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## King, Kinglessness and an Oral Poem Political Authority and Its Discontents in Early Modern Malabar

**ABSTRACT:** The essay discusses an oral poem from north Malabar detailing an 18<sup>th</sup>-century event of political conflict, manifested between a native king and a local landlord. The story of conflict centres around the idea of *bhēdam* or difference that the king wanted to project as the secret of his earthly right to rule. The king's opponent, the local landlord, rejects this idea and claims that they are equals, and there exists no hierarchy of relation between them. The essay explores certain features of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century political transition along the Coast of Malabar which culminated in the Mysore and British rule, and argues that the landlord's denial of king's authority was firmly rooted in this context, and had futurist intentions. In this way, the essay also tries to present a critique of the neo-Hocartian idea of "little-kingdom" and the Proppian proposal for "pattern morphology". It indicates that the early modern Malabar presents an interesting case of 'hollowing' the crown from inside, and its oral poems—as a genre of history—document this process in modes that are deemed appropriate to their times.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Modern, Malabar, Hindu Kingship, *Vatakkān-Pāṭṭū*, Landlords, English East India Company

### **Orra-pāṭṭū: The stand-alone oral poems of history**

This essay narrates the story of a north Malabar oral poem titled *Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēḷappan* and attempts to place it in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century transitions that culminated in this region's political takeover by the East India Company [EIC]. The oral poem was collected in 1950s and published by the folklorist, late M. C. Appunni Nambiar (Nambiar 1960: 66–84). It runs into 471 lines in Nambiar's transcription and takes around an hour to fully render in the traditional *nārri-pāṭṭū* ('the transplantation song') style. The story presented in this oral poem is popular in the Poṟḷātiri kingdom of Kaṭattanāṭṭu in the province of Malabar on the south western coast of India. The province was once administered by the EIC's Bombay centre and later, the Madras officials. At present, Kaṭattanāṭṭu forms a part of the Malayalam-speaking State of Kerala in the Indian Union and is often recognized by the modern scholarship as a type-site for localized oral genres and endemic folk heroes (Logan 1951: 95–101, Raghavan 1932). To this date, the day-labourers of the interior crop-garden areas in places such as Eṭaccēri, Nādāpuram, Kallācci, Tōṭannūr, Vānimēl and Pārakkāḍavattū located in Kaṭattanāṭṭu still recount the poem of Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēḷappan and identify the neighbourhoods where its events took place and where the characters lived. All these places are situated on the upstream course of the river Mayyaḷi (also known as the river Mahe, named after the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French trade settlement at its mouth), manifestly away from the dominant Poṟḷātiri places along the coast such as Vaṭakara and Cōmbāla and seem to have maintained an adversarial relationship with the Poṟḷātiri early modern kingship.

The poem pitches its narrative on the history of such a conflict, orchestrated during the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century between two households of the realm, the one kingly and royalist, represented by the Vāḷunnōṟ family of Pārakkāṭavattū and the other, independent and gentry-like, namely the Nambiyār house of Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil. It is probably because of this interesting pitching that this oral poem, especially its anti-king story-line portraying upstart landowners daring to threaten

their “ancient regime” overlords, succeeded in catching the attention of the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century “song” collectors, Rev. Hermann Gundert and Rev. C.A.E. Diez, Calvinist missionaries working in Canara and Malabar for the Basel-based German Evangelical Mission. In 1868, Gundert made a prose retelling of the Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil story and introduced it, under the title “Kelappen vom Garten” to the young readers of *The Jugend-Blätter*, the Calw journal he edited (Gundert 1991: 478–484).<sup>1</sup> He called such poems “romances” and knew, as later indicated by the Mission’s Malayalam grammarian Johannes Frohnmeyer, that they were crafted in a simple language, in a metre similar to the German doggerel, and sung by the plebian crowd: “the fishermen, boatmen, coolies and others”. These poems frequently allude to historical occurrences, some of which, such as the rebellion of Paḷaśśi Raja and Tippu Sultan’s invasions, are indeed datable events in Malabar region’s recent political past (Frohnmeyer 1889: xii). It is interesting to note that in Gundert’s retelling (Antony 1994: 70–97), the story of the poem ends with the tragic death of its hero Tōṭṭattil Kēḷappan: the prodigal *nāir* landlord. In Gundert’s opinion, such deaths are capable of “revelations” from which “the best thoughts of their time could be derived” (Gundert 1991a: 466). Nambiar’s transcript reproduces Gundert’s storyline and context. But here the story progresses from the slayed hero and spirals into another event of death, emplotted as an anomic suicide, which befalls the anti-hero, the Vāḷunnōṛ of Pārakkataṅavattū, the kingly slayer.

In this essay, the discussion is based on Appunni Nambiar’s transcript (hereafter, the ETKK). I will narrate the story of Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēḷappan and attempt to see the oral poem in the light of a set of individualist anxieties which represented, if Gundert’s observation makes any sense, “the best thoughts of their time”. Such thoughts were prevalent in this part of South India at the time of its political takeover by the EIC. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Poṛḷātiri Rajas were appointed as *tahasildār* or the managers of land

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<sup>1</sup> In Albert Frenz’s opinion, another German version, though not traceable, seemed to have published from the missionary station of Mangalore sometime after 1861 (Frenz 1994: xxviii).

tax collection over their old medieval realm, the kingdom of Kaṭattanāṭṭu. The kingdom was made into a revenue fiscal unit (*tālūk*), first by the Sultans of Mysore around c. 1766 and later, in 1793–1794, by the EIC. The expression *vāḷunnōr* literally means the ‘ruler’ and in the Kaṭattanāṭṭu realm, extending for about 20 miles along the Malabar coast from Mahe to Putuppaṭṭanam along the north-south axis, it was one of the common designations used to denote the Porḷātiri kingship, specifically its male membership which wielded some political authority of revenue collection even when they had been weakened as *mālikāne* or the ‘pension’ recipients. The kings belonged to one of the several collateral houses that made up the *Porḷātiri Svarūpam*, the royal lineage of Kaṭattanāṭṭu.

The ETKK is a standalone composition or *orra-pāṭṭū* in the standard classification of the north Malabar oral poems known as *Vaṭakkan-Pāṭṭū* (‘northern ballads’). They are generally found organised, if one looks at the early collections by Rev. Gundert and the Madras civil servant Percy Mcqueen (d. 1970), into two clusters of ballad-like compositions, “Taccōḷi” and “Puttūram”, named after two households of martial fame and political prominence. However, *orra-pāṭṭū* constitutes a third category and it is often considered as forming a “little” or recent tradition within the *Vaṭakkan-Pāṭṭū* world. In selecting characters and plots, the *orra-pāṭṭū* genre stays away from the Taccōḷi/Puttūram clique and always narrates a complete story of individuals and events that have no connections with the households mentioned above. Even though the ETKK had been known to the academia since its publication by Nambiar and by way of occasional public performances during the 1960s in the rhapsodic story-telling stage across Kaṭattanāṭṭu, past folklorists and historians paid little attention to its content, nor for that matter to several other texts belonging to the generic family of the *orra-pāṭṭū*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, this is largely because of the longstanding preference in the Kerala folkloristics for the narrative theories postulated by the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp (Propp 2009) and their later structural-Marxist adaptations by historians. Initially proposed as a tool to examine the traditional “origin myth”, i.e. the so-called “Paraśurāma Legend” of Kerala (Hameed 1966), the Proppian idea of

The *orra pāṭṭū* oral poems describe past events and personalities, often those active in the recent memory, and narrate their stories around the implication they set forth in regard to the themes of kingship, landlordism, and the Hindu caste. However, this feature of implication, especially its immediacy aspect, was rarely investigated by the folklorists. The common tendency amongst the Malabar folklore scholarship is to agree with the conclusions from this region's historiography where the standard emphasis while discussing the themes mentioned above (Kurup 1973, Varier 1980) is on the ideas of the *long durée* stationariness and dead-slow diffusionism. Institutional permanence and timeless idealism are often preferred over historical change and its temporal possibilities, either real or imagined. Nothing illustrates this point better than the historian's conceptualization of kingship and its social authority. To cite a telling example, Margret Frenz saw the Malabar kingship as an eternal institution of an *in-situ* sovereignty representing a line of continuity from the *dhārmic* Hindu past (Frenz 2003a: 45–46, 148–150). Though the model of great-king had disappeared from the political scene since the decline of the Cēramān Perumāḷ rule, sometime by the early 13<sup>th</sup>-century, his royal image continued to exist in Malabar in the form of a “virtual reality” well into the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Even though “the evidence concerning little and great king(s) is difficult to come by”, Frenz wants us to believe that these positions

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pattern morphology was easily borrowed and randomly deployed by scholars to analyse an internally differentiated collection of literary genres including the north Malabar phenomenon of oral poems (Varier 1982: 2012). The mainstream fascination was to find out in the narrative a set of underlying structures (or “patterns”) ensuring stability of the content and the formulae of stylistic repetition. As a sequel to this fascination, the individual poems—like the one we are about to look at—never received the kind of historiographic engagement and attention that their Tamil and Telugu counterparts have richly attracted (Rao et al. 2001). On the contrary, the standalone poems of north Malabar were often played down as “exceptional songs” and at times, they were denigrated as “modern forgeries of the traditional genre” with little or no connection with the “original” *dēśī* milieu (Varier 1982: 75–96).

of authority successfully sustained themselves by inheriting from the past an apparatus for self-legitimization (Frenz 2003).

