red rays of the setting sun,
 and of a smoldering fire,
 And whose matted hair hangs down,
 You would say that to those who have surrendered to him,
 He shines like a golden flame;
 But to those who move away without taking refuge in Him,
 He has the nature of leaping fire. (*Arputattiruvantati*, 82)

Creating Community

The devotional movement denies caste or gender privileges, but ultimately the only real egalitarianism is the spiritual equality of the worshipers of Shiva, in contrast to other religious groups, including devotees who follow a different path to Shiva (Zvelebil 1973, 194). Karaikkal Ammaiyar is pursuing her own path to salvation, but at the same time she is working to create a community of devotees who also understand that Shiva is the ultimate truth. In addition to sharing a Vedic, mythic understanding of Shiva, the Tamil Shaiva community was forged partly by the harsh rhetoric of the Tamil Shaiva saints against the Buddhists and Jains in particular. Peterson argues that “the negative representation of Jains was an important part of a process of self-definition and consolidation of power for the Tamil Shaiva sect . . . Jains were not only a threatening rival group, but a very useful foil against which to establish the superiority of the Shaiva religion” (1999, 164). Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not refer to any group by name, but

lumps together as “others” the people she is defining her spiritual path against.²⁶ But it is clear that she is referring to non-Vedic groups. She says:

Look!

Having become a slave to the beautiful feet of the

One whose red matted hair has the waves of Ganga,

We have realized Him through scriptures,

We have become suitable for this life and for the other world.

Why do others gossip about us behind our backs?

Understand us. (*Arputattiruvantati*, 91)

In two other poems she is even more scathing:

Ignorant mind,

Worship the feet of the devotees, again and again

Focusing on them, and praising them with words.

Leave that group of people who do not think about

The One who wears a moon as a small garland,

Which no one else wears. (*Arputattiruvantati* 40)

²⁶ In Shaiva poetry, “others” are sometimes referred to as “the six faiths” (*akacamayam*), which can refer to six sects of Shaiva Siddhanta, or six sectarian groups with different cultic deities. *Tamil Lexicon*, 8; Peterson 1989, 132-133, n.52.

Oh! You pitiable people
 Who are without wisdom.
 It is an easy way to live,
 Thinking of our Lord all the time,
 Our Father with the gleaming throat,
 Who wanders around,
 Wearing a snake. (*Arputattiruvantati* 46)

His greatness is such that it is not known by others.
 [But] Others know he is the great consciousness.
 Our Lord, wearing the bones of others,
 Happily dances along with the strong ghouls
 In the fire at night. (*Arputattiruvantati*, 30)

In this poem, the first “others” refers again to the usual suspects who do not understand him. The second “others” refers to his devotees, who do realize who he is. The third, “the bones of others,” refers to “just anyone,” conveying that Shiva does not discriminate against anyone concerning whose bones he wears; he treats all equally, is god to all equally, and is open to all devotees. The many references to these “others” who do not understand Shiva reveal how influential these heterodox communities were. The lumping together of all these groups probably reveals that the Jains were not the only powerful voice that the Shaivas had to resist. But perhaps most importantly at this early period, Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s refusal to specify any one community conveys the key point: everyone who doesn’t follow the right path to Shiva is

equally ignorant. She urges followers to “worship the feet of the devotees,” requiring that worthy individuals are identified as belonging to the emerging community. Serving Shiva by serving his devotees remains an important part of the tradition (Peterson 1989, 41-47).

All those other people who do not understand that he is the real truth,

Have seen only his ghoul form:

His lotus-like body smeared with ash and garlanded with bones.

See that they ridicule him? (*Arputattiruvantati*, 29)

Although Karaikkal Ammaiyar doesn't transgress the boundaries of chastity for a woman, she does transgress other boundaries, evoking a tantric orientation to the world.²⁷ Karaikkal Ammaiyar's transgressive behavior does not go to the extremes of some Shaiva worshippers of her milieu, but she engages in behavior that turns ordinary categories of personal and social perception upside down in order to force a transcendent spiritual awareness, including an understanding of the self as rooted in divine power. This perspective is intensified by the Tamil view of the world as pervaded by powers, including the forces present in places of death, such as the cremation ground. Karaikkal Ammaiyar's extreme ascetic emphasis reveals the early, broad roots of the Tamil Shaiva tradition before it is systematized into a temple-based orthodoxy. This asceticism is rooted in a milieu of multiple traditions, drawing particularly from the earliest Shaiva sects often grouped together as the Pashupatas, whose followers imitated Shiva in his

