

Comparison of Tamil Shaiva Visual Narratives in Lepakshi with Community Theatre Traditions of Thanjavur and Thiruvarur

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Introduction

The Lepakshi Veerabhadraswamy temple in Ananthapur District, Andhra Pradesh has one of the largest collections of medieval murals in South India and the best preserved examples of the 16th century Vijayanagara style paintings. The sculpture and continuous narrative reliefs on the pillars and walls of the mahamandapa, natyamandapa, and the unfinished kalyanamandapa are also significant both in quality and quantity.

Some of the devotional narratives of paintings and reliefs in this temple are from the Thanjavur and Thiruvarur region of present day Tamil Nadu. The monkey-faced king Muchukunda in the ceiling of the cave area in Lepakshi is depicted worshipping Thyagarajaswamy in Thiruvarur. The Beda Kannappa or Kannappa Nayanar narrative painted on the ceiling of the mahamandapa and two other Tamil Shaiva devotional narratives of sacrifice - the Siriyala Charithram depicted in bas relief panels on the east and north walls of the mahamandapa and the Manuneethi Chola story depicted in a ceiling mural in the natyamandapa are described by the 12th century Tamil poet Sekkizhar in his *Periyapuranam* (great Purana).

In this paper we compare the structure and aesthetics of the Manuneethi Chola painting and Siriyala Charithram narrative relief panels in Lepakshi with their

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tangible and intangible heritage parallels in Thanjavur and Thiruvavur region of Tamil Nadu, where they are part of the Sthalapuranas. We focus on annual community theatre performances called nadagams and associated ritual practices where these narratives have been preserved for over 500 years in this Tamil region.

The Siriyala Charithram known as the Siruthonda Nayanar Kathai in Tamil Nadu is the legend of the 7th century Pallava army general Paranjothi, who later became one of the 63 Nayanmars. He sacrifices his only son in devotion towards Shiva and is blessed by Rishabharuda. This narrative is also popular in Karnataka and Maharashtra. In Lepakshi, this story is depicted on 8 relief panels beginning at the boulder with 4 panels on the eastern wall and 4 more placed on the north wall enclosing the mahamandapa, ending on the left of the entrance to the mahamandapa (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Siriyala Charithramu bas relief panels, Lepakshi

Source: Gandhi Balasubramanian

The Manuneethi Chola narrative of justice and sacrifice painted in the ceiling of the natyamandapa is from Thiruvavur, one of the Chola kingdom capitals. This story is

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depicted as a continuous narrative. After the king and his ministers in the royal court, we find the scene of the chariot of the Chola prince running over a calf. The mother cow rings the bell for justice and the king as custodian of justice decrees that his son be run over by the chariot. Shiva brings everyone back to life and blesses them (see Figure 2).

Hanumantha Rao (2004) and other scholars have analyzed the structure and aesthetics of this painting and the Siriyala Charitram relief panels in great detail. However, their tangible and intangible parallels with community theatre traditions in the Thanjavur and Thiruvarur region as well as textual and epigraphic evidence from the Tamil regions are yet to be adequately explored. This paper hence, attempts to do this below.

In *Silappadikaram* [2 CE] one of the five great Tamil epics, Kannagi proclaims to the Pandiyan king that her hometown 'Puhar' is the land that takes pride in a man killing his much beloved son under the wheel (for justice). *Mahavamsa* [5 CE], the book of kings of Sri Lanka also mentions that Manuneethi Chola was a just king who ruled as a guardian of Dharma. *Mahavamsa* identifies the king as a Chola and his name as Ellara in Pali. Ellalan in Tamil means guardian of the frontier. The Vijayanagara feudatory Virupanna who expanded the Lepakshi temple in 16th century and his brother Veeranna were also guardians of the frontier.

An inscription dated 1123 CE and attributed to Vikrama Cholan in the Thiruvarur Thyagarajaswamy temple provides an elaborate narration of the Manuneethi Chola story. The *Periyapuranam* composed by the 12th century poet Sekkizhar, chief minister in the court of Kulothanga Cholan II (1133-1150), depicts the legendary lives of the 63 Nayanmars, canonical poets of Tamil Saivism. The detailed descriptions of the *Periyapuranam* popularized the Manuneethi Chola and Siriyala stories. More elaborate narratives are found in parallel literature as well as in the oral and theatrical traditions. *Manuneethi Chozha Raja Nadagam*, a 200-year manuscript in the Maharaja Serfoji Saraswathi Mahal Library in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu was earlier in

the possession of U Kathaiya Vayadiyar and his family who have been the custodians of this intangible heritage for seven generations.

