

THE ANNANMAR EPIC

Overview The Annanmar ('Two Brothers') story is one among several local oral epics that are still performed in rural parts of India. This epic, like many others (see, for example, the essay on the Pabuji epic), is a story of war, revenge, death and sacrifice, which leads to the deification of the heroes. And, again, as is often the case, the heroes are brothers. The 'Two Brothers' story is truly epic in scope; it is a drama played out over a series of generations, as if all Shakespeare's history plays were enacted in a single sequence, one after the other. Enactment is indeed part of the tradition of this oral epic, which is performed in a number of different ways in a region of south India. That region is the historical Kongu Nadu, which is located in the modern state of Tamil Nadu and is home to a particular caste, the Vellalars. The 'Two Brothers' epic functions as a foundation myth for these people, who migrated to Kongu Nadu some five or six centuries before the action described in the story. The epic thus provides them with a link to the past and a vehicle for celebrating their ancestral heroes. It is deeply entrenched in local culture, to the extent that singing the epic can prompt young men to be possessed by the spirits of the dead heroes.



(traditional region of Kongu Nadu as shown on a modern map)

History Scraps of literary and archaeological evidence suggest that the two core events in the story—the struggle between two sets of cousins in the Vellalar caste, and a battle between the Vellalar farmers and forest-dwelling groups—probably took place in the 14th or 15th century in the Kongu Nadu region, the same region where the story is known. The background to these events is the territorial expansion that occurred when the Chola Empire (9-13th c. CE) expanded into the upper reaches of the Kaveri River. Into this dry, upland region, where modern-day Tamil Nadu adjoins modern-day Kerala, came migrants from the river delta area where land was too expensive. Chief among these migrants were a high-status group known as Vellalars, who settled down and became known as Kongu Vellalars (and sometimes as Gounders). During that settling-in period, the Vellalars fought among themselves and also with marginal people who lived in the forest and whose land they were clearing for agriculture. Those foundational events, and the ancestry behind them, were preserved in folk memory by oral tradition by writing the story down on palm leaves. The oldest surviving manuscript of the story only takes us back to the 19th century, after which came printed books and pamphlets. When the epic was first studied and performances recorded in the 1960s, it was found that various versions of the story were circulating under different names. However, the core story was more or less consistent.

Cultural Significance The epic of the 'Two Brothers' (like the many other oral epics in India) is significant for several reasons. On the broadest level, it illustrates the crucial interaction between the local and pan-Indian layers of culture. As in the case of the Pabuji epic (see separate essay), that interaction can be defined as a process in which a local figure becomes deified through death and rises up to be absorbed into the Hindu pantheon or is identified with one of the great gods or goddesses, such as Vishnu or Parvati. In fact, we can expand this pan-Indian epic pattern to include

other narrative elements, such as a core triangle of leading characters (two brothers and a sister), rival sets of cousins, heroes forced into exile, intervention by the gods and the power of fate. Many, and sometimes all, of these elements can be found in other oral epics and in the Sanskrit epics (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*). These extensive parallels among Indian epics might be explained in three different ways. First, it is possible that a paradigmatic pattern found in the pan-Indian Sanskrit epics has trickled down to the regional oral epics. The opposite is also possible, that is, a bottom-up process in which the Sanskrit epics borrowed from the local epics in constructing their stories. A third, and more likely, explanation is that both Sanskrit and local epics took their material from the same broad repertoire of motifs and themes. If that is so, we might also speculate that this 'epic pattern' itself derives from the distinct social and cultural landscape of India: a patrilineal, agrarian society in which rivalrous sets of male relatives is almost inevitable, plus a culture in heroes are deified by death.

Away from this speculation, the epic holds tremendous meaning for the people of Kongu Nadu. The story of the brothers, their parents and grandfather provides people with a history and a foundation myth. We have to remember that this story emerged in the pre-modern era, when there was no television, cinema or radio, and only a very few could read, and even fewer of them had access to manuscripts and later to newspapers. Telling and listening to this story, of how a community came to and settled in a region, was an education and an entertainment.

Story The story begins with a famine, which forces the grandfather of the future heroes to leave his home and search for work. He is given a small patch of land by a raja (who claims to be descended from the great Chola emperors). When the rains return and the land is prosperous again, the raja gives the grandfather a large tract of land in Kongu Nadu. Now the grandfather's brothers become jealous and a struggle begins between the relatives that will last for three generations. The grandfather's position is weakened because he has no sons, and so the gods intervene and create a boy for him. That boy suffers hardship all through his life, being forced off his land by a rival faction in the family, but again the gods come to aid and arrange a wedding for him.