Predictably, the stand-alone oral-poems were classed as “unusual”. This classification was due either to their critical takes on the institutions of kingly authority or because of the portrayal of unprecedented characters who did not fit into the received historiography. A notable exception to this trend is P. Pavitran’s pioneering study of the *orra-pāṭṭū* titled *Rāmattēlamēle Kuññiccāppan* which describes the ascendancy of the EIC authority in Malabar and a situation of predicament in this region’s caste hierarchy, occasioned, amongst other things, by the presence of successful, mobility aspirants belonging to the Hindu order of ‘lower castes’ (Pavitran 1999: 176–180). Interestingly, this oral poem too was collected by Appunni Nambiar and printed in the same collection as that of the ETKK (Nambiar 1960: 272–314). However, in narrating the story of Tōṭṭattil Kēlappan, the ETKK does not refer to the statist incarnation of the EIC and the societal change seemingly caused by its bureaucratic offices, nor does the poem consider the EIC’s 18<sup>th</sup>-century commercial presence along the Coast as an event worth accrediting. Instead, the poem picks up the history of an anti-king dispute from the locality and elaborates its quick unfolding by describing a home-grown chain of inter-related events. The tone of narration is overtly oppositional to the person of a local king and his claims of political exclusivity.

It was because of the anti-king political posture and its diagnostic foundation on the recent historical material and occurrences that there was a quasi-official ban on reciting the ETKK in the Kaṭattanāṭṭu territory during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> At the time of its doc-

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<sup>3</sup> According to the veteran folklorist and author, late M. Kelappan alias M. K. Paṅikkōṭṭi of Vaṭakara (d. 2019), this prohibition (which he recognized as *vilakkū*) was the result of a conspiracy by a literate group of village aristocrats who were the servants (*sibbandi*) of the Poṟḷātiri’s cliental household, specifically those who functioned as the king’s rent-collectors and lived attached to the *mālikāne* palace of Puṟamēri. It was as a result of this surveillance and the threat of punishment that this oral poem was largely withdrawn from public avenues of work and

umentation by Appunni Nambiar, the poem of the Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēḷappan had been in circulation as a ceremonial grinding-song (*aravu-pāṭṭū*) sung mainly by the lower-caste women when they sat at the grinding-stone. As we would see in the following section, even in this ceremonial and private context of recitation, the ETKK maintains its reportage-like narration, often at the cost of the so-called “de-historicised formulae” (*orukkuṣīl*) in rendition and theme which, according to the dominant Proppian norm, is the characteristic feature of the north Malabar oral poetry (Varier 1982: 24–25).

### The honour of de-acknowledging king and his claim of difference

Rayiru and Villu are young children learning *kaḷari* (martial art) and *eḷuttū* (writing). They are the disciples of a well-known master named Matilūr Gurukkaḷ and would go every day to his *eḷuttupalli* school, sit together in nearby seats made of wooden planks, under the same thatch, and spend long hours till the sunset in learning and remembering the art, the etiquette, and the techniques of writing, and of fighting local wars. Rayiru is the youngest nephew of Tōṭṭattil Nambiyār who is one of the opulent *sthāni* (title-holding) *nāir* landlords of the shudra class living in eastern Kaṭattanāṭṭū. Rayiru’s uncle is a seasoned farmer, a decision-making key-man in the crop-garden countryside. This household owns several well-kept coconut orchards, pepper compounds and paddy enclosures, and an impressive double-storied mansion in the Eṭaccēri neighbourhood. The present Nambiyār is very old, an aged *kāraṇava* (uncle) maintaining only the household title, cherishing a certain dose of the old lordly nostalgia and temperance. By all indications he has left the daily management of his household, its gardens, and other effects to Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēḷappan who is Rayiru’s elder brother,

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recitation such as the paddy-fields and pepper gardens. The poem, however, was not entirely erased from public memory as it got reserved for certain special private occasions relatively free from the *vilakkū* apparatus.

and presumably the senior-most and the most efficient among the in-house nephews staying in or eating from the house of Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil.

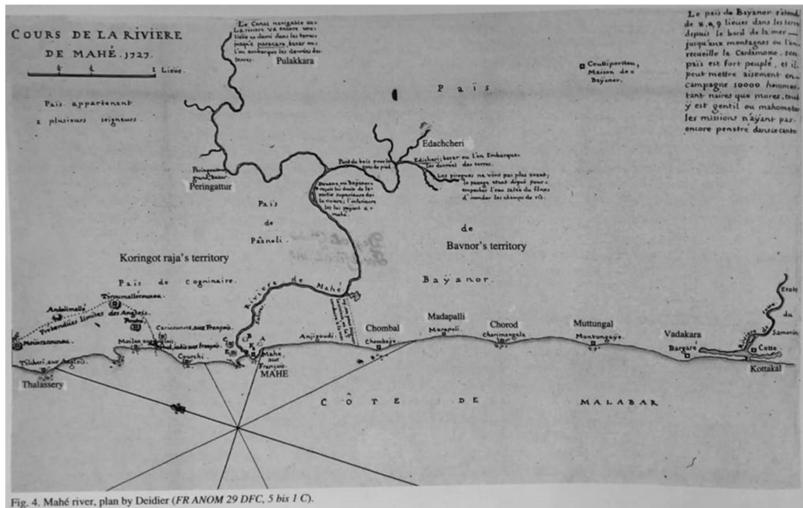
Villu is the son of, and the heir-apparent to, the Vālunnōṛ ruler of Pārakkataṭavattū. Eṭaccēri and Pārakkataṭavattū are neighbouring garden localities. Being laid out along south-north axis, about twenty miles east of Vaṭakara and of the French settlement Mahe, they are divided by a perennial water course, the river Mayyaḷi [See fig. 1]. But their countryside remains inseparably connected, certainly as early as the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, by means of a wooden bridge,<sup>4</sup> and shortly afterwards, by a constant movement of people: “the rebellious poligars and Moplas who has already made a cause [of union] with armed Nairs” (Wallace 1823: 120). The Vālunnōṛ of Pārakkataṭavattū is affluent and has always styled himself as a scaled-down king of his sylvan realm. Being pompous, he maintained a trusted line of councillors and camp-aides recruited from among the local syndicate of the *aṭiyōṭi* (a localized variety of the *nāir* caste) men, salaried brahmin collectors and an armed legion of drilled soldiers or the *paṭṭālam*. The loads of golden ingots and coined money that fill his palace (*keṭṭil*) coffers require several porters and stitched gunny bags if the Vālunnōṛ wants this wealth to be transported elsewhere.

Rayiru and Villu in fact share some “family” relationship and a degree of prior familiarity. Rayiru’s mother-like elder sister (*nēr-ēṭṭatti-amma*), Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuñṅikunki, was the queen consort (*keṭṭilamma*) of the Vālunnōṛ and she is Villu’s mother. In this sense Rayiru, though coeval with Villu, is latter’s *kāraṇava*, or the uncle. The same kin-terminology is valid, albeit normatively, for Villu’s

<sup>4</sup> See ‘Cours de la Riviere de Mahè 1727, Fig. 4, Mahè River Plan by Deidier (FR ANOM 29FDC, 5bis 1C)’ in Deloche 2013: 8. According to the cadastral information given in his map, Edicheri (Eṭaccēri) was connected to Paracaro (Pārakkataṭavattū) by an old ford and, by a wooden-bridge (*pont de bois*). Both these places were upstream bazaar sites from where one could even afford “to embark donnée raw-boats, [for] going [further] inland”, or as the map clearly states, “bazaar oul’ on embarque les données des terres”.



relationship with Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēḷappan. Kuññikuṅki was taken to Pārakkaṭavattū when she was a girl of seven, and the Vālunnōr had to pay a good amount of bride-price to the Tōṭṭattil household. But later on, the in-laws got estranged and became arch political enemies, and as a result, Kuññikuṅki had to confine her life within the patrilocal abode.



**Fig. 1.** Eṭaccēri, Pārakkaṭavattū and the Kingly Realm Vālunnōr. Source: ‘Cours de la Riviere de Mahé 1727, Fig. 4, Mahé River Plan by Deidier (FR ANOM 29FDC, 5bis 1C)’, in Deloche 2013: 8.

