HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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BOW SONG TRADITION

Overview The bow song tradition of south India is somewhat different to the other oral epics in India (see, for example, the essays on the *Pabuji* and the *Two Brothers* epics. The stories sung in the bow song tradition are not full-blown epics; they lack both the multi-generational depth and the week-long performances. Instead, these songs tend to take place in a single lifetime and their performances last from about three to five hours. However, these sung stories (one might call them 'ballads') share most of the other elements the define Indian oral epics: their heroes and heroines are ordinary people who are caught up in moral dramas of fate, betrayal, revenge and a death that leads to deification.

The bow song is a Tamil oral tradition, although it has traces of influence from the adjacent region of Kerala, where Malayalam is spoken (see map). Today, and from as far back as we can determined, the tradition exists in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, at the very tip of the subcontinent. It takes its name from a long hunting bow *(vil*) that is played by the lead singer in an ensemble of performers. They perform these narrative songs as part of an annual festival dedicated to local gods and goddesses, who are the main characters in the stories. In other words, these are very localised stories, telling the lives either of historical figures or a Hindu deity who comes to the area and is worshipped there. All the stories—there are approximately forty different stories, dedicated to different figures—are performed as a ritual, at the centre of a three- or four-day temple festival. In many cases, a story is performed in one temple only, in the village where the sung events are thought to have occurred; in other cases, a story may be sung in half a dozen temples, scattered over a small area. This is the key difference between the bow songs and the larger oral epics: they are highly localised. And for that reason, they have a deep hold on the people who sing them and listen to them and worship the figures whose stories they tell.

Cultural Significance The bow song tradition has significance both for the local communities who participate in it and for those of us who want to understand Indian religion and culture. For local people, these songs preserve histories and memories that have been transmitted orally and by palm-leaf manuscripts for hundreds of years and now through printed books. The songs provide people with the framework within which to live their lives. There is the power of the gods to punish and reward; there is the morality of right and wrong on earth; there is suffering and there is hope. As ritual texts, memorised and performed by specialists, dedicated to the gods and goddesses, the bow songs are nothing less than a local Veda.

And that is their other significance: they present us with a radically different Hinduism to that extrapolated from classical Sanskrit and Tamil texts. In these local stories, the key concepts of textual Hinduism are absent or at best play a minor role. The idea of karma is recognised—good and bad reproduce themselves—but there is very little of the dreaded karmic cycle of birth-death-rebirth. And there is nothing of *moksa*, the final release from that cycle, which is achieved by piety and introspection. In the bow songs, only the gods meditate and undertake penance. Instead, these stories, especially the death stories, speak of a small-scale morality, of betrayal, revenge, star-crossed lovers, loyalty, struggle against injustice and, finally, death. There dead heroes do not rise again, like the figure of Jesus Christ, but they do live on in the songs, in their stone statues and in the temples where they are worshipped.

History There are references to a 'singing bow' in the oldest strata of Tamil literature (100-500 CE), but we have no clear evidence of the bow song tradition until the 16th century. A courtly poem dated to the 1540s describes the distinctive bow exactly as it exists now: played in a festival to invoke local gods and goddesses. The oldest surviving manuscripts of the bow songs themselves date from the 18th century. The tradition is very likely much older than this, but we have no evidence for that claim. In fact, there is no other good description until we reach the colonial era, when, paradoxically, the bow song tradition was described by those who wished to eradicate it. Christian missionaries described the bow song tradition as 'devil worship' and announced optimistically that the 'devils would shrink before the presence and superior power of the European.' That, fortunately, did not happen. When the first comprehensive field study of the bow songs was carried out in the 1970s, it found more than a hundred temples where the performances took place. Since then, the ritual aspect of performance

has waned in favour of entertainment, and now the bow songs are heard at school functions and political meetings, seen on television and in films. As with much of India's folk culture, the tradition has become a symbol rather than the practice of identity.

Stories The dozens of bow songs are divided, in local terminology, into two groups: 'birth songs' and 'death songs'. Almost without exception the birth stories are about goddesses and gods in the regional (and sometimes all-Indian) Hindu pantheon. For instance, there is the story of Muttar Amman, a goddess worshipped beyond the bow song area, all over the southern half of Tamil Nadu. Her story begins in the heavenly abode of Siva, Mt. Kailasa, where she is born and then sent to earth in order to combat some disaster, a famine perhaps or some nasty demon who is wreaking havoc among the people. She takes a local form, is victorious and the song ends with her taking up residence in the very temple where the performance is taking place by placing flowers on her statue.