Together, the couple work hard and re-establish the family's fortunes, only to find, once again, that the wife is barren. It is then revealed that this infertility is a punishment for the grandfather's inadvertent killing of cows many years before. The barren wife spends years in meditation on Siva, who grants her the boon of children: two brothers, Ponnar and Cankar, and a sister, Tankal. When the rival cousins hear of these births, they begin to plot against them. The two boys are whisked away to safety through a tunnel and put in the care of a goddess in a temple, while the sister is left to grow up with her parents. When the parents die, and the boys are mature, they fight a great battle with their cousins, which they win with the help of magical horses and an untouchable man. Buoyed by their local success, the boys go on to win more battles over neighbouring rajas and end up as the rulers of the vast tract known as Kongu Nadu.

Their victories, however, breed another struggle, this time with the groups who live on the uplands and in the forests. When the brothers expand their territory into these areas, the forest-dwellers and hunters unite against them. In a scene similar to many others in Indian traditional literature, the brothers enter into the forest in order to capture a parrot for their sister. In retaliation, the hunters form an alliance with a huge wild boar, which then uproots the crops planted by the brothers. The brothers are drawn into a hunt for the boar, which leads them into a battle with the hunters. In a long war, reminiscent of the *Mahabharata*, the brothers prevail, but thousands of their supporters lie dead. The brothers then learn from Vishnu that they have reached the end of their allotted span of 16 years. Accepting their fate, and saddened by the death of their comrades, the brothers draw their swords and kill themselves. Hearing that news, the sister springs into action. She goes to the house where the brother's virginal wives have been locked up ever since their unconsummated weddings. The sister burns that house to the ground, making sure that the two wives become *sati* (wives who burn after their husband's death or on the same funeral pyre). Searching for her brothers' bodies, she finally finds them deep in a forest and revives them for a short time so that they can exchange final words. Then the sister also dies, and the three siblings are transported to Shiva's heaven.

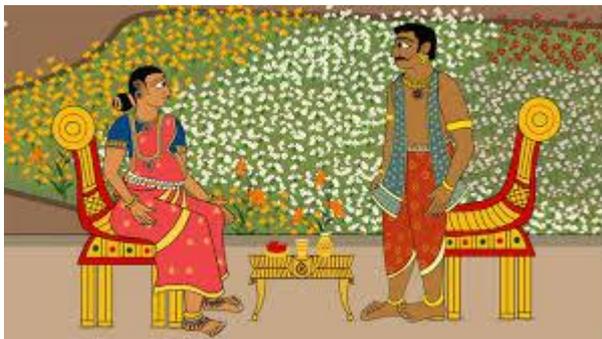


(statues of the two brothers in their main temple in Tamil Nadu, date unknown)

Performance The story of the 'Two Brothers' is performed in several ways in the Kongu Nadu region. In short versions, it is told as a folk tale, sung in songs at work or at major events, such as a wedding, and chanted very briefly as part of private rituals in a house. The longer, more spectacular and enduring performance, however, is sung and told by professional bards at annual temple festivals. Singing stretches as song, and then advancing the narrative through dialogue and prose, these mostly male performers accompany themselves with a small wooden drum (*damaru*). These festival-based performances vary a great deal in length, from a few hours one evening to 38 hours stretched out over eighteen days. Some of the episodes may also be enacted as dance-drama. The focal point of these ritual performances is the death of the two brothers when they commit suicide. As this section of the story is sung and the drum beats grow more incessant, some men in the audience will get to their feet and dance around, believing themselves to be possessed by the spirits of the dead heroes. Waving swords around, they continue to dance until exhausted and then fall to the ground, where they lie in a death-like stupor until revived by a local priest. These extended, ritual performances are now very rare, although, at the same time, the epic has found new performance media. The story has been retold in different print media, including comic-books and graphic books. A full-length feature film version was released in 2011, and in 2013, a television version (26 episodes of 25 minutes each) was broadcast in India and Canada.

Text in translation

As no reliable translation of the epic is available, pages from a graphic book version (*The Legend of Ponnivala*) are shown here. This is, in fact, the most popular form of the story in the 21st century. This graphic book was written and drawn by Brenda Beck, Cassandra Cornall and Ravi Arumugam in 2012.