As a symbol of his household prosperity and cultivated pride, the young Villu has inherited a special golden stylus, with a beautiful lotus motif embossed on its handle, which he would carry with him to school. Rayiru had an eye on his friend’s golden pen. One day, he proposed to Villu that they could exchange their writing instruments and he may be allowed to keep, at least for a day or so, the kingly golden stylus. Villu could not agree with this proposal. Though it was an informal gesture of workplace intimacy and friendship, he construed the proposal as a potentially dangerous

encroachment upon his unique kingly possession and inheritance. Villu's denial turned out into an open public abuse of Rayiru and annoyingly, the merit of his father's material wealth. Rayiru could not stand this mistreatment and the stain of dishonour that it dumped on to the dignity of his ancestry and on the Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil household. In a fit of anger, he slapped Villu, tore one of his ears and overpowered him by force. Villu cried helplessly, his right ear bleeding. The little boy went running to his home at Pārakkāṭavattū, to the palace of the Vālunnōṟ. The ruler was incensed to see his son's injury. An injury to the inherited status and the pain that it brings are never forgotten and, like a wounded elephant, the Vālunnōṟ remained silent for the time being. But vengeance is the fundamental faith which an elephant loves to eat, to live by and, perhaps to die with. In the meantime, Rayiru, as usual returned to Tōṭṭattil, met his uncle, and described to him the whole incident. As he listened to Rayiru, the Tōṭṭattil Nambiyār became thoughtful as he knew what deadly results such an otherwise ordinary quarrel and childish fight could bring about. The Vālunnōṟ of Pārakkāṭavattū, he knew, would use the incident as a pretext and try to settle his old scores with the Tōṭṭattil landlords:

Vālunnōṟ, the one who reigns over Pārakkāṭavattū-  
 Is a ruler who is bloody, inauspicious, and evil-eyed.  
 His greed, be it known to you O' Rayiru, is very old  
 And it goes back to one of those older days. (ETKK: 61-63)

When the Vālunnōṟ first saw the booming palms planted in the Eṭaccēri orchard and the ripening bunches atop the coconut trees, he became desperate with desire. He was like a hungry elephant intoxicated by the sight of a sugar-cane garden. The Vālunnōṟ wanted to raid the orchard, to strip it of its wealth and to intimidate its owner. The senior Tōṭṭattil *sthāni* was now a feeble old man, but his nephew, the elder brother of Rayiru, Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēlappan, could withstand such an attack. Knowing this too well, the Vālunnōṟ decided to wait until an opportunity presented itself.

As days passed in waiting, the Vālunnōṛ got half a chance to pick up the first quarrel (*eṭaccal*) when the old landlady of Koḷavāyi passed away. It was a standing protocol among the landed elite that someone from the leading land-holding houses should go and take part in, and even contribute to, the lordly funerals, including the final ritual of departure called *kaṇṇūkk*. Kuññikkēlappan therefore set off to Koḷavāyi with his servant, a bag-carrier (*pokkaṇāri*) named Etaccēri Kaṇṇan. On their way through the *peruvali* (avenue) leading west towards the market-town of Vāṭakara, they came across the Vālunnōṛ. He was coming back to his palace in Pāṛakkaṭavattū, and was accompanied by his *aṭiyōṭi* entourage in a tiny procession. Kuññikkēlappan was neither willing to take off his *talēkkeṭtu* (turban) nor to deferentially give way to the royal procession. Both these gestures (taking off the *talēkkeṭtu* and clearing the way) would signify respect, acknowledgement, and obedience to the Vālunnōṛ, and it was the distance and difference (*bhēdam*)—not certainly the so-called intimacy, similarity and the neo-Hocartian collegialism—that marked out rulership and nobility. The obsession with difference and the uniqueness it entails is already evident in the golden stylus episode, and what has been repeated in the *peruvali* had the old *eḷuttupaḷli* history.

Neither the ruler nor his landlord opponent, nor the accompanying servants, took off their headgears and paid respects to each other. No one bothered to clear the path of their worldly existence for the other. The Vālunnōṛ and Kuññikkēlappan came so close on the road that their chests were about to collide against each other as if they were going to merge together in a moment of physical friction. For a moment, the *peruvali* was transformed into a suffocating country-lane and a political labyrinth. Being caught in this difficult standoff, both of them anticipated their bodies would be cut off with the razor-like war-knives which they carried sheathed in their undergarments. For generations, these incendiary weapons, as much as the Hocartian gifts and collegialism, were integral to the regional political paraphernalia. But the bloodshed was somehow avoided, and the overt acts of violence, at least for a moment, were postponed

with an extremely sophisticated polemics on *bhēdam* or the idea of political difference. Shaken by this wayside challenge of disobedience, the Vālunnōṟ was the first to throw an important question at his local opponent: “Isn’t there any difference between us?” (ETKK: 95). But this question and the axial mystery of the kingly authority that it implied were instantly retaliated. Kuññikkēḷappan posed a counter-question to the king at the right moment: “Is there such a difference between us?” (ETKK: 97). This verbal retaliation was followed by a long and vociferous elaboration on part of the Tōṭṭattil householder, and surprisingly produced an extended moment of silence from the Vālunnōṟ. Kuññikkēḷappan rejected the very idea of *bhēdam* and its capacity to endow uniqueness to the king’s political authority. It must be kept in mind that in Malabar “whenever a land-holding household waxed strong, it took the earliest opportunity in repudiating the claim of the Raja and asserted its own independence. But whenever the Raja waxed strong and the landed households weakened” (Wigram 1882: 102), the position of the latter was that of loyal servant wielding often a conditional “a military tenure” in the service of the king (Munro n.d.: 7). Perhaps, Tōṭṭattil *sthāni* was among those local households which exerted their existence by the first scenario. The royal court did not matter for them and the monarchy remained a strange, if not an artificial, institution. What then loomed large in the context and in the individuated realm of the political desire was the big-man aura generated by the farmer households (Menon 1999: 1997). For Kuññikkēḷappan, the Vālunnōṟ’s obsession with *bhēdam* and kingly uniqueness that it claimed, represents a gesture of infantile pettiness.<sup>5</sup> The crown has already been left “hollowed” in the *eḷuttupalḷi*

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<sup>5</sup> The wayside occurrence of the quarrel denying the idea of *bhēdam* reminds one of the famous anti-caste response made in the *tōṟṟam* story of the north Malabar Teyyam God ‘Pulayan Poṭṭan’ alias Viṣṇumūṟṭti. The response took place when the untouchable Poṭṭan met a high-caste nobleman in an open paddy-field and when the high-caste nobleman ordered the polluting Poṭṭan to clear the path (Freeman 1991: 684). As Richardson Freeman points out, Poṭṭan’s response was packed with “contrastive pairs comparing his given conditions of life with that of

dispute and there is, therefore, no room for a difference between their existential circumstances.

Is there such a difference between us?  
 O ruler, you are the son, but born to a midwife.  
 I am the son born to my uncle's elder sister.  
 Is that a marking difference between you and me?  
 You own income from the wild hilly forests and swidden tracts.  
 But my uncle owns enough income from the vast oceans.  
 Is that a marking difference between you and me?  
 While Pārakkaṭavattū has a good store of the paddy seed,  
 Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭatil stays abundant in paddy grain.  
 Is that a marking difference between you and me?  
 Pārakkaṭavattū is richer in treasury gold: the pagoda!  
 But lord of Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭatil has more golden paṇam attached to him.  
 Is that a marking difference between you and me? (ETKK: 97–112)

In Kuñṅikkēḷappan response to the Vālunnōṟ, it is evident that his emphasis is not on the contrasts which allegedly existed between himself and the ruler of Pārakkaṭavattū. Rather, during his comparison, he makes sure that a set of definite similarities are accentuated and made evident in public. They remain right at the surface-level of the narrative, and these similarities establish an aspect of parity and convergence between the realms of landlord and the king. The poem, therefore, in my opinion, tries to reject, if not de-acknowledge, the idea of *bhēdam* ('difference'), and the hierarchical etiquette which was once thought central to the self-projection of Hindu kingship. In this attempt, the oral poet might have taken clues from an older repository of materials (such as the *tōrram* story of Pulayan Poṭṭan). But what makes Kuñṅikkēḷappan response a novel early

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the high-caste nobility and they intend to point out the marked disparities in the material entitlements". In this sense, the "intimations of equality" in the Malabar Teyyam experience—of which Dilip Menon had paid attention to (Menon 1993)—could only be grasped "at the deeper (perhaps an opaque) level" in the *tōrram* narrative where "the [same] contrastive pairs seem to fulfil common functional needs and thereby, indicate shared human nature between the Pulaya and the high-caste noblemen" (Freeman 1991: 684).

modern event and, perhaps the representation of a regional moment in thinking afresh and reworking a given idea of political authority, is its ability to progress from the subtle rejection to an openly threatening opposition. This was hardly the case in the Pulayan Poṭṭan narrative.

