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Pauline Schuster-Löhlau

‘Leaving the Country, I Shall Be Free’

The South Indian Siri Tradition
as a Source of Identity

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Note on transliteration and the spelling of Indian words

Personal names (of performers, informants, experts etc.) and place names are given in their common, often anglicized forms, without diacritics.

Personal names and place names occurring in the mythical texts are spelled in accordance with the Tulu original, in transliteration in Roman script with diacritics.

Tulu words are provided in transliteration in Roman script with diacritics, usually with the English translation or an explanation following in brackets.

Concerning the transcription of originally Tulu and Kannaḍa texts, please note that I have adopted the spelling found in my sources. Dr. Alva has used phonetic transliteration while preparing transcriptions of Tulu texts; Peter J. Claus and his assistant have apparently taken the same approach, but applied it more freely. For instance, instead of *v* they use *w*, and, at times, they do not conform to the scientific notation using diacritics, writing *sh* in place of *ś*.

Abbreviations

App.	Appendix
ibid.	Latin <i>ibidem</i> , “in the same place”
Kann.	Kannaḍa
lit.	literally
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OTD	Online Tulu Dictionary
Skt.	Sanskrit
()	often used in a translation: providing an explanation or alternate spelling
(...)	omission of words or entire sentences
[]	as part of a translation or citation: denoting an addition
[sic]	Latin <i>sic</i> , “truly so”, “in fact so”: spelling conform with the original quotation
i.e.	Latin <i>id est</i> , “that is”
e.g.	Latin <i>exempli gratia</i> , “for example”
RRC	Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, Udupi

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- Department of Tribal Studies, Kannada University, Hampi
- Kannada Department, University of Mangalore

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Introduction

In recent years, India has drawn a lot of unwanted attention due to several exceptionally brutal assaults against women. Especially the 2012 Delhi gang rape case provoked protests against sexual violence and gender discrimination all over the world. A mostly biased presentation of Indian society in the media has resulted in a distorted and undifferentiated image of India, and of women in India in particular. Indian women are first and foremost depicted as victims of an anti-modern society deep-rooted in oppressive patriarchal structures. Moreover, Western media seems inclined to construct India as a third-world country whose ideas, norms and values tend to be interpreted in terms of “backwardness” with an outdated image of women, and not at all compatible with the image of a changing, modern society and an economic power. India is seen as a country in need to be empowered. Ironically, this imperialistic attitude towards India is exactly the same attitude that is shown towards Indian women within the society’s dominant discourse on the role of women. India is a very large and diverse country, with an extremely complex situation in regard to language and culture, religious, social and political movements, the caste system, the distribution of wealth etc. This ambiguity and complexity is perceptible in regard to the image and position of women as well. But whereas a negative image of Indian society and its anti-modern, patriarchal perception of women appears to dominate at the moment, this model of womanhood disseminated especially by the mass media is very limited. Numerous works have analyzed the position of women in India from different perspectives (social, political/ideological, cultural), and shown that Indian women have found their own strategies of resistance, that they have successfully created spaces of their own, and that the Indian feminist movement is one of the most active in the world. Yet, conservative, nationalist movements seem equally strong in a world that is influenced and shaped by global markets, universal movements and ideas. This is a development which at the same time raises questions of one’s own (national) identity, and creates social and economic insecurity and a lack of orientation. These developments seem to be one of the reasons why people around the globe long for a new sense of stability and security, and turn to their social and cultural roots, in the hope of finding these.

While contemporary neo-conservative movements draw on traditional Hindu ideologies and classical (Sanskrit) literature, propagating the picture of Indian women as chaste wives (*pativrata*) and devoted mothers (of sons, ideally), I have found that the women portrayed in regional oral texts possess much more independence, spirit and freedom than their counterparts in classical (pan-Indian) texts. Many of the oral texts I have studied so far (North Indian and South Indian oral epic texts), succeed in giving justice to the often very complex and ambiguous female characters they feature. Usually, women and models of female behavior are represented in a realistic way in oral narratives, reflecting actual women’s daily lives and views. This is also the case with the South Indian narrative and ritual traditions studied in this work. I take into account different oral epic texts in Tulu and Kannaḍa language, featuring both female and male protagonists belonging to various social backgrounds, as well as recently collected empirical data in order to explore the role of South Indian, and in particular