Annual community theatre performances of the *Manuneethi Chola Maharaja Nadagam* take place in Andan Kovil near Valangaiman in Thanjavur district. This five-night devotional performance commences on the full moon of the Chithirai month. Performers and community patrons end the ritual paying homage at the Thyagarajaswamy temple, Thiruvarur where the event is alleged to have taken place. It begins with the just and compassionate Chola King whose wife Thirumana Devi longs for a child and the couple is blessed with a son after extensive prayers. They name him after Veethivitanagan, the processional deity of Thyagarajaswamy temple in Thiruvarur. This is not depicted in the Lepakshi painting, which has eight scenes that are similar to the Thiruvarur nadagam script.



Fig 2: Manuneethi Cholan mural, Lepakshi

Source: Vinod Raja

As in the nadagam, the Lepakshi painting of this narrative begins with a scene of the court of the Chola king where he is depicted in discussion with his ministers. In the nadagam *script below*, Veethivitanan ask for permission to go to worship Thyagaraja.

“O revered father, mother to whom I am born, to bathe in the waters of Kamalalayam which chants the great vedas, one who is adored by the world-the Vanmeeka Thyaganar, oh truthful one to worship him grant me permission.”

- Ramanujam, 2004

The king sees bad omens and discusses with ministers. He permits Veethivitanan to go worship the deity. The second scene of the mural depicts Veethivitanan on a chariot that has run over the calf and the distressed mother cow (see Figure 2).

In the nadagam, there is an interesting detail where both Shiva disguised as the cow and Yama as the calf come to the northern street of Thiruvavarur. Veethivitanan riding in his chariot is caught by surprise and runs over the calf. Interestingly, the painter (s) positioned the Manuneethi Chola ceiling painting in the extreme north of the Lepakshi natyamandapa.

The cow rings the bell of justice before Veethivitanan's letter about running over the calf reaches the king in the nadagam. The king as guardian of justice for all commands his minister to punish his beloved son similarly. The minister feels the prince is innocent and pleads for mercy. As the king insists that the minister execute his command, the minister kills himself. The king executes the sentence. In the last scene of this nadagam, Shiva appears as Rishabhharuda bringing the calf, minister and prince back to life and blesses all. In the Lepakshi paintings most of these scenes are depicted and in the last scene, the minister, the king, son and calf are facing Rishabhharuda who is accompanied by Shiva ganas.

“As in dance, so in painting, the imitation of the Triloka in prescribed...”

-Citrasutra [5 C E), Adhyaya 35 (p.3)

Devotional narratives depicted in performance and in visual arts are closely synchronized. Hence, they must be accorded equal value.

We discuss below the Siruthondar Nayanar nadagams in Thiruvarur and Thanjavur region and compare with Siriyala Charithram relief panels in Lepakshi. The eight Siriyala relief panels on the east and north walls enclosing the mahamandapa of the Lepakshi temple have been elaborated in detail by Hanumantha Rao (2014). It begins with three deities and ends with Siruthondar and family receiving Shiva's blessings with a Shiva gana blowing a wind instrument. Although Rao identifies the first image as Shiva in panel 1, the iconography of the deity indicates that it is Indra who is in Sukhasana to the right of Brahma and Vishnu. The eight relief panels have some missing segments and appear to have been brought from elsewhere and reused to enclose the mahamandapa. The relief walls also seem to have been built after the paintings inside the mahamandapa were completed as the paintings extend slightly beyond the wall into the ardamandapa area.

The oral ballads of the Siriyala Charithram belonging to the Telugu as well as the Kannada regions differ from the narrative relief panels in this temple. The reliefs are more closely synchronized with the Thanjavur community theatre nadagam scripts that are discussed in detail later in this paper.

Cultural transmigrations and transpositions seem to have added to and transformed such art forms in the Lepakshi temple. Royals and other elites during the Vijayanagara as well as the Nayaka period patronized literary, performance and visual arts. They often granted villages and lands to poets, performers and artists from other regions to encourage and promote the arts. The spread of the Telugu dance and theatre traditions such as Yakshagana, Aata Bhagavatham, Bhagavatha Melams to and from neighbouring regions reveals cultural transmigrations and transpositions. The Vijayanagara and the Thanjavur rulers also had close military, economic and socio-

cultural associations with each other. This could be one reason that we find the painted and sculpted devotional narratives in Lepakshi to be so closely associated with epics and community theatre traditions of that district.