²⁷ Tantra is a vast subject that cannot be taken up in detail here. There are many perspectives on, and definitions of, tantra, as the scholarship shows, including elements of yoga and meditation. See Denton 1992, 225-227; Brooks 1990, 3-6; Padoux 2002. Among other things, Padoux addresses the porous boundary between Tantra and bhakti. The later Shaiva Siddhanta tradition uses the tantric texts called Agamas as the ritual manuals in temple worship; see Davis 2000; Prentiss 1999; Filliozat 1983.

terrible Bhairava form, often in the cremation ground. These devotees enact Shiva's penance for brahminicide, which he incurred by cutting off Brahma's fifth head when he tried to sleep with his own daughter, and because of which Shiva is known as the beggar, Bhiksayatana, and Kapalin the skull-bearer.²⁸ Later poets refer to Pashupata ascetics worshipping at Shiva's shrines, but the emerging orthodox tradition rejects their devotional mode. This is probably one major reason why Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry is not regularly sung in Shiva temples today, in contrast to the Tevaram poets, whose hymns are regularly sung. Perhaps because the nearby town of Tiruvorriyur is known to have had a significant Pashupata presence at this time, Karaikkal Ammaiyar was drawn to a more extreme asceticism than the later Nayanars embodied (Krishna Murthy 1985). In one poem she takes the point of view of a male ascetic:

My heart!

Give up your bondage, your wife and children.

Saying that you take refuge here at His feet,

Think of Him and worship. . . (*Tiruviruttai manimalai* 13)

And in another poem she says:

Not following a false path ruled by the five senses,

We have achieved merits,

Because of the Lord's love for His slaves. (*Tiruviruttai manimalai* 16)

Now we have been elevated;

We have reached God's feet.

Now we do not have any troubles.

²⁸Flood 1996, 154-173; Bhandarkar 1983 145ff; Dorai Rangaswamy 1990, 392-3, 400, 1265.

O my heart! Look!

We have now crossed over the inescapable sea

That roars with anguished souls,

And that causes an ocean of karma.

(Arputattiruvantati, 6)

The intimacy of Ammaiyar's relationship to Shiva combines with her living beyond social norms to create a powerful model of the devotional path. A wife is expected to serve her husband and sacrifice herself for his welfare; Karaikkal Ammaiyar relocates this behavior in the cremation ground where she serves Shiva as her Lord. Through Karaikkal Ammaiyar's life and poetry a new form of Shiva takes shape (Ramaswamy 1997, 129). Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry does not describe the ecstatic fusing with the divine seen in other devotional poetry (Hardy 1983, 306-307). The goal of Shaivism is to become liberated from the cycle of rebirth by becoming like Shiva, or at least more like him.²⁹ Karaikkal Ammaiyar exhorts devotees to focus all of their energies in constant meditation on Shiva as the discipline that leads to salvation. Her poetry is intellectual, focusing on the experiential understanding of Shiva as knowledge and the ultimate truth gained through meditation, an important perspective in the development of the orthodox Shaiva Siddhanta tradition.

He himself is the one who knows.

He himself is the one who makes us know.

He is the one who knows by being knowledge itself.

²⁹ Davis 1998, 221.

He himself is the truth that is to be known.

He himself is the sun and moon, the earth, sky, and all the other elements.

(Arputatiruvantati, 20)

In the ritualization of her life, Karaikkal Ammaiyar renounces her life in the domestic sphere, becomes one of Shiva's ghoul attendants, and dwells in perpetual bliss with him. Her radical transformation from a lovely, dutiful wife into an emaciated, frightening demon reveals that knowing Shiva requires the devotee to transcend ordinary human awareness, and to see that the terrifying cremation ground is really the beautiful place of liberation. Her poetry urges people to give up a life rooted in family relationships and bounded by conventional rituals and goals, and instead live their lives as ritual offerings to Shiva. Through vivid descriptions of the Beautiful Lord Shiva, multiple mythic references to his deeds, and regular references to a host of ignorant "others," Karaikkal Ammaiyar delineates a spiritual path and creates a community that centers on a self-conscious understanding of Shiva as the ultimate truth and the only path to liberation.

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