At the end of Kuññikkēḷappan polemic, the Vālunnōṟ's silence is broken. He expresses his wish to visit the landlord's household at Eṭaccēri, perhaps with a view to seeing and verifying for himself the similarities argued out in Kuññikkēḷappan response. To this Kuññikkēḷappan replies:

O you the ruler of Pārakkaṭavattū, [listen]!  
 If you come to my Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil with good manners and intentions  
 You will be welcomed but in the walled-avenue of Ālašēri  
 Where the free feast is organized, and we will feed you from free feast.  
 But if you come with an erratic ill-will and other intentions  
 You may have to eat the [lead]-balls and the [gun]-powder.

(ETKK: 117–121)

Then the Vālunnōṟ asks “whether the balls (*uṇṭa*) contain some palm-sugar”. Kuññikkēḷappan is enraged by this question which appears to him as an ill-timed joke. The Vālunnōṟ has twisted the sense of the word *uṇṭa* which also means fried rice-balls. He replies to the ruler: “O ruler, you will better know when you get a chance to taste them” (ETKK: 126). The Vālunnōṟ does not reply. But by this threatening challenge, the contest of words comes to an end. The verbal dual and the rupture that it brought to public now becomes complete but without a final resolution. Here too, as in the *elut-tupaḷli* quarrel where the ruler's son Villu was beaten up and dishonoured, the Vālunnōṟ does not resort to a violent retaliation. He would rather wait for another opportunity. Time marches on and the contestants lie in wait till the local political stage is set for another confrontation which, as we see below, turns out to be critical. This time, the conflict is not merely about the certain symbols of the Vālunnōṟ's or of his opponent's authority. On the contrary, it is woven around an actual material substance: the privatized accounts of

money and liquid assets, which make these contestations, and even their respective contestants, possible.

Nāmbi Kuṟup was a hill-cultivator (possibly the family-head of a pioneer-settler unit) occupying one of the mesa hillocks in the Eṭaccēri countryside. The hillock was called Tuvvāṭan Kunnu. Nāmbi Kuṟup owed an amount of money equal to 3,000 *paṇam* to the Vālunnōṟ. This was the amount of *kōlappaṇam*, or the money-tribute due to the king from his improvised swidden domain, and also from the tiny *paraṃba* gardens being terraced out in the laterite topography. *Kōlappaṇam* was an exaction of the protection-money much like the Maratha *khaṇṭāṇi* (tribute). By the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century, it was often figured in the Malabar Coast as a lumpsum payment of cash due each year to political overlords and was known as *khaṇṭāṇippaṇam* (Menon 1989: 536–544). *Khaṇṭāṇippaṇam* was the price or the so-called “fine of entry” given to predatory kings or their mercenary proxies for exempting a revenue locality from the purview of their enterprise of plundering raids or *mulkigiri* (Wink 1986: 351, Gordon 1977: 15–16). For some reason, of which the poem gives no explanation, Nāmbi Kuṟup was unable to pay this amount, and consequently the unpaid *kōlappaṇam* was reckoned as his debt which was due to the Vālunnōṟ ruler. In the meantime, Nāmbi Kuṟup was drawn into a dispute with another cultivator, probably his envious neighbour, named Kovvakkal Kuṟup. This dispute intensified into a full-scale dispute between local landed proprietors, and there took place a fierce gun battle. Nāmbi Kuṟup was killed in this incident. Having been shot in the forehead, his body, unattended, was left to rot on the Tuvvāṭan hill-side. No one dared to touch it. There was a certain reason for this predicament: since Nāmbi Kuṟup was indebted to the Vālunnōṟ for the *kōlappaṇam* account, the Vālunnōṟ laid a standard legal claim on his corpse and over all his assets (Menon 1929: 252–255). He even denied the permission to remove the decaying corpse from the hillside and to arrange an appropriate cremation ritual for it. Kuñṇikunkan was the nephew of Nāmbi Kuṟup and therefore, the legitimate successor to all his effects in the Tuvvāṭan Kunnu prop-

erty including the *kōlappaṇam* debt. He was also supposed to perform the final obsequies for the departed. For Kuñṇikuṇkan, the Vālunnōṛ was a daunting overlord, a predatory Zamindār who could attach his assets and even threaten his corporal existence without much difficulty. He did not even dare to speak in front of him. The helpless Kuñṇikuṇkan approached the landlords of Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil and beseeched their intervention and support in this ticklish issue. The action was understandable as he was a friend of Kuñṇikkēḷappan, and a familial acquaintance to the senior Nambiyār of the Tōṭṭattil household.

Kuñṇikkēḷappan wished to proceed to Tuvvāṭan Kunnu, intervene in the conflict, and help his friend to wriggle out of the trouble. But the senior Nambiyār discouraged him: Don't let yourself be drawn into their dispute.

If you still proceed go to the hillock named Tuvvāṭan Kunnu,  
Listen! You may have to stand as a surety (jāmyam) for the debt;  
For the amount of *kōlappaṇam*  
That your friend now owes to the Vālunnōṛ. (ETKK: 182–190)

Kuñṇikkēḷappan, however, did not pay heed to this wise counsel grounded in the practical value of temperance and meditated action. He had already made up his mind to proceed to the site of conflict, help his friend in removing the encumbrance, and thus release the decaying dead-body of his uncle. When the senior Nambiyār took a short leave for his regular siesta, Kuñṇikkēḷappan got away from his aged *maṇḍala* of guardianship and avuncular protection. He rushed through the northern gate of the Tōṭṭattil homestead, and went running to Tuvvāṭan-Kunnu. Unfortunately, things happened exactly as the senior Nambiyār had predicted. When Kuñṇikuṇkan, the successor of the slain Naṃbi Kuṛup, explained his pathetic state of helplessness to him, Kuñṇikkēḷappan was so emotionally moved that he offered himself to stand in as a monied-surety. This was for the *kōlappaṇam* due to the Vālunnōṛ. They then informed Emmiñṇi Kuṇkan, one of the managers to the king,



about this new development and through his scribal office, the same was reported to the Vālunnōṛ. Kuññikkēḷappan soon prepared a surety document (*jāmiya-kaccīṭṭ*), signed it, and handed the document over to the manager. In this way the deadlock was removed and the body soon released so that Kuññikuṅkan was able to perform the last rites for his deceased uncle and to refortify his successor claims on the Tuvvāṭan-Kunnu property. In the meantime, the suretyship of Kuññikkēḷappan and the fiscal responsibility that this aspiring landlord had entailed by signing the deed of surety made the Vālunnōṛ happy; time to settle his old political scores against the Tōṭṭattil landlords has arrived at long last. The pain of dishonour in the golden-stylus incident and at the wayside anti-*bhēdam* challenge, and his longstanding desire to control the coconut orchards of Eṭaccēri, might now find a karmic resolution: “The Vālunnōṛ became cheerful as if he spotted a piece of gold” (ETKK: 216).

### **The surety setting: Guaranteeing kingly authority in the 18<sup>th</sup> century**

If one tries to think about the historical provenance of the greedy cheerfulness of the Vālunnōṛ, and to propose a tentative date for the events remembered in this oral poem, an important clue could be found in the references to *kōḷappanam* tribute and to Kuññikkēḷappan’s suretyship which had been put up to realize it. As an arrangement for revenue collection, specifically in realizing land-tax, the institution of money-tribute and the practice of guaranteeing it with surety-individuals became widespread in north Malabar during the region of the Mysore Sultanate or the Khudādād Sircar (1766–1792), with some weak precedents dating back to the Canarese Nāyaka invasion (1734–1739) (Rajendran 1979: 97, 119 and 1978: 613–617, Swai 1985: 92–102). It was the Mysore *nawāb* Haidar Ali who formalized this practice around 1766, and carried it across his “new conquests” in the Malabar Payenghaut, that is the territory between Ēḷimala in the north and the port of Cochin in the south. Though often documented under several obscure and at times con-

fusing terms, the institution of money-tribute (and the political integration that it procedurally necessitated) embodied certain traits of internal uniformity. It was relatively peaceful and cost-effective compared to an event of outright military-fiscal annexation and was based, as David Ludden has pointed out from the Tamil *pālēgāra* economy, on complex and generally localized, but expansive, networks of commercial exchange. Its success depended on creditworthy individuals of intermediary type “who had been contracted to pay revenue to their superiors on the basis of the collection from inferiors” (Ludden 1990: 116 and 1985: 131). By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the tribute-based alliances and integrative mechanisms started surfacing in a number of diverse settings. For instance, they were found to be used in older political formations such as the kingdoms of Calicut, Cochin and Travancore (Aitchison 1876: 420–422, Brown 1849: 14, Menon 1943: 15) and also in the relatively new revenue-lordships of Cīrakkaḷ, Kaṭattanāṭṭu, Kōṭṭayam, Kavalappāra and Pālakkāṭṭu (The Joint Commission 1862: 13–15, Anonymous 1093 ME: 320–321, Mukundan 1949: 90–91). In all these settings, notwithstanding the micro-level specificities involved in the introduction of money-tribute, surety-individuals figured as indispensable components of the political process. In Malabar, in the cash-crop garden localities extending from Cannanore to Cochin, these individuals were willing to pledge their assets and to provide monied-guarantee for others’ political offices and responsibilities (Malayil 2015). In other words, it was because of these surety-individuals’ guarantees (*hawālātti*) that the localized offices of kingly rule and revenue-collectorship had come into existence, and they continued to exist even after the province was formally ceded to the EIC.