Tuḷuva, women from a mytho-historical, literary and contemporary perspective. The focus of this study is especially on the women-centered Siri narrative and ritual tradition, which is named after and centers around the heroine Siri and her female descendants. Siri is thus somewhat of an exception among the (deified) heroes and cultural icons of Tuḷunāḍu, the Tuḷu-speaking areas of Coastal Karnataka, i.e. Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts (and Kasaragod District in Northern Kerala), who are mostly male. I hope this work can be understood as a contribution intended to balance the negative, biased and generalized picture of Indian society and its perception of women painted, in particular, by the media. Perhaps this study can be seen as a further piece of the puzzle that helps to understand and appreciate India's cultural diversity.

Moreover, while oral narrative traditions are still alive in India, this seems to be changing rapidly. For example, some traditions, such as the Tuḷuva women's field-song tradition, have largely been discontinued, partly because the modern mass media has replaced this traditional medium over the last few decades (see chapter 10.1). For this reason, studies in the field of oral narrative traditions appear rather urgent. Still, in contrast to other countries and parts of India as well as compared to other oral traditions, the oral epic, or *pāḍḍana*, traditions of Coastal Karnataka/Tuḷunāḍu have survived up to this day. This is probably due to the fact that the Tuḷu-speaking people(s) of this area have lived in a non-literate culture for most of the time. In addition, I assume that the Tuḷu *pāḍḍana* traditions have been transmitted and kept alive because they are considered worthy and because they occupy a significant function within Tuḷuva society: I will argue that the *pāḍḍana* traditions play a central role in creating and maintaining individual and collective identity, and even serve as sources of cultural identity. This is especially due to their capacity for reminding individuals of their shared history, religion as well as social practices. In that respect, I follow Aleida and Jan Assmann's (2008) deliberations on the connections between time, identity and memory. Moreover, it seems useful to apply their concept of "cultural memory" to the Tuḷuva context: This may bring new insights in regard to the workings and nature of oral textual traditions, their transmission and reception. To sum up, the goal of the study at hand is to show how oral epic traditions serve as sources of personal, social, and especially cultural identity, and why oral traditions such as the Tuḷu *pāḍḍanas* are still of relevance even today.

The Siri narrative and ritual tradition

As I have already mentioned, the center of this study is the Siri oral tradition, for a number of reasons: For one thing, the Siri narrative, or *pāḍḍana*, revolves around the life and relationships of women and the family. This is unlike most other Tuḷu *pāḍḍanas* which feature around caste and/or class conflicts, battle, valor, and honor. For another thing, the performers affiliated to the Siri narrative and ritual tradition, i.e. singers and participants in the Siri ritual, are largely female, which is somewhat of an exception within the context of public (ritual) performances. Furthermore, the possession ritual is rather special as Siri spirit possession is conceived of as being different from other kinds of spirit possession in the Tuḷu region. Up to this day, the Siri narrative and ritual tradition is very much alive in Tuḷunāḍu. Since the Siri *pāḍḍana* is an orally transmitted and performed text, it does not exist isolated from its socio-cultural and religious context. Siri is an exemplary woman from the matrilineal Baṇṭ