(the brother's grandparents, childless at the beginning of the story)



(images of the brothers in a temple)



(a dance-drama performance of the story as part of a temple festival, place and date unknown)

The Counter Curse



(the brother's grandmother in despair about her lack of children)

The Counter Curse



(the grandmother on a visit to her hateful enemies collects gifts for them)



(the brother's mother sitting on a pillar in meditation in order to overcome her infertility)



(the birth of the two brothers, overseen by Vishnu and Siva)



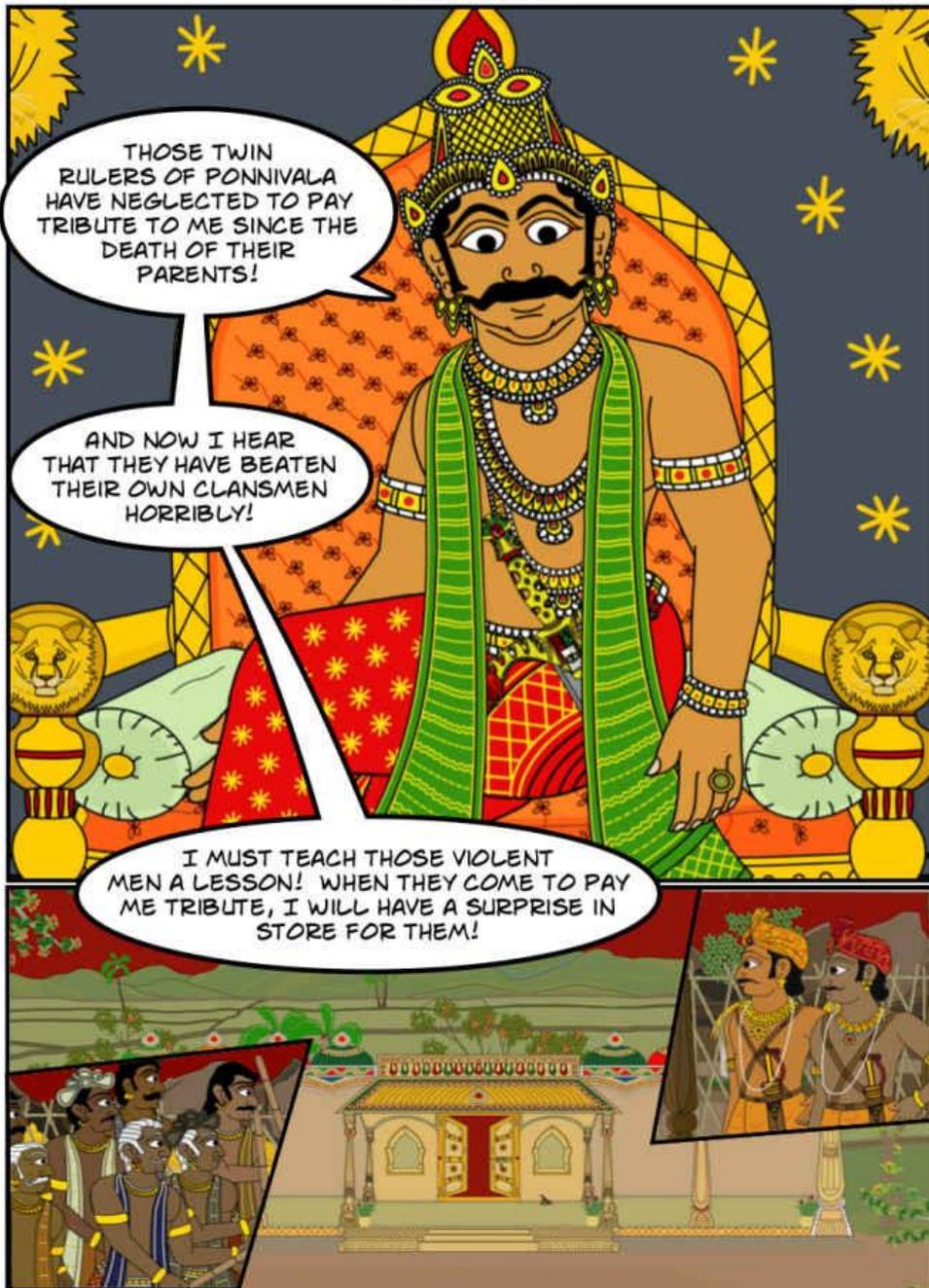
(the sister, who grows up unmarried)



(brothers and sister return to their house after exile)



(brothers go into battle on their magical horses)



(the king who is conquered by the brothers after they have defeated their rival cousins)



(the sisters weeps over the dead bodies of her brothers)



(the sister and her brothers are transported to Siva's heaven)

Reading

Brenda Beck, *The Three Twins: The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic*, 1982

Brenda Beck, *The Elder Brothers' Story*, 1992

Brenda Beck, Cassandra Cornall and Ravi Arumugam, *Legend of Ponnivala*, 2012