If we go further down in the surety spectrum to the level of the little revenue-villages classed as the *hobaḷi*, or at the everyday localities of what Bonaventure Swai once called the “lesser rajas”, we could find a significant population of village-based rich men taking up suretyship and other fiduciary portfolios and functioning as guarantors for each other and, also for their Rajas and local chieftains. Most of these *hobaḷi*-level surety individuals were increasing-

ly drawn from the *mukhyastha* landed-elites, or “the principal inhabitants” as they were known to the early EIC administration. They were successful either in inserting themselves at an advantageous position in the existing tenurial grid or in establishing an independent hierarchy for themselves by amassing privatized rights of ownership and usufruct in the local land economy. In general, all these surety-individuals, irrespective of their scale of operation and diverse social origins, formed the common profession of money-making with money. Money had already become the object of production and fetishism by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Such persons often appear to form a class-in-itself, and their classness seem to be a function (perhaps the sole function) of their profession and therefore, of the assets they owned, and of the material accumulation they had been carrying out.

The image of the *Ḥaccēri* landlord, *Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēlappan*, was cast firmly in this matured scenario of money-tribute and suretyship which was being unfolded in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *hobaḷi* world. When the royalist dignitaries, the Malabar kings and their councillors, fled their kingdoms during the violent heights of the Mysore Rule, an important stratum of principal inhabitants remained active, armed, and hedged up in their own village domains. Bonaventure Swai has paid attention to this countryside resilience. According to him, where and when the Rajas were not the mediators between the Sultans and the local agrarian population, many of the local stakeholders became the sole occupants of this role. Some of them even became officials under the Mysorean rule. Under this arrangement, they seem to have enjoyed an episode of prosperity. When the EIC assumed the overlordship of Malabar, many of these officials wanted to continue with the existing arrangements and to serve the new administration without the intermediacy of their old superiors, the Rajas (Swai 1974: 145).

In the rajaship of *Kaṭattanāṭṭu*, in particular in the interior *hobaḷi*-units of *Ḥaccēri*, *Cērāpuram*, *Paṙambil* and *Pāṙakkataṭavattū*, we have some contemporary evidence to pinpoint this resilience and its apparent anti-king implications. It was in this domain—where the

kingliness of the Raja was comparatively recent in articulation and had its historical genesis in a low-brow *paṭa-nāir* (soldering) profile<sup>6</sup>—that the “principal inhabitants” were able to fabricate a durable organizational structure of their own. This is the famous *nāir* syndicate, “Kaṭattanāṭṭil Mūvāyiram-Nāir or the Three Thousand Nairs of Kaṭattanāṭṭū”, and its membership played a critical role in the regional political process since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. And quite unsurprisingly, the Nambiyār household of Eṭaccēri Tōṭṭattil figured prominently among this *nāir* standard.<sup>7</sup>

In 1796, we see the Nambiyār chief of Tōṭṭattil appearing in a long *haraji* (petition) document written by the Mūvāyiram-Nāir syndicate. The letter was addressed to Mr Christopher Peile, the English chief of Tellicherry who was also the superintendent-in-charge of the north Malabar administration.<sup>8</sup> According to this letter, Tōṭṭattil household owned landed property (*vastuvaka*) in several revenue units appertaining to the supra-locality of Eṭaccēri. The household (and their stock of assets) was divided into two collateral branches viz. Puttan Vīṭṭu and Niṭṭunṇōṭṭu-Puṛam, and probably housing two lineages of the Tōṭṭattil family. It was based on their ownership over this cluster of assets, that the Tōṭṭattil landlords maintained their authority over a band of tenants (*pāṭṭakkār*), mostly

<sup>6</sup> The earliest inscriptional record (a copper-plate belonging to c. 14<sup>th</sup> century) referencing Kaṭattanāṭṭu kings was found in Tirunelli Temple of Wayanad. It carries the following expression “Kaṭattuvanāṭṭū Mānirāmanāya kīl-paṭa-nāir” i.e., the subordinate soldering *nāir* (*kīl-paṭa-nāir*) named Mānirāman of Kaṭattanāṭṭū (Nair 1972: 295).

<sup>7</sup> We know very little about the origin of the Tōṭṭattil household. But a small set of letters found in the Herman Gundert collection shed light on the household’s prominence at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. The household seemed to have taken up political and fiduciary roles during the Mysore rule, often acting as its local collaborators. In these regards, the Tōṭṭattil landlords are verisimilar to their enemy, the Vālunnōṛ of Pāṛakkaṭavattū. Letters from the Gundert collection were once stored in the EIC’s north Malabar ‘factory’ of Tellicherry, and they provide, just like oral pome we now discuss, a portrayal of the countryside politics during a short-period between 1796 and 1800.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Letter no. 13-B: [From Kaṭattanāṭṭil Mūvāyiram-Nāir to Mr. Christopher Peile], dated 23 Kanni 972 M.E. 6 October, [1796]’ in (Skariah 2017b: 7–11).

the Malabar Muslims or Māppiḷas, occupying garden and swidden plots on the *kuṭṭijanmam* tenure.<sup>9</sup> These tenants were entitled to pay land-tax (*nikiti*) to the state, and a concessional ground-rent to the local landlord.<sup>10</sup> But in effect, the tenants paid both these dues into their landlord's treasury. This was because of a peculiar turn in the political events during transitional decades (c. 1766–1799). Tōṭṭattil landlord functioned as the local revenue-collector, acting on behalf of the incoming military-fiscal states: initially for the Khudādād Sircar of Mysore and subsequently for the EIC State. This process unfolded almost similarly as Bonaventure Swai has suggested. The collection rights of the Tōṭṭattil landlords date back to 1766:

In that year the *navābha* [Haidar Ali] approached Kaṭattanāṭṭi. The king of our country (*nāṭṭiltampurān*) proceeded for exile, and his people followed him. Later, [in the absence of the king] the Mūvāyiram-Nāṭṭi secured a standing settlement (*nilpān nila*) from the *navābha* by paying him a good amount of money (*ērekkorayāyīṭṭulla drav-yam*). Later [based on this settlement, that] in 1767, the king was able to return Kaṭattanāṭṭi. The king then went along with Mūvāyiram-Nāṭṭi and met *navābha* for a second time, and they agreed to give *navābha* rupees 50,000 as the annual money-tribute (*kappam*)” [from his country]. [‘Letter no. 13-B’ in Skariah 2017b: 8]

It was perhaps the convergence of these collection rights (that is, the traditional authority to collect ground-rent and the parvenu right of collecting land-tax) that made the Tōṭṭattil household function as if it represented a form of authority which had no functional difference (or *bhēdam*) when compared with the authority of the king. Contemporary letters indicate that the Eṭaccēri chief, Tōṭṭattil Nambyār, had mounted certain home-grown facilities for penal arbi-

<sup>9</sup> ‘Letter no. 2-C & D [From Celavurāyan Venkata Subbayyan to Mr. Christopher Peile], dated 5 Eṭavam 971, 15 May 1796’, in Skariah 2017a: 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Letter no. 177-F& G [From Bāburāyan to Mr. Christopher Peile], dated 3 Kumbham 972 M.E. [1796], in Skariah 2017a: 91.

tration and detention,<sup>11</sup> and that the household even maintained a line of revenue collectors on its own payroll.<sup>12</sup> In order to exercise this authority and to ensure its continuation (running parallel to the Kaṭattanāṭṭu raja's establishment), Tōṭṭattil landlord had to take recourse to a standard *hawālātti* support. In 1766 the Porḷātiri kings themselves had set an example for such a survival mechanism (Rejikumar 2010: 252). Tōṭṭattil Nambyār therefore availed of a contract of surety from the famous Tellicherry merchant Covvakkāran Mūsa in the year 1796. This, I assume, in a way, was a continuation from his household's functioning as monied-guarantees against the demand of tribute (*kappam*) during the early Mysore rule. Covvakkāran Mūsa had given him a document of surety undertaking for rupees 3000,<sup>13</sup> and this document was duly produced before the Tellicherry court by the Nambyār chief. It was intended to buy a deal of non-interference, as in the past, from the EIC administration. In fact, Mr. Christopher Peile had already intimated to Nambyār that such an assurance from the EIC would bring him "great fame and tranquil experience".<sup>14</sup>

However, the Porḷātiri Raja, who in the meantime became the *tahsildār* of the *tālūk* of Kaṭattanāṭṭu, was bent on extending his collection authority over those localities that were not part of his traditional realm. In one of his letters, the *tahsildār* king complained to Tellicherry that the Nambyār of Tōṭṭattil owed a huge money-debt to him.<sup>15</sup> The burden or debt was not less than Rs. 12,000. This was allegedly the amount of revenue pending from the Eṭaccēri lordship

<sup>11</sup> 'Letter no. 296-G&H [From Vaṭakara Daṛōgha to Eṭaccēri Nambyār, dated, 23 Mīnam 972 M.E. [1796]' in Skariah 2017a: 137.