caste who fights against the injustices of a feudal, male-dominated society. Siri and her descendants, her son Kumāra, her daughter Sonne and her granddaughters Abbaga and Dāraga, are commemorated by hundreds of devotees in nightly possession rituals taking place at so called Siri *ālaḍes* all over Tuḷunāḍu on the full moon nights from February till May, i.e. in the solar months *ponni* to *paggu*, in the context of the annual Siri *jātre*s (festivals). A Siri *ālaḍe* is a site of worship comprised of five or more shrines of local deities, including one for the supernatural Siri beings, or *sirikulu*.¹ Important centers of Siri worship are Bolyottu, which is believed to be the primordial Siri *ālaḍe*, Hiriyadka, Kavathar, Nandolige, Urumbidottu, Pangala, and Daregudde. The first Siri *jātre* to take place in the course of the festival season is that at Ermalu, while Kandevu is the last. As a rule, only non-Brahmins get “possessed” by the *sirikulu* during the Siri *jātre*, a phenomenon which is usually referred to as “having *darśana*.” During the Siri *jātre*, then, male and female performers, known as *kumāras* and *siris*, who are already initiated into the ritual tradition, start singing from the Siri *pāḍdana* and get “possessed” by the mythical Siri character with whom they identify.² The *kumāra* (also: *kumāra patri*), a man who identifies with the character of the same name, i.e. Siri’s son, controls the ritual proceedings and serves as a priest.³ Each of the *siris*, on the other hand, identifies with one of the *pāḍdana*’s female characters, usually Siri, Sonne, Giṇḍe, Abbaga or Dāraga, whose role she enacts for the duration of the possession ritual. The *sirikulu* actually constitute an independent category of female supernatural beings, or spirits, usually seven in number: Siri, Sonne, Giṇḍe, Abbaga, Dāraga, Dāru and Sāmu.⁴

While most oral narrative traditions in Tuḷunāḍu evolve around male heroes or deities, the Siri narrative and ritual tradition focuses on women, their manifold social relations and their perspective on the world: the protagonists of the Siri *pāḍdana* are all female, except for Siri’s son Kumāra, and so is the majority of the participants in the Siri possession ritual. Furthermore, the Siri tradition is open to women of a wide range of castes, age groups, and social and economic backgrounds, thereby providing them with an opportunity to interact with each other, and share their stories. Hence, feminist Gayatri Navada regards the Siri cult as a “beautiful concept of empowerment through Culture” (Hegde 2012), a protected space where women can express themselves, and stress their womanhood. Just like any other oral text, the Siri *pāḍdana* is embedded in a specific social, cultural and religious context but it is

-
- 1 The OTD gives the following definitions of the word *ālaḍe*: “A complex of five or more Bhuta shrines especially of Brahma, Naaga, Kseetrappaala, Rakteeshvari, Nandigooṇa and others”; “The original habitation of Bhumas and Nagas.” Note the use of Sanskrit terminology where ritual activities are concerned, albeit within the context of indigenous Tuḷuva culture.
 - 2 Whenever I refer to the mythical characters of the Siri *pāḍdana*, their names will begin with a capital letter; while relating to the performers, i.e. the *siris* and *kumāras*, the terms are set in italics, beginning with a minuscule.
 - 3 Claus (1979a: 36) points out that „[t]he proportion of male and female cult members (one to four) roughly corresponds to the number of male and female spirits.” Judging by my own observations, this still seems to be the case.
 - 4 Depending on whom you ask, the question concerning the identity of the seven *sirikulu* is answered very differently. Some informants identified Siri, Sonne, Giṇḍe, Abbaga, Dāraga, Cennaga and Celavaga as the *sirikulu*, while others said they were Siri, Dāru, Sonne, Giṇḍe, Abbaga, Dāraga and Kumāra. It seems curious that some performers considered Kumāra as one of the *sirikulu* although they are said to be group of exclusively female deities.

not the property of a single person, or community. Still, there are usually certain individuals or social groups who keep the oral tradition in question alive, partly because it helps them create an identity for themselves. This is true for the devotees of the *sirikulu*, and especially for those who perform in the Siri ritual, the *siris* and *kumāras*. The Siri *pāḍḍana* is sung not only in the ritual context of the Siri *jātre* but also as part of the domestic *illecida daliya*, a ritual performed to identify a *siri*, or to initiate a novice into the Siri tradition, and also in secular settings: (1) in the field work context: the *pāḍḍana* is sung by groups of women pulling out paddy seedlings; (2) as a pastime: while doing household chores, or at leisure in the evenings; (3) in an induced context: an artificial context created to record an uninterrupted rendering of the *pāḍḍana*, e.g. for purpose of detailed textual research.