In the section below, we compare the Lepakshi Siriyala relief panels with Siruthondar Nadagams performed annually in the Thanjavur region. A version of this nadagam composed in early 18th century by Ranganatha Upadhyayar is performed in Thanjavur Mariamman Kovil on the Bharani star in the Tamil month of Chiththirai and after 21 days in the Uthirapathiswarar temple, Thiruchengattankudi, which is closer to Thiruvavarur, Tamil Nadu.

The *Amudhu Padayal Nadagam* (The Food Offering Play) is one of the more vibrant theatre forms of community theatre today. This is the Siruthondar nadagam, which has been performed annually for the past three centuries in the Punnainallur Mariamman temple in Thanjavur, Poondi Theru, Pookaratheru in Thanjavur district and Puthur in Salem district and by other groups who come and perform in Thiruchengattangudi.

In Thanjavur, non-professionals take a vow and perform the nadagam as a ritual. Here, the *vidhushaka* or the *sutradar* is substituted by the *konangi* (buffoon) who introduces the play to the public narrating what is going to happen in a humorous manner. In panel 2 of the Siriyal Charithram reliefs in Lepakshi, Bringhi is positioned at the end of the assembly of gods and as in the play he seems to be introducing the story to the audience. The dancing position and musical instrument in the hands of Bringhi indicates he is a singer-performer.

The stories performed as community theatres around Thanjavur and Thiruvavarur are coined around bhakthi and sacrifice and the devotion of the protagonists and the blessings and positions attained by them. Shoka rasa and Karuna rasa are embedded in these performances and there is minimum display of Shringara and Hasya in the

mainstream of the performance and the same is explicit in the sculpted relief panels of Lepakshi,

In the nadagam, the story begins with the Pallava king Narasimhavarman enquiring about the valour of his commander in chief Paranjothi over his victory in war with Pulikesin of Vatapi. On advice of the Shaiva saint Thirugnanasambandhar, Paranjothi proceeds to his hometown Thiruchengattankudi to serve Lord Shiva. After extensive prayers, Paranjothi and his wife Venkattunangai are blessed with a son who they name Seeralan. Sandhana Thaadhi who is also a devotee of Siva assists them in their household and ritual services. Thirugnanasambandhar visits and confers the title Siruthondar to Paranjothi who has begun serving the Shaiva followers and devotees by hoisting the 'annakodi' (food-flag) and feeding them every day and only partaking in his meal after they are satisfied. One day, Siruthondar is worried as no devotees of Shiva come as guests. Venkattunangai suggests that being in rich attire may repel mendicants and suggests that Siruthondar dress as a simple devotee of Shiva and go find a devotee to invite and feed. Siruthondar wears simple robes and Shaiva marks and goes in search of devotees of Shiva. None of the above scenes except for the scene where Siruthondar is wearing simple robes are found in Lepakshi.

In the nadagam script, Shiva in the form of Kankala (Bhairava) visits Siruthondar's home when had gone in search of devotees. Shiva abstains from entering the house and waits under the *Aatthi* tree (*Bahunia Racemosa*) in the temple precincts. In panel 2 of the Lepakshi reliefs after Bringhi, we find a tree motif representing the *Aatthi* and a mendicant being greeted by Siruthondar. This mendicant is referred to as Jangama (wandering religious sanyasi) in the nadagam. Jangamas are gurus of Lingayats who migrated to Tamil Nadu from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (Russell and Lal, 1916).

Two architectural structures in panel 3 in Lepakshi appear to be the temple in Thiruchengattankudi and a school attached to it. The school is in the ardhmandapa and the teacher is seated on an elevated platform. Seeralan is prostrating before the

teacher and other children are standing. In the next scene in panel 3, Seeralan is bowing to a person draped in a loincloth whose hair is tied in a topknot. In the nadagam, Siruthondar comes to the school to take Sreeralan home. Seeralan says, “Salutations father, as I am to be eaten by your lord who hit Andhakasura, it may be a flaw if I am hurt by stones or thorn, hence carry me over thy shoulders!” Siruthondar carries his son on his shoulders and takes him home.