<sup>12</sup> 'Letter no. 1303-K [From Iruvaḷināṭṭu Daṛōgha Māṇeyāṭṭe Vīrān Kuṭṭi to Mr. James Stevenson], dated 30 Kanni, 15 August 1799', in Skariah 2017a: 611.

<sup>13</sup> 'Letter no 214-F & G [From Covvakkāran Mūsa], dated 9 Kumbham [972 M.E.]' in Skariah 2017a: 104.

<sup>14</sup> 'Letter no. 189-F&G [Mr. Christopher Peile to Rāmarāyaṛ; The Pēškār], dated 4 Kumbham 972, 12 February 1797', in Skariah 2017a: 95.

<sup>15</sup> 'Letter nos. 364-G&H and 372-G&H' in Skariah 2017a: 161–162, 166.

since 1796.<sup>16</sup> The Nambyār was reluctant to settle the accounts with the king. Instead, he wanted to deal directly with the EIC administration. In the course of growing disagreement, the Eṭaccēri landlord had even enlisted his tenants in the anti-king legion, the Mūvāyiram-Nāir.<sup>17</sup> There were instances of armed conflict, desertion, insubordination and intrigue in the kingdom during 1796–1797. About a year later, on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1798, a member of the royal family, a “lesser raja” named Pōrriyamān, who was the head of a Poṟlātiri collateral house, Putiya Kōvilakam, was stabbed to death in the Eṭaccēri countryside.<sup>18</sup> Though the letters do not indicate a direct connection of the Tōṭṭattil landlords with this event, the murder was committed in the sphere of their immediate influence, and it was certainly a culmination of the intrigue-ridden political process in which these landlords had long been implicated.

### Brother, sister, and the power of localized landlordship

It has been a while since the Eṭaccēri landlord, Tōṭṭattil Kuññik-kēḷappan, offered to become the surety for his friend’s debt to the Vālunnōr. He was expected to remit 3000 *paṇam* coins in this regard to the Vālunnōr. But the debt remained unpaid due to some unknown reason. The interest was accumulating upon the delayed principal, and fast turning this burden of debt into an inescapable death trap. The Vālunnōr was impatient. He wanted to redeem the money at the earliest. One day, he ordered his ‘foreign-brahmin’ (*paṭṭar*) revenue collectors to proceed to the Tōṭṭattil household. They were entrusted with the task of collecting by force, or whatso-

<sup>16</sup> ‘Letter no 202-F&G [From Kaṭattanāṭṭu Poṟlātiri Kōta Varma to Mr. Christopher Peile], dated 6 Kumbham 972 M.E. [1797]’, in Skariah 2017a: 100.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Letter no 387-G& H [From Kaṭattanāṭṭu Poṟlātiri Udaya Varma to Mr. Christopher Peile], dated 5 Muthunam, 972, 17 June 1796’, in Skariah 2017a: 173.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Letter no 932-I [From Kaṭattanāṭṭu Kānagōvi Celavurāyan Veṅkaṭakubbayyan to Mr. James Stevenson], dated 9 Eṭavam 973 M.E., 20 May 1798’, in Skariah 2017a: 411.

ever manner that they deemed appropriate, what had long been due to the ruler or the *pāṭū*.<sup>19</sup> At this moment an interesting twist is introduced into the oral-poem narrative. The Vāḷunnōṟ's plan of the *pāṭū*-collecting mission against Tōṭṭattil household was known to his palace-queen Kuññikuṅki. She, as already mentioned, was born in Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil, and was gifted out in an alliance of marriage to Pārakkataṭavattū. However, despite her long absence from the natal locality and the growing affinal hostility between her husband and her matrilineal kinsmen who lived in the Tōṭṭattil household, Kuññikuṅki maintained a strong but invisible sororal association with her kin, especially with the brother-dominant persona of Kuññikkēḷappan.<sup>20</sup> This association was so strong that she even tried to stop the brahmin revenue collectors from their assignment. She wanted them to tell a lie to her husband that they had already completed the *pāṭū*-collecting raid and were about to submit its accounts to him. But she soon found that these revenue servants' allegiance to the ruler of Pārakkataṭavattū was stronger than her marital attachment and commitment to him. Kuññikuṅki decided to leave her husband and her father-loving son at once. She crossed the river Mayyaḷi over to the Eṭaccēri realm on a secret mission. She wanted to stay with her brothers and help them to face, and if possible, to get away with, this incoming predicament. As soon as she reached the Tōṭṭattil household, Kuññikuṅki explained to her younger brother the gravity of the situation which was gradually taking shape against his person:

<sup>19</sup> In the oral-poem vocabulary, the expression *pāṭū* means several things. It was literally a mark (of dignity), and therefore, when used in connection with the institution of kings or *nāṭuvāḷi* chiefs and of the *mukhyastha* households, it was a symbol of their authority. And in effect, it meant the political privilege of extracting (*pirikkal*) a share of produce or its money-equivalent as "tribute". *Pāṭū* also means a 'burden'. In this sense, in the case of an unfortunate defaulter who bear the burden of tribute, the term *pāṭū* represented suffering, an injury and a constant dunning, and by extension, it was an inexorable mark of dishonour (Gundert 1872: 640, Logan 1951: 270).

<sup>20</sup> For an observation of the presence of affinal hostility in the Nāir-retainer settings, see Gough 1961: 298–384.



O' Kuññikkēḷappan, you are still my dear little-boy, listen!  
 It is only because of your cause and reason  
 That I have no peace to live in that country  
 In the lofty mansion of Pārakkaṭavattū  
 I hear the envious people speak out your fame  
 [They say]  
 Until your life ends at the Tōṭṭattil orchard  
 You will continue to cause a burden for them. (ETKK 254–260)

Kuññikkēḷappan wanted his sister to play some advocacy in the Tōṭṭattil household in order to save him from insolvency, and indeed, from the political burden of the borrowed money. Accordingly, Kuññikuṅki was ready to seek permission from the uncle, the senior Nambiyār of Eṭaccēri, to open one of the several coconut-huts (*kūṭa*) of their possession where the household used to store its harvested coconuts for aging. Since there are plenty of green coconuts available in the wet season, but little possibility of drying them in the sun, the farmer households in the inland revenue units of Kaṭatanāṭṭ kept facilities for garden-based processing and warehousing. As early as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, these structures for storage were reckoned by the Mysore and later the EIC revenue survey (*paimāṣī*) accountants and merchants as valuable revenue assets. Kuññikkēḷappan wished to encash such a stored-up consignment of coconuts in the nearby market of Tellicherry, and pay off the debt that had been due to the Vālunnōṟ. The senior Nambiyār was initially reluctant to give his consent. But Kuññikuṅki supplication was successful. Her uncle finally gave his permission to sell this household wealth. Kuññikkēḷappan opened seven storage huts and the loads of coconut were taken out to the day-labourers' yard. Kuññikuṅki went back to her husband, and the details of her momentary absence from Pārakkaṭavattū remained unknown to him.