Research on the Siri tradition

The Siri *pāḍḍana* and its ritual context, especially the phenomenon of female “mass possession”, have drawn the attention of psychologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and Indologists. A detailed outline of the history of research on the Siri tradition, especially on the Siri *pāḍḍana* texts, is presented by folklorist K. Chinnappa Gowda (2017). As a matter of fact, the story of Siri has inspired many literary works, as well as films, (dance-) dramas and *yakṣagāṇa* (traditional Kannaḍa folk theater), thereby expanding the popularity and profile of the Siri narrative (Gowda 2017: 63f). Remarkably, the early missionaries at Mangalore who published the first compilations of Tuḷu *pāḍḍana* texts at the end of the 19th century seem to have overlooked the Siri *pāḍḍana* and ritual tradition altogether. A first prose rendering of the Siri *pāḍḍana* in Kannaḍa language was released by Polali Sheenappa Heggade in 1952, entitled *Satyanāpurada Akkarasu Puṇjedi* (Gowda 2017: 64). The first Siri text to be recorded, analyzed and translated was collected by Amritha Someshwara in 1972 but published only decades later, in 1997, as part of an anthology entitled *Tuḷu Pāḍḍana Sampuṭa* (see Gowda 2017: 66f). Subsequently, three other volumes, namely *The Siri epic as sung by Gopala Naika* (Honko et al. 1998), *Giḍikere Rāmakka Muggērti Kaṭṭida Siri Pāḍḍana* (Navada 1999), and *Kargi Śeḍṭi Hāḍiruva Sirikāḡyālōka* (Alva 2009) followed. The first of these three works presents the Tuḷu text, as transliteration in Roman script with diacritics, with English translation on the facing pages. The other two volumes mentioned present the Tuḷu original in Kannaḍa script without translation and with Kannaḍa translation, respectively, on the facing pages.

Besides these published texts, two renderings of the Siri *pāḍḍana*, one sung by Shyama Shetty and another by Ramakka of Ujire, have been collected around the year 1999 on the initiative of Lauri Honko, i.e. within the framework of an Indo-Finnish oral epics project. He sought to build a large corpus of Siri texts, collecting them from singers of different castes and communities, both male and female, in order to make possible more detailed comparative analyses and intertextual studies. The oral texts obtained from Shyama Shetty and Ramakka have not been published yet. The video and audio files as well as their transliterations can be accessed at the Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts (RRC), Udupi. Three Siri texts collected by anthropologist Peter J. Claus in the late 1960s and mid-1970s, but never published by him as independent text editions, were made – at least partly – accessible for the first time in the scope of an article called “Three Unpublished Versions of the Siri

Pāḍḍana: An Analysis” (Schuster-Löhlau 2017). Another research article composed by folklorist Ashok Alva (2017) presents and compares important passages of different Siri texts, with some of the excerpts being available in English translation for the first time as well.

Apart from recording and, in some cases, publishing different Siri texts, numerous scholars from various disciplines have studied the complex Siri narrative and ritual tradition carefully, shedding light on its various layers (ritual, cultural, social, historical) and intertextual links. For example, Mark A. Nichter (1977), a medical anthropologist, has studied mainly the curative aspects of the Siri ritual tradition, whereas social anthropologist P.J. Claus (1975, 1979a, 1986, 1993, 1999, 2001, 2004) has pointed out the social and religious implications of the Siri tradition in regard to Tuḷuva society. He, too, has stressed the ritual’s therapeutic effects, especially in his early works, while he later focused on text-related aspects, and questions of “folk literary criticism.” B.A. Viveka Rai (1985), a folklorist, has critically analyzed the Siri *pāḍḍana* in regard to its form and ritual context, providing a summary of Siri’s story rather than an original text. He proposes a “rationalistic” approach to the Siri narrative tradition in order to open up new modes of understanding folk religious practices and beliefs (see Gowda 2017: 67). Furthermore, Rai shows how the events and characters of the Siri *pāḍḍana* reflect the stratification and peculiarities of Tuḷuva society, and he too stresses the therapeutic value of the Siri possession ritual (Gowda 2017: 67f). Several years later, Rai was part of the Indo-Finnish research team headed by folklorist Lauri Honko that documented an exceptionally long and elaborate Siri text (Honko et al. 1998). Gowda (2003, 2005), who was a member of the team as well, has published several works on Tuḷu performance and worship traditions, and worked on various aspects of the Siri tradition too. In 2013, the psychologists Valsarj Prabha Blessy and Savitha presented an interesting study exploring the connection between “cultural beliefs and spiritual wellbeing” among women who participated in the Siri possession ritual at Hiriyaḍka. More recently, a collection of articles entitled *Oral traditions in South India: Essays on Tulu Oral Epics* was published by Heidrun Brückner and B.A. Viveka Rai in 2017(a), including three articles on the Siri tradition.