In panel 4 in Lepakshi, the man carrying Sreeralan home appears to be different from the man in the loincloth. The person with the loincloth could be Thirugnanasambandar, who visited the Thiruchengattankudi and blessed the child. In that case, the entire story sequence in this panel could be an earlier episode and panels that could fill the gaps in the chronology of narratives appear to be missing.

In the nadagam, Seeralan is bathed and put in cradle by his mother after he reaches home (see figure 3). Sreeralan explains to his mother that when he is asleep he is similar to a corpse and it is not auspicious to make an offering of a corpse to the Kankala. He tells his parents that it is a boon to be an offering to the lord and they should overcome the illusions of worldly bondage and do the sacrifice with satisfaction and devotion. The mother holds the feet of the child while the father holds the arms and severs the head. This scene is depicted in panel 4 in Lepakshi.

In the ritual practices associated with the nadagam, the Kankala (Bhairava) performer goes in a procession around the village accepting offerings from the people. Ingredients to make *Pillai Kariamudhu* (meal made of a meat of a child) are gathered from the community. There is a prescribed recipe for making the dough, referred to as *marundhu* (medicine) as it is distributed to devotees as sacred *prasadam* after the nadagam, especially to those who have taken a vow to beget children. The ingredients are put into a mortar and pounded with a pestle symbolizing the pounding of Seeralan's head by Venkattunangai and Sandhana Thadhi. This is depicted in panel 7 on the north wall of the mahamandapa in Lepakshi. In the nadagam, this activity

recurs twice, once as a ritual and again as a performance on the stage. The pounded flour is mixed and cast into a form of a child (see figure 3), and physically severed during the enactment.



Fig. 3: Siruthondar Nadagam, Thanjavur

Source: N.K. Senthil Kumar

In the nadagam, Siruthondar requests Sandhana Thadhi to set aside the head and cook other portions for Kankala's meal. Kankala however, demands that the head also be cooked and Sandhana Thadhi cooks and serves him. Kankala refuses to eat food alone

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and wants another devotee to eat with him. When Siruthondar tells Kankala that no devotee is available, Kankala asks Siruthondar to dine with him. Siruthondar accepts and eats his own son's flesh. Kankala admonishes him for not waiting till he begins eating and says that Siruthondar is not the right person to dine with. He asks him to call his son Seeralan to eat by his side. To satisfy the Kankala, Siruthondar and his wife call out to their son and to their surprise Seeralan rushes to them as if returning from his school. Unable to find Kankala, the happy couple rushes out looking for him. While severing of Seeralan's head is depicted in Panel 4 in Lepakshi, the pounding of the head and feeding the Kankala is depicted in panel 7. The in between panels appear to be earlier scenes of the narrative when Siruthondar begins his service to the deity by inviting and feeding Shaivite devotees. Siruthondar is followed by three mendicants in Panel 5 and he is depicted in pranamanjali mudra in front of three seated mendicants in Panel 6.

In the Thanjavur and Thiruvarur community theatre repertoire, there is a scene of Siruthondar attempting to kill himself when he does not find the Kankala. This is also depicted in panel 7 in Lepakshi where he is shown standing with a raised sword attempting to kill himself (see Figure 2). There is however, no mention of Siruthondar trying to kill himself in the *Periyapuranam*. In the final scene of the nadagam, Shiva comes as Rishabharuda and blesses the couple, Seeralan and Sandhana Thadhi. The couple and their son are depicted being blessed by Rishabharuda in panel 8 in Lepakshi. Sandhana Thadhi who is a great devotee of Shiva is not depicted. Perhaps this was due to lack of space in the smaller sized panel.

Conclusion

Through the comparison of the structure and aesthetics of two devotional narratives of sacrifice represented in the visual art of Lepakshi with community performances in Thanjavur and Thiruvarur regions as well as textual and inscriptional evidence, we have shown the continuity of the close synchronicity between the visual and performance art forms of the Telugu and Tamil regions since the 16th century.

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Further comparison of the Lepakshi reliefs and paintings with sculpture and paintings in other temples in Andhra and Tamil Nadu including Malayadippatti Ananthasayana, Thanjavur Brihadiswara, Pattiswaram Dhenupuriswarar and Srirangam Ranganatha temples and also with other local community theatre traditions will provide a better understanding of the cultural transmigrations and transpositions during the Vijayanagara period and the transformations and continuity of the visual and performance art forms during the Nayaka, Maratha and Colonial periods.

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