Death stories, on the other hand, begin on earthy and tell the stories of local men and women. Most of these death stories are, in effect, biographies of people who die a cruel and usually premature death while (like the goddess) combating injustice. That evil might be family-based, a case of land appropriation or other betrayal; but sometimes the injustice is social, such as caste discrimination. The main point is that the hero (usually it is a man) is killed in the struggle. But he is not gone forever because at the end of the song, as with the birth stories, he is deified and worshipped in the temple where the singers are performing. Both birth and death stories, then, provide the narrative material for ritual. Outside these two large categories, there are a few, very popular, stories that are sung more for entertainment than worship. During these performances, the singers relax and tell jokes as they sing, but they are simply a counterpoint to the intensity of the ritualised performances.

Performance The ensemble that performs a bow song is comprised, at a minimum of five people. They are divided into two sub-groups. First, there is the 'right-hand' group of the lead singer and the cymbals player (and sometimes a 'teacher' (*annavi)*. The 'left-hand' group is comprised of instrumentalists playing a clay pot, wooden blocks and sometimes a drum, all of whom function as a chorus. Often, especially in more recent times, there are two lead singers, one male and one female. All the other performers are male. These men, and the occasional female lead singer, are aged from about 20-50 and come from low- and middle-ranking castes: primarily from the Nadar caste but also from the Pillai caste. They are semi-professional, earning some money from the performance, but depending mainly on income from small plots of land or a small shop. That is why the songs are performed only in the off-season, from January to May, when the fields are fallow.

The performance begins with a long invocation of gods, both local and regional, before setting the scene, either in heaven or in a village, and then proceeds with a mixture of song and narration. The lead singer may sing for several minutes, possibly as long as ten minutes, before pausing to allow the chorus to repeat the final phrase, which then allows the lead singer to explain what he has just sung and to move the narrative forward by using more conventional language. He may insert a separate little story, a joke or a comment on local events, before returning to the next song. And so on, for three or four or five hours, combining the formal language of the songs (which few in the audience and not all the performers understand) with ordinary speech. At the same time, the singing is accompanied by music, which is the distinctive element in a bow song performance.

The bow itself, made from hard palmyra wood, is anywhere from ten to fourteen feet long. Several variously pitched cow bells hang from its frame and ring whenever the lead singer hits the bow string with a pair of small sticks, which also have bells attached. The upturned bow is held in place by lashing it to a large fired clay pot, which is played by slapping its open mouth with a fan-like palm leaf and striking its side with a little piece of wood. The rhythms produced on the pot are reinforced by the wooden blocks and the cymbals, and sometimes by the addition of a small hour-glass shaped drum.

There is often also one other object among the performers: a palm-leaf manuscript of the story. The soft leaves are cut and trimmed to a uniform size (15-18 inches long and 3-4 inches wide), then softened and blacked with pot ash. Finally, they are inscribed, on both sides, using a piece of thin metal, like a long nail. This is the document that authenticates the performance; it is the written text that ensures that the song will tell the true story. Without it, local people know that stories have a habit of wandering off into fiction. It is also a source of pride among the performers themselves that they tell the story right because everyone accepts that textual accuracy means ritual efficacy. Only if

they sing the song as it should be will the gods hear their prayers, give them rain, protect them from disease and help their children to pass their exams.

In many cases, and certainly among the best performers, the manuscripts have been memorised and are recited with near word-for-word reliability. This is not as difficult as it might sound because many of the linking songs are highly repetitive and depend on a repertoire of stock phrases and epithets.

Beginning an hour or so after sunset, the performers arrange themselves on a low flat space built specifically for them next to the temple or sometimes on a makeshift wooden platform. As they tune their instruments and warm up their voices, the audience settles in, sitting cross-legged on the ground and facing them. There are whole families, with several children, but mostly they are adults, and mostly those aged forty and older. They watch and listen, following the stories in some cases only because they have heard them or heard about them for decades.

The serious business comes after midnight when most of the children have gone to bed. Now, as the death of the hero approaches, the singing becomes more excited and the drum beat more insistent. When the moment of death comes, some men and women in the audience will rise to their feet and begin to sway. Rocking this way and that, and then turning in small circles, they pick up the growing intensity of the rhythm and song. Soon, they are flailing their arms about, jumping, twisting and careering around, seemingly out of control. Sometimes the men brandish sharp swords, which they swing around, forcing the audience to retreat. Sometimes they beat their backs with chains of hard metal, drawing blood. It seems dangerous, but in fact there is a small body of watchers who step in whenever someone cuts himself too deeply or might hurt another person. Meanwhile, the women are spinning and dancing by themselves. All of them are believed to be possessed by the spirits of the deified heroes. So, when the hero dies and the music stops, they all slump to the bare ground, sometimes convulsing and breathing hard before the priest steps forward and sprinkles them with sacred ash. Now, people from the audience will rush forward and ask the dazed dancer a question: 'Will granny get over her illness? 'When will the rain come?' 'Should I marry my son to his cousin?' They ask because the dancer has, in effect, become the hero-god. When he speaks, the god speaks.