Methodology and theoretical approach

The present study seeks to explore the link between *pāḍḍana* texts and their (social, cultural) relevance for (and in) Tuḷuva society, by looking at the texts as sources of individual and shared identities. While the focus of the textual analysis will be on five, published and unpublished, texts appertaining to the Siri *pāḍḍana* tradition, other oral epic texts are to be included for comparative purposes as well, namely the Tuḷu *pāḍḍana* traditions of Kōṭṭi-Cennaya and Koḍḍabbu, as well as the Kannaḍa oral epic of Male Mādēśvara. As you can see, I differentiate between “(oral) text” and “(oral) tradition”. When I speak of text/texts, I refer to the different “renditions” or “versions” of an oral epic, which are sung differently by different singers. Tradition, in my opinion, concerns the textual corpus and its transmission as well as the performative, i.e. the ritual and cultural, practices closely connected to the text(s). The term “tradition”, then, is the more inclusive one of the two; both “text” and “tradition” form a continuum rather than being mutually exclusive.

The textual analysis of a corpus of altogether eight, published and unpublished, oral epic texts is supplemented with field material collected during several research stays in Tuḷunaḍu

over the last seven years (2011–18). Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to usefully combine an Indological, i.e. philological-textual, and an ethnological, i.e. ethnographic-empirical, approach in order to more fully understand the connection between oral epic texts and their ritual performance, as well as the significance and function of oral epic traditions today. In contrast to the women-centered Siri *pāḍḍana* tradition, the three other oral epic traditions discussed in this study feature male protagonists. It is interesting to see which themes and motifs dominate in each *pāḍḍana* tradition. Further, special attention will be given to the way female and male characters and their interactions are represented in the different oral epic texts, also in regard to inter-caste/community and intra-caste/community relations: Will there be a discernable difference to be made out between the female-oriented Siri *pāḍḍana* tradition and the other, male-dominated, oral epic traditions?

In the course of analysis, the oral texts are examined in regard to their inner and outer structure, the depiction of the protagonists and their relationships, key scenes and motifs, characteristic formulaic expressions, and (poetic) style. Concerning the questions of the value and significance of oral epic traditions in contemporary times, it seems most useful to seek the opinions and knowledge of those who are a part of the given tradition. Therefore, I rely on ethnographic data, in particular interviews, collected during several field trips to the homes of performers, to Siri *ālāḍes* and Siri *jātres*, in order to find answers to these questions. Whenever possible, I will provide the singers' comments and opinions on the text passages under examination. This inclusion of the emic perspective to respective oral epic traditions can be regarded as an attempt to balance my own, etic approach.

The importance and future of the Siri tradition

Another part of the thesis is concerned with the question of the possible future of the Siri tradition. In general, oral epic traditions play a crucial role regarding the world view and the self-image of the social groups who maintain and continue the performance tradition in question. Moreover, oral traditions appear to be involved in the constitution of personal and collective identities. The concept of collective or group-identity is closely related to the idea of a cultural memory, which is comprised of a “canon” and an “archive”: The canon is built “on a small number of normative and formative texts, places, persons, artifacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated and communicated in ever new presentations and performances” (A. Assmann 2008: 276), including oral epics. The archive, in contrast, is a reference memory, which is constituted of specific cultural institutions. These have been established to “preserve and store documents, artifacts and relicts that have fallen out of use (...) but which are nevertheless deemed interesting or important enough as not to let them vanish altogether” (A. Assmann 2008: 280). In my understanding, oral epic traditions could fall into both categories, or at least seem to share characteristics of both these modes of the cultural memory, and are thus relevant in regard to the creation and maintenance of collective, shared, identities. While Honko (1998: 28), too, stresses the social and cultural importance of (oral) epic traditions, he does so in terms of considering them as symbols, as cultural icons representing certain groups: “Epics are great narratives about exemplars, (...) excel in length, power of expression and significance of content over other narratives and function as a source of identity representations in the traditional community or group receiving the epic.” While