These coconuts were husked and the kernels were cracked and smoked into oily copra halves, and the entire load was finally piled-up in bundles. It was ready to cart out to the market of Tellicherry and was destined to the banksauls (*pāṇṭikaśāla*) owed by the household's friendly merchant Covvakkāran Mūsa. It was perhaps

because of the merit of his surety investment in the Eṭaccēri domain that Mūsa gained a critical right of monopsony, if not the first-right to purchase, over the Tōṭṭattil household, over its market-bound flow of labourers and commodities. At this juncture, Kuññikkēḷappan wanted to visit to his wife, Kuññiccīru, and he went to her house, the nearby Nāir household of Payyaṅānñāttū and decided to stay with her for three nights. In the meantime, the cart-loads of coconut set out from Tōṭṭattil. The drivers had to lead their carts through the country of the Vālunnōṟ. The road to Tellicherry was close to the market of Pārakkataṅavattū. When the carts, laden with sealed gunny bags carrying copra, briefly stopped at Pārakkataṅavattū for midday refreshments near the wayside shop of the Muslim merchant [Iccali] Kuṭṭiyāli, there took place another unexpected event. The trading party, the Tellicherry-bound caravan, was intercepted by the armed men sent by the Vālunnōṟ. The entire load of copra, along with the carts, cattle-drivers, and their attendants was captured, and carried away to the Vālunnōṟ's palace. This was not a mere instance of wayside robbery. The event of sequestration signalled the beginning of a full-fledged military action for which there had been a diehard cause: the *bhēdam*-based enmity. The Vālunnōṟ wanted to annex Eṭaccēri, to discipline the king-like household of Tōṭṭattil by force, and to teach a lesson to its disobedient Nambiyār landlords about the primacy of political difference (*bhēdam*) and hierarchy. The ruler wanted to avenge a long line of political grievances. His son, the little Villu, had been beaten up and dishonoured in Mātilūr school in the golden-stylus incident and the Vālunnōṟ himself openly challenged by Kuññikkēḷappan. Above all, the Vālunnōṟ had an unquenchable desire to enjoy the extraordinary coconut orchards, the swidden plots and the industrious Māppiḷa tenants of the Eṭaccēri-Tōṭṭattil.

On the fourth daybreak, while still at the house of his wife, Kuññikkēḷappan momentarily sighted an inauspicious omen. It was the time for him to take leave from the wife's house. He was scrubbing his teeth with mango-leaves and a little charcoal made of rice-husk. Kuññikkēḷappan thought this early-morning omen as an

unreal residue from the last night's nightmare! But it continued to annoy him. However, in the lapse of a couple of seconds, the inauspicious unfolded before him as a real physical situation. He could see from distance armed soldiers crowding the Tōṭṭatil garden plots and laying a heavy siege to his orchards. He could hear the echoing of gun-shots being fired in the direction of Eṭaccēri. Kuññiccīru tried to calm her husband by saying that there was nothing to worry at all because the sound of gunshots was the regular firing from the English fortress of Tellicherry. Kuññikkēḷappan was not ready to accept this untimely attempt at consolation. He was enraged, and rushed into the bed-chamber to take out his personal gun—a double-barrel matchlock with a silver-sling (*velli-paṭṭa*). He loaded the gun with a little stock of power and lead-balls. Kuññiccīru cried aloud in deep agony and the pain of impending widowhood, and she tried to prevent her husband from going to the warfront. But all her attempts failed. Ultimately, Kuññikkēḷappan reached the scene of the fighting. The enemy line was commanded by the Vālunnōṛ himself and he was assisted by his young son Villu. Both carried matchlocks and their troops were made up of the faceless mercenary swordsmen (*āḷ*) from the Pāṛakkaṭavattū countryside. None of the soldiers were known to Kuññikkēḷappan. They were strangers and were laying the siege and erecting temporary encampments around the Tōṭṭatil household. The enemy was steadily closing in. Kuññikkēḷappan somehow broke the line of siege from behind the enemy-lines, and sneaked into his household compound. He found no active stockades there, not even a rudimentary defence or sufficient military stores. No one was defending the household: the defensive positions and moats were left unmanned and empty right from the outset.

For a moment, Kuññikkēḷappan felt helpless. But he refused to give up and gift the enemy an easy victory. In the vast homestead compound, which was laid out as a multi-tiered garden and looked almost like a customized piece of evergreen rainforest, Kuññikkēḷappan found a lofty *īntū* palm tree (*cycas circinalis*). It was an unusual tree towering into the sky with seven branches and seven canopied heads. Their canopies had grown wild, were very thick and

dark-green, and covered by an umbrageous array of foliage. The *īṇḍū* palm was an ideal place to hide in, and to ambush an incoming standard of enemy from. Kuññikkēḷappan climbed up the tree and hid himself within its green leaves. He could see the invaders from the lofty position and attack them. He started shooting the enemies one by one. Neither the Vālunnōṟ nor his field lieutenants could ascertain from where and by whom the gunshots had been fired at them. In no time several of their mercenaries were dead and some others fell aground with deadly wounds. It was Villu who got the first clue of this rather unusual incident. He saw that the gunshots were coming from a high position in the canopied *īntū* tree and inferred that somebody was hiding with a loaded gun behind its foliage. It was Kuññikkēḷappan: the enemy-uncle carrying out a cunning act of ambush and destruction.

Villu now took out his gun, aimed it at the *īntū* tree and fired a volley against the tallest canopy. The hiding gunman was hit in his forehead. He threw down his gun, jumped out from the treetop stockade and fell on to the ground on his knees. He was bleeding and was driven to a state of delirium by pain. He could smell death. Kuññikkēḷappan tried to stop the bleeding from the wound: he tore out a piece of cotton from the corner of his war-attire and dressed the bleeding wound. With this piece of cloth, he fastened a turban-like loop around his head. The mortal wound, still bleeding, now looked like a flame-shaped mark of valour (*pūkkuri*) on his forehead. This is an appropriate mark for a dying war-hero. The Vālunnōṟ, Villu and their drunken swordsmen returned home after finally tasting the rare honey of success, revenge, and retaliation.

However, Kuññikkēḷappan did not die on the spot. His younger brother Rayiru appeared on the scene. Seeing Kuññikkēḷappan bleeding, Rayiru burst into tears. He cried aloud and helplessness prevailed over agony. But somehow, the little boy arranged a group of people and a palanquin to carry his fallen brother to their home. Even at this moribund moment of retreat and imminent death, the palanquin looked like a royal object. It was made of reeds of wild-cane and was reinforced with metallic joints, beautifully cast in

pure gold. The death-awaiting hero was transported to his home, into its private bed-chamber where the family deities and ancestral spirits were usually installed, secured, and worshiped by the household members. Still alive, Kuññikkēḷappan communicated his last wish: he wanted to see his elder sister Kuññikuñki and spend his last minutes in his elder-sister's lap. Nāiṛ messengers were instantly dispatched to Pārakkataṭavattū.<sup>21</sup>

The *nāiṛ* messengers reached the palace of Pārakkataṭavattū and communicated to Kuññikuñki the tragic turn of events at Eṭaccēri and the situation and wish of her dying brother. The news distressed Kuññikuñki so much so that she became disoriented and swooned. She cried aloud like a mad woman possessed by a *pēi* (ghost) and ran in the direction of the Tōṭṭattil household. She did not bother to seek permission, either of her husband or her only son. At this final moment of her escape-like departure, she met Villu standing at the door. She asked him:

O' Villu, are you now the ruler of Pārakkataṭavattū?  
 It was to you, O' Villu, whom I had cautioned earlier,  
 That you should not never ever go to Eṭaccēri  
 Because  
 You are fated to kill your own uncle! (ETKK 369–372)

If the fate of avunculicide was one of the inescapable realities of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Malabar, the same was true of its immediate political effects. Kuññikuñki had neither the time nor the wit to impart

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<sup>21</sup> This whole episode reminds one of the remembered final moments of the north-Malabar war-heroes par excellence, Ārōmaṛ Cēkavaṛ and Taccōḷi Otēnan. Both, having been betrayed and fallen in the battlefield after receiving fatal wounds, wanted their shattered retinue to transport them—the sinking bodies—back to their respective homes (Logan 1951: 101, Raghavan 1932: 210). The desire to breathe last in one's own courtyard, in one's own private bed-chamber and, by extension, in the crop garden that one privately owns, was central to their act of perceiving the final moment of corporeal annihilation. This domestic fixation of, and with, death perhaps differentiates these lordly individuals from the death-sworn warriors (or the *cāvēṛ*) of the Malabar Māmāṅkam complex (Ayyar 1909: 22–27, Sankarakurup 1114 ME: 450–461).

such an insightful lesson to her son at that moment. She crossed the palace gate by jumping over the parapet and she continued to run. She cried aloud a long history of sisterly affiliation and attachment. She crossed the river Mayyaḷi from north and reached the front of the Tōṭṭattil household. Though maddened with agony, she was still able to see the many marks of wanton destruction which had been wrought there by the last *mulkigiri* siege. Kuñṅikuṅki went inside the bed-chamber and looked at her dying brother, with tears in her eyes and a whimper suspended somewhere in her heart. Kuñṅik-kēḷappan saw his sister; he placed his head on her lap and said:

O' dear Kuṅki, you are my real motherly-sister.  
 If you continue whimpering, however  
 How can I speak out what I have the intention to say to you?  
 O' my truthful motherly-sister, [stop crying and] listen to me  
 That you should not go back to Pāraḷkaṭavattū  
 Even if the ruler, your husband  
 Offers and brings at your feet, loads of money: the golden pagoda.  
 That you always prefer me and my abode [over your husband  
 and his royal realm]

Listen to me again, O' my truthful motherly-sister  
 The lady of Payyaṛakkāṭṭū is my wife named Kuñṅiccīru  
 She who is now pregnant about four months  
 You should go and meet her, O' my real sister  
 And, to her you perform all the rites that are appropriate in time.  
 Do provide her with all what is her rightful due [from my household  
 share].