A Story in translation Below are excerpts from a performance of one story. This is the story of Muttuppattan. I have chosen it not because it is a dramatic death story, with all the frenzy of spirit possession, but because it is simply a cracking good story. When performed in temples where Muttuppattan is worshipped, it can become ritualised as worship, but it is also performed in other temple festivals as entertainment. Entertainment with a moral theme, however. Muttuppattan is a Brahmin who falls in love with two Untouchable women, marries them and then dies defending their cattle from thieves. When performed in temple where the hero is not worshipped, however, the singers end the story with the marriage, and thus avoid the death that would induce spirit possession and dancing. The translations below are taken from one of these non-ritual performances. The drama, however, is still striking. A marriage between a Brahmin and an Untouchable is the most direct challenge possible to the caste system. Neither the bow song performers nor their audiences come from these two extremes of the social hierarchy. This is not an historical story, although many believe that it is. Rather it is an iconic statement, understood by all castes, about the inherent injustice of the system.

The excerpts given here are taken from a performance in 1978; translation by Stuart Blackburn.

1. Invocation The lead singer launches into the performance with a string of invocations. First, he calls on Murugan, a son of Siva, then on Ganesa, Siva's other son and 'remover of obstacles.' Third, he asks the goddess, the wife of Siva, to bless his tongue as he sings. Having begun by addressing the gods in heaven, the singer then brings us to the local setting, 'the good land, where rain pours and the cool breezes blow.' After about twenty or thirty minutes of this necessary preliminaries, the singer introduces the story itself. There are seven Brahmin brothers, the youngest of whom is our hero Muttuppattan. He is mistreated by his brothers, but then his life turns around, as we will see in other excerpts.

> You, god of the victory spear!
> Murugan [son of Siva], protect us from evil.
> Help me sing this magic music,
> make my tongue eloquent.

The *patalai* and budding *mutalai*
titulai flower, tiny *tuvarai* seed,
grains and young fruit—
All this, Murugan,
I offer to you.
Milk, water, sugar,
tender coconut, mango,
sweet foods and areca nut.

I offer these to you.
Murugan of the Red City,
who by the grace of Siva,
released the gods from imprisonment.

Guru and poet who kindly taught me
music and rhythm on the bow
with heart generous as a king,
Palacuppiramaniya [name of the singer's guru]
I worship at your feet.

Murugan!
your powerful spear
held back the sea
and destroyed the demons!
God with six heads
and matted hair,
Majestic Murugan,
All-Knowing One,
wish-granting *karppakam* tree,
keep us from harm.

Ganesa [elephant-headed god, and son of Siva]
I'll not forget you,
or my guru.
Help me sing this song.
Murugan,
husband of that forest girl,
lovely as a dark peahen,
Come rest in my throat,
come bless my words.

Goddess!
I sing of you,
I worship you.
Wandering in this southern land,
I searched for you,
you who danced with Siva
at the beginning of time.
Garland of shining light!
come to me now,
come quickly,
bless me as I sing!
Protect me, Great Goddess,
as I sing of Muttuppattan
in the temple of Corimuttu Ayyan [Tinnevelley Dt.]

Destroyer of demons
and son of Siva,
Lord of the eight directions.

In the best of all lands,
in the land poets praise,

Land where rains pour
and cool breezes blow,
Where light rains fall
and sweet pepper grows,
Where the monsoon pours
and dry lands yield fruit.

Land where rains dance
and clouds drizzle,
Where rains fall in summer
and deer herds roam,
Land of tamarind and turmeric
where black lilies bloom.
Land of sugar cane
of sweet ripe bananas,
of red and white paddy
standing rich and tall.

Land where cow and tiger
play at the water hole,
Where the snake and mongoose,
cats and mice
live peacefully.
Land of spreading peacock fans
and swans' graceful dance,
where cow herds graze
and the deer run free.
Land of spreading mango trees
and dense forest groves,
Land where fighting with cows
sends one to hell,
Where fighting with horses
brings suffering,
A land where kings
fight only with elephants.