oral epics apparently function as sources of identity, they also reflect a given social reality, and reinforce this society's world view, norms and values; in some cases, however, the social hierarchy is reversed, and an alternative way of life, or history, presented. For this reason, it seems safe to say that the influence is mutual, and in the process of negotiation, texts and discourses change. However, the singers of oral epics usually state that "their" text is sacred and thus cannot have (been) changed over the years (comparative analyses, however, have shown that they do change), which then raises questions of representation, variability and legitimacy.

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that oral narrative traditions cannot be understood isolated from their respective context(s), thus it seems worthwhile to study the different functions of oral texts in different contexts. Honko (1998: 14) has identified three functional aspects of oral epics, namely religious, socio-ethical, and national. Concerning the last issue, it may be interesting to pursue the question whether the Siri *pāddana* can be seen as a symbol and source of Tuḷuva culture, and if so, in which ways it represents Tuḷuva identity. Therefore, it appears useful to include other Tuḷu and Kannaḍa oral epics, namely those of Kōṭi-Cennaya, Koḍḍabbu, and Male Mādēśvara, in order to be able to compare the texts.

The intended purpose of this work

First, I would like to stress the value of living oral traditions for the study of oral literature, including processes of oral composition. Many oral texts can be considered as works of (oral) literature, poetry, and song or music, i.e. as (creative) art, in their own right. Some of the *pāddana* singers of Tuḷunāḍu are great editors, like Shyama Shetty, who sings the episode of Kumāra's birth in a special fashion that seems to be modeled after the narrative of Koḍḍabbu's supernatural birth, while other singers possess exceptional skill and creativity, like Kargi Shedti, who is able to sing and create oral poetry impromptu. In addition, oral epics provide valuable information in regard to linguistics and the use of language. For instance, a large number of oral epic texts utilize archaic words and expressions, thereby preserving idioms which would be long forgotten otherwise. In addition, the texts offer insight into the way folk artists make use of a given language, for example in regard to a narrative's poetic style and vivid imagery. Furthermore, the oral (epic) texts reflect the social and cultural context in which they are embedded, and can thus provide us information about the world view underlying the narrative in question. Therefore, the texts can be considered as meta-texts that comment on people's beliefs, ethos and way of life.

Moreover, by taking into account oral texts we may be able to get a more balanced and differentiated view of history because the texts usually look at the world from the perspective of the common, or the oppressed, people. In that sense, they preserve a kind of "counter narrative", or alternative history. Lastly, it seems desirable to make oral texts, whose literary and cultural value is often underrated, accessible to a wider, i.e. international, audience by the means of interdisciplinary, elaborate and careful studies, but also by translating them into other Indian and foreign languages. My work is intended to bring together text and context of different South Indian oral traditions asking whether, or rather how, oral epic traditions function as sources and vehicles of personal, social, and cultural identity. I especially concentrate on the question whether the Siri *pāddana* can be interpreted in terms of an

alternative account of Tuḷuva history, or “counter history”, i.e. an account of events from a distant history told from “below”, and, even more importantly, from a rather unique female perspective. The fact that the Siri tradition is highly women-oriented appears to be part of the reason why the Siri *pāḍḍana* evades Blackburn and Flueckiger’s (1989) basic classificatory system, which labels (oral) epics either as “martial”, “sacrificial”, or “romantic”: Often, epics that feature one or more major female protagonists fit into the category of “romantic” or “sacrificial”; in the case of the latter, the heroine usually sacrifices herself in the end, for example, by immolating herself after her husband’s premature death, becoming a *sati*. Siri, however, is not one of those heroines. In fact, the Siri *pāḍḍana* does not fit into Blackburn and Flueckiger’s scheme at all. For this reason, I think it is useful to ask why, and in which ways, it eludes such a classification. It remains to be seen whether the other texts studied here elude this categorization as well, and if yes, which reasons can be held accountable for this fact.