Listen to me again, O' my truthful motherly-sister  
 That if the lady of Payyaṛakkāṭṭū who is my wife Kuñṅiccīru  
 Gives birth this time to a girl-child  
 You let your son, the young Villu of Pāraḷkaṭavattū  
 Marry her, and let this couple come and stay in my little abode.  
 (ETKK 384–402)

Kuñṅikuṅki agreed to carry out all these instructions except the last one of restarting the broken affinal relation by a cross-cousin marriage between his daughter and Villu, the heir apparent to

Pāṛakkaṭavattū. For Kuñṅikuṅki, it was Villu who had precipitated the internecine war from an otherwise petty quarrel. It was he who attacked his uncle Kuñṅikkēḷappan with a gunshot, and it was he who was now causing his painful death. Villu was the ‘son of his father’ and remained passionately attached, like a scaled-down shadow, to the figure of his father, the ruler of Pāṛakkaṭavattū, and thus he perpetrated the heinous sin of avunculicide. Kuñṅikuṅki had already left her son, and in effect, her husband, and his reified patri-archate of Pāṛakkaṭavattū. She had broken the taboo of crossing the river Mayyaḷi and switched over, to her old natal universe forever. A return was impossible. She could accept the idea of marrying off Kuñṅikkēḷappan’s daughter to a stranger Tamil brahmin coming from the eastern town of Pālakkāṭṭi; but she couldn’t even think of her son, the slayer Villu, marrying the daughter of her slain brother and thereby attaining claim over the Eṭaccēri domain. Kuñṅikuṅki rejected the conciliatory proposal of the cross-cousin marriage. She had made up her mind and was firm in her decision regarding the final division and departure. Kuñṅikkēḷappan helplessly repeated his plea and breathed his last on his sister’s lap. His body was cremated in the Tōṭṭattil homestead, and Kuñṅikuṅki observed a long death-pollution.

In the “usual” types of oral poems of north Malabar, or in the print-driven chap-book variety to which the historian M. R. Raghava Varier has paid exclusive attention, the death of the hero/anti-hero always marks, if such an event is part of the oral plot, the “final” end, perhaps a ritualized culmination, of the narrative. However, the death of the Eṭaccēri landlord Tōṭṭattil Kuñṅikkēḷappan does not signal such a predictable end in ETKK. Nor does this oral poem (along with numerous others that fall into its family) agree with the *a priori* “patterns” (*prarūpam*) of the “narrative structure” (*ākhyā na-gḥaṭana*) or with the descriptive formulae (*orukkuśīl*) that Varier has tried to argue for the regional oral poem complex (Varier 1994). Instead, ETKK takes a conscious movement into the unusual theme viz. the standalone career of Kuñṅikuṅki and its contemporary effects on the Vālunnōṛ rulership. I think that this preference for

standaloneness—and the individualistic disposition over which it has been moored—is critically important. This is for more than one reason. In the narrative body of the oral poem, this standaloneness is analogous to the anti-*bhētam* attitude that Kuññikkēḷappan invoked when he encountered the Vālunnōṟ king in the roadway incident. Added to this point is the fact that the wayside polemics on *bhētam* was carefully drawn and improvised from an already existing registry; the north Malabar *tōrram* poems. Just like this improvisation, the sororalism of Kuññikuṅki and her overt natal attachment also appear to represent a conscious reworking of certain older idioms signifying individualistic articulation and *sui-generis* existence.

It must be kept in mind that the sororalism of the Kuññikuṅki type has been documented in an old, probably the 14<sup>th</sup> century, oral poem *Payyannūr Pāṭṭū*. Its avenger heroine, Nīlakēśi, plots to kill her own son, Nambūsari Aren. The filicidal plot had emerged out of her uncontrollable thirst for taking vengeance against her husband, a king-like trader of Kaccilapaṭṭanam named Nombu Ceṭṭi, who happened to kill four of her brothers in an unfortunate event of battle (Antony 2000: 9). Nīlakēśi groomed her little male child very carefully. But it was only to kill him, and to take revenge against her husband. In an appropriate moment, she turns wild and strategically deserts her husband, and soon after orchestrates a complicated plan of maternal filicide. The whole edifice of revenge is mounted on her secretive upkeep of certain post-mortem remains (literarily, ‘the bones collected and dried from the graveyard’) of her slain brothers. In Kuññikkūṅki’s narrative in ETKK, however, the filicidal dimension is muted and it has been overshadowed by the heroine’s overt hostility to her husband. In other words, as we will soon see, Villu escaped the fate of Nambūsari Aren, the scapegoat in *Payyannūr Pāṭṭū*. But this omission and the possibility of escape given to Villu was at the cost his father—the so-called ‘little king’ of Malabar historiography—whose qualities he had adored and whose kingdom he wanted to inherit.

Several weeks passed since the tragic death of Kuññikkēḷappan. The period of death-pollution and the ritual seclusion that it entails



on the kin and the commensal survivors finally came to an end. Similarly, the momentary joy of political victory of conquest and of retaliation met its natural low-ebb in the Vālunnōṛ realm. Political victories and public wounds are often easily forgotten. But even after the soothing effect by the passage of time, Kuññikuṅki did not return to Pārakkaṭavattū. The Vālunnōṛ was eager to see her return to his palace but it was not happening. So the ruler decided to pay a conciliatory visit to Eṭaccēri, and soon he set off in that direction. In this trip, the Vālunnōṛ travelled without his usual retinue. He was unarmed and with no embellishments. He was alone, silent, and walking close to a certain tide of avenge rising against his person. The ruler was unusually serene in his individualistic urge to see his wife again. Not even his son, Villu, the heir-apparent, accompanied him in this attempt. When Kuññikuṅki saw him approaching her compound, she retired to the bed-chamber and closeted herself behind the closed doors, and she secured the wooden vaults of the room from inside. It was the spot—the household's private-chamber—where her brother Kuññikkēlappan had breathed his last. The Vālunnōṛ saw his wife hiding behind the doors. He went to the door-step and called her name aloud. No one replied to this order-like call. The ruler had to lower his voice and tone down the peremptory mood. He now requested her to come out and to see him for once. Then a startling reply (*pakaram-paraññu*) came in:

If you want me to open the door [O Vālunnōṛ, it is impossible]  
 Tōṭṭattil Kuññikkēlappan, he who is [slain, but who was] my real brother!  
 If he knocks at the door and calls my name aloud  
 I will open the paṭiññārra (bed-chamber) only for him, only to his call.  
 I could get another bed-partner [like you] now,  
 Or whenever I wish to search one like you!  
 But I cannot get by slain brother back. (ETKK 418–423)

This merciless reply shattered Vālunnōṛ to the core of his lordly being. The ruler lost his balance and became burdened (*pātāyi*) with a feeling of loss and guilt. He spent seven more days awaiting Kuññikuṅki's reply, and camped in front of the Tōṭṭattil homestead.

Nothing came out in his favour, no leaves were tuned in his support, no exonerating message was forthcoming, and the doors of *paṭiññārra* were closed before him forever. The Vālunnōṟ had no option but to go back to his realm.

He reached Pārakkatavattū. But the ruler would not find peace and presence of mind. The agony and angst of loneliness worsened and ate into him beyond a breaking point. The burden of angst was existential. The ruler swallowed a diamond ring and committed suicide. None of his companions followed him in this final course. The Vālunnōṟ died all alone, and then, a state of kinglessness prevailed in the countryside. In the meantime, at the Tōṭṭattil household, Kuññikuṅki emerged from her private-chamber. The closed doors were now opened. She mounted on a luxuriously adorned palanquin and went to the house of Payyarakkāṭṭū. By this time, Kuññikkēlappan’s widow had given birth to a male child. Kuññikuṅki took this child to the Tōṭṭattil household. The little boy was destined to become the next landlord, the new Tōṭṭattil Nambiyār. The slain anti-king hero and the local landlord had several afterlives in the immediate political future of the region. Maybe, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Malabar king, until he was recently invented in the historiographic plain of “little-kingdom”, was no match to them. What might have then ‘revealed’ to the collectors (and also the singers and listeners) of ETKK and other *orra-pāṭṭū* poems was this early modern mentality—“the best thoughts of their time”—of denying kingly authority and deference.

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