[switch from song to narration]

In this good land, seven Brahmin brothers: Appapattan, Kuppapattan, Anantapattan,
Comaccipattan, Comalinkapattan,
and youngest of them all, the good Muttuppattan.
His brothers raised precious little Muttuppattan with
tender care, and he grew up quickly—one, two, three, four, and five years passed.

2. A suspicious father-in-law Years later, Muttuppattan falls in love with the two daughters of Pakatai, a cobbler (Cakkiliyar caste) and therefore an untouchable. The handsome young Brahmin declares his love to them, but they are unsure of his intentions and run off to their father. When the father finds Muttuppattan, the Brahmin is asleep. The father is confused about what to do next. On the one hand, he is angry, believing that the Brahmin has tried to take advantage of his daughters' low social status. On the other, he is afraid of mistreating a Brahmin and committing a sin. He approaches the sleeping body very quietly.

[narration and dialogue]

Pakatai knew that his daughters were telling the truth about the man. The only way to figure out what had happened was to wake the fellow up and ask him. Pakatai walked up to the sleeping body and called, "Sir! Sir!"
But there was no response. He tried three or four times, but still Muttuppattan didn't move. Pakatai was caught in a bind, like the proverb says: 'If you touch him, it's wrong; if your shadow touches him, it's a sin.' How to wake him up—obviously he wasn't a light sleeper—in

the least offensive way? Then Pakatai got an idea. He clapped his hands and lightly tossed a pebble.
"Who are you?" the startled Brahmin asked.
"Oh Raja," Pakatai replied, "at the Tambraparni river my daughters stopped to drink, and some lust-crazed Brahmin spoke insulting words. When I find that bastard, I'll cut him in two, Make him into mincemeat and feed him to the jackals!"

3. Muttuppattan accepts an Untouchable as a father-in-law

This is one of the most popular scenes in the four- or five-hour long song. By speaking one word (*mama*, or 'maternal uncle'), the Brahmin breaks through the deep fear and resentment build up between these castes over centuries. With that one word, Muttuppattan accepts the Untouchable as his future father-in-law because a man in that region usually marries his maternal uncle's daughter.

When he heard Pakatai speak these words, Muttuppattan knew he was a Cakkiliyar [untouchable]. Then he saw Pummakkal and Tummakkaj [the two daughters] behind him, and put it all together. This was the person he must ask for permission to marry them. But how could he, a Brahmin, ask a Cakkiliyar? What form could his request possibly take? Then it hit him: he had to use a kin term, treat him as his maternal
uncle, his potential father-in-law, and address him as "Mama."

[switch to song]

Muttuppattan looked right at Pakatai and spoke clearly,
"Mama! Mama,
I'm in love with your daughters.
I was performing a ritual,
But I cast it aside, Mama,
Out of love for your daughters."

4. Testing a future son-in-law Pakatai, the father, is startled by Muttuppattan's words and begins to think that perhaps this Brahmin might be sincere. Still, Pakatai is suspicious and so he decides to accept the Brahmin as his son-in-law only if he is willing to live like a cobbler (a Cakkiliyar). If he wants to join a family of cobblers, he has to act like a cobbler. He must remove all the trappings of his caste identity and then, worst of all, he must cut up a cow and eat the beef.

[narration and dialogue]

When Muttuppattan, undeterred, asked for more details, Pakatai softened and agreed to the marriage—but with conditions:
"Take off your sacred thread,
Shave off your Brahmin's tuft [of hair worn on the back of the head]
Wipe off your sacred ash,
Wear this dirty cloth around your soft waist,
And start growling your words like a Cakkiliyar!
Find a dead cow and skin it,
Cut it up and serve us Cakkiliyar!
And remember, when you cut it up, be careful with the meat. Not even one tiny piece should be wasted! Got that?
And then you must sit down and stitch me
A beautiful pair of leather sandals."