Apart from the “localization” of the narratives in local Tuḷu culture (with the exception of the oral epic of Male Mādēśvara), family, kinship and gender relations, as well as aspects of procreation, e.g. fertility and barrenness, play crucial roles in the texts. How are the interactions between men and women, elder and younger family members, members of different castes etc. depicted in different texts? How are women and men portrayed? Where do conflicts arise, and how are they solved? From where do female and male power, respectively, issue? Other constellations of characters and motifs may prevail in the epic of Male Mādēśvara, though. Moreover, I will address the issue of gender norms, and the question of their legitimacy; it seems useful to examine whether the oral epics serve as reference texts, or even as bases of legitimacy in regard to certain beliefs and practices. Altogether, these are the three major questions I would like to answer in this study: (1) Are oral epic traditions still relevant and meaningful today, and if yes, which function(s) do they have? (2) Can oral epics be regarded as sources of personal, social, and cultural identity, and if yes, in which ways? (3) Can, and should, the oral epic traditions studied here be interpreted in terms of alternative narratives, or counter-histories?

The structure of the study

This study is divided into six major parts: The first part is the present introductory chapter that seeks to acquaint the reader with the subject and the intended purpose of this study. The second part provides the theoretical framework for the analysis of the different oral epic texts. It includes each a chapter on the contemporary conceptualization of (Indian) identity, the history of research on (oral) epic traditions and the connection between oral epic traditions and identity. In this context, important elements of the analytical paradigm, in particular gender, (personal, collective and cultural) identity and representation, are discussed in detail. The third part of the study, then, talks about the nature and background of the oral traditions selected for this work, as well as the combined Indological (textual) and ethnographic approach I have chosen.

Subsequently, the fourth part is concerned with the analysis of eight oral epic texts (five Siri texts, a Koḍḍabbu text, a Kōṭi-Cennaya text, and a Male Mādēśvara text) from the Tuḷu-speaking region and the southern, mainly Kannaḍa-speaking, part of Karnataka: Initially, the

Siri *pāḍḍana* is examined in regard to its quality as a Tuḷu epic, taking a closer look at various concepts that appear to be specific of Tuḷuva culture and its underlying ideology. Next, the main protagonist, Siri, is studied in more detail, exploring how she is represented in the texts and in which ways she exemplifies various Tuḷuva concepts, ideals and peculiarities. Then, we analyze how gender is constructed in the Siri *pāḍḍana* by the means of stereotypes and binary opposites (husband-wife, wife-prostitute, elder brother-younger sister etc.), as well as in the other Tuḷu *pāḍḍanas* of Koḍḍabbu and Kōṭi-Cennaya, and compare these texts to the depiction of gender roles and ideals in the Kannaḍa oral epic of Male Mādēśvara. In addition, we identify the sources from which female and male power, respectively, issue according to the different oral epic texts.

In the fifth part of this dissertation, we learn in which ways oral traditions can function as sources of personal and collective, as well as of cultural identity. An important tool in providing a link among the three is the notion of memory, especially the idea of a cultural memory that helps establish and maintain cultural identity. Special importance is also given to the autobiographic narratives of both male and female performers of the Siri tradition, who explain what it means to be a *siri* or *kumāra*, respectively, and how their role as a medium of the supernatural and their knowledge of the sacred Siri *pāḍḍana*, which provides them with a normative framework, has affected their life and world view. In a next step, we take a close look at the changes the Siri narrative and ritual tradition has undergone over the years and decades, and try to identify the internal and external circumstances that have contributed to these developments. Discourses on the Siri tradition include, among others, ideas of female propriety in accordance with middle and upper class/caste values and norms as well as a mostly negative media coverage of the Siri festival in the past. Media representations went as far as sexualizing and criminalizing the *siris*, which has resulted in a lasting negative image of the entire tradition. In addition, educational and medical discourses have tended to rationalize and pathologize the female performers' unusual behavior, i.e. their religious service, apart from reducing the women themselves to epitomes of the poor, illiterate and vulgar woman in need of empowerment. The sixth and last part is dedicated to the findings of this study, especially concerning the question whether oral epic traditions can be interpreted as sources of individual and shared identities.