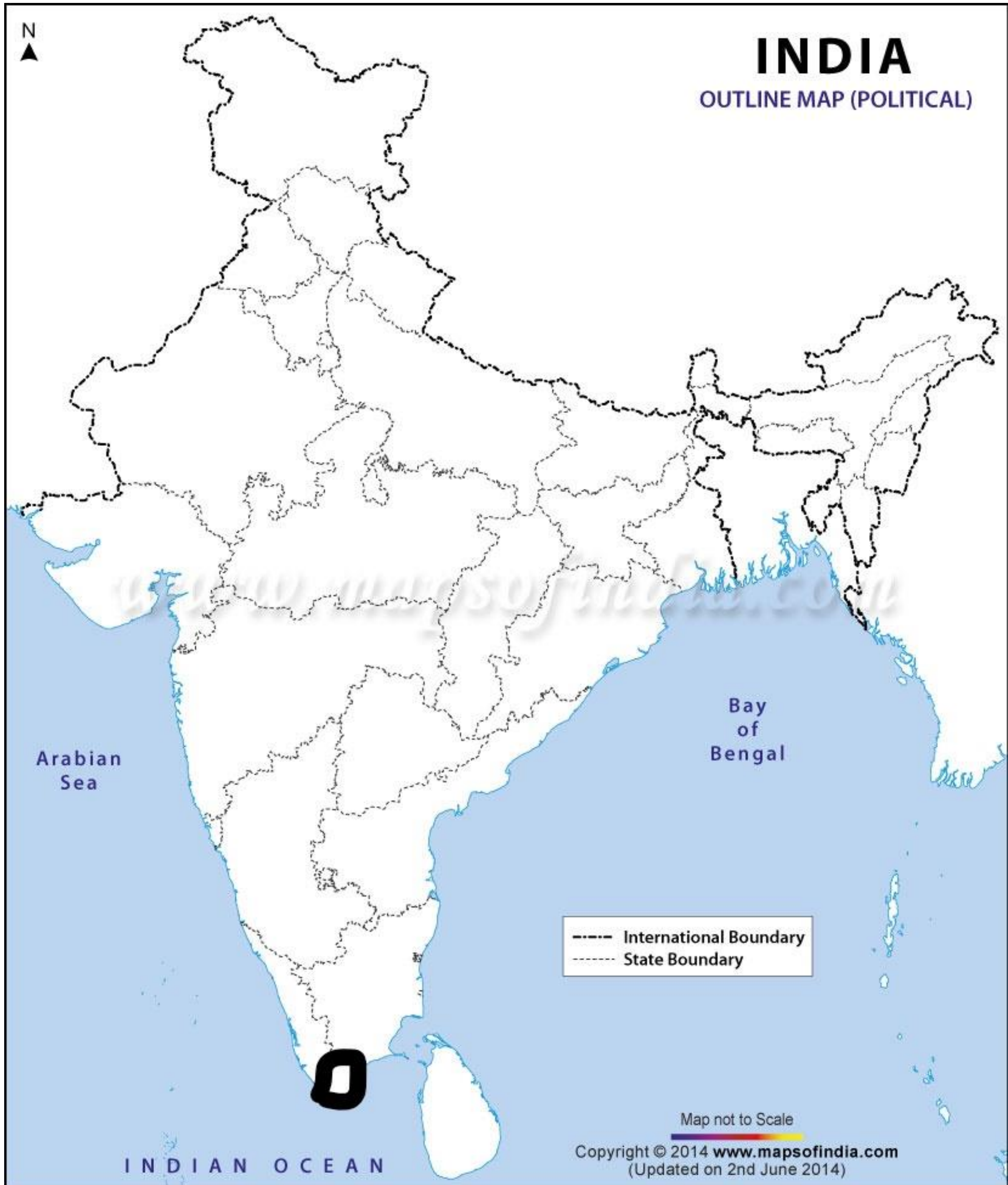
Now it is time for Muttuppattan to be shocked. All his life, he has been trained to live like a Brahmin, to abhor animal killing and never to eat beef. But such is the depth of his love, that he agrees to all these demands and sets out to fulfil his promise. He passes the test only when his father-in-law carefully inspects the sandals he has made and finds them to be of excellent workmanship. Now the performance advances swiftly to the marriage, which is celebrated with great gusto.

Reading

Stuart Blackburn, *Singing of Birth and Death: the Tamil Bow Song Tradition*, 1988

(A collection of palm-leaf manuscripts of bow songs in the possession of a lead singer. 1978)

(A local, non-Brahmin priest stands before the image of a god [deified hero] whose story is sung in the bow song tradition. 1978).



(Map showing the region of the bow song tradition)

(A bow song performance, beginning [unusually] in late afternoon, with the crowd facing the performers in their custom-built stage. 1979)

(Audience members dance as if possessed by the spirits of the dead heroes; the garland that had decorated the heroes' statues [visible in background] have been placed around their necks because now they are the gods. 1979)

(Female lead singer in a bow song performance, leaning in to hear the old man [the guru] read the lines from a palm-leaf manuscript, thus ensuring that the authentic version is performed. 1977)