Theoretical Framework

1. The conceptualization of “identity”

The term “identity” was first introduced and applied in the field of psychology. Today, however, it is used rather excessively by a number of disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, political sciences and literary criticism, but also in a popular scientific way and in everyday life. According to the English dictionary Merriam Webster, the term “identity” has several meanings. I reproduce only two definitions here, those most relevant in our case: Identity either refers to a “sameness of essential or generic character in different instances”, also in the sense of oneness, i.e. “sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing”, or to “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual”, i.e. individuality.

In terms of etymology, identity stems from Middle French *identité*, which in turn goes back to Late Latin *identitat-*, *identitas*, probably from Latin *identidem*, a contraction of the expression *idem et idem*, literally, “same and same” (Merriam Webster). That is, identity is understood in the sense of “sameness”, “being identical” in this context. It is along this line of thought that early models have focused on the supposedly static, ontological nature of identity (Birk, Neumann 2002: 120), revolving around the idea that each person possesses a set of essential and unique characteristics, an unchanging core, which will always remain the same even while one will pass through the different stages of life. This rather essentialist concept is widely rejected today, with contemporary models stressing the processuality of identity as well as its social construction, conceiving of identity as multiple, flexible and fragmented (Birk, Neumann 2002: 120). Which mechanisms are at work in the process of constituting identity, on the level of both the individual and the collective?

1.1 Post-modern models of individual and group identities

We can broadly distinguish between three levels of identity, namely personal identity, social identity and cultural identity. More generally, we can differentiate between personal, i.e. biographical, identity (diachronic) and social identity, which is role-specific and comprised of various types of group identity, or “we-identity” (collective identity, synchronic). External markers of personal identity include a person’s physical appearance and his or her behavior, such as body image, character traits, (body) language and so on; social identity, in contrast, mainly comprises an individual’s affiliation to one or more social groups and the values, norms, practices and symbols shared by them (Broszinsky-Schwabe 2011: 44). Being part of a “we-group” is usually associated with a feeling of belonging, or being at home. Everyone of us belongs to several so called “we-groups”, including, for example, one’s family, gender,

age group, class, occupation, religious community, ethnic group, and so on (Broszinsky-Schwabe 2011: 44). A post-modern conceptualization of identity, then, would be characterized as multiple, fluid and ever-changing. As each individual possesses several, and often fragmented, identities it appears somewhat challenging to create a coherent identity. Most of the time, we realize identity in communicative verbal interaction as well as in (retrospective) biographical narratives (Kresic 2006: 40), in the process of which we are able to sort and make sense of our multiple, sometimes contradicting identities, constructing a consistent image of our self.¹ Marijana Kresic (2006: 130), a professor of applied linguistics, actually takes the view that “self-narration” (Selbstnarration), i.e. autobiographical narration, is the main modus of constructing identity and our “being in language” enables us to do so. In this sense, language is the medium which provides us with a discursive framework to invent, reinterpret and negotiate our identity.

Moreover, identity is not possible without alterity, as “I would never come to know myself and be conscious of my separate individual identity were it not that I become aware of others like me: consciousness of other selves is necessary for consciousness of self or self-consciousness. The individual has therefore a social origin in experience” (Joseph 2004: 8). Furthermore, the “encounter with language raises us above mere immediacy of experience and immersion in the current of experience. This enables us to form a conception of self rather than simply *being* ourselves” (Joseph 2004: 11). Kresic (2006: 66) argues along the same line of thought, stating that identity should be interpreted as a bundle of interactively created self-ascriptions. In other words, language is the medium through which we, as human beings, express ourselves and share our experiences and feelings, i.e. we actively construct our reality.

In this study, then, we rely on the assumption that individual and group identities are socially and historico-culturally constructed, open to interpretation and negotiation. Although the meaning of a word, in the sense of a sign, symbol or icon, may seem natural, pre-given, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (de Saussure 1967). Therefore, the meaning which may emerge from the relation between the two is constructed, and language is the medium in which we do so. Language, according to the well-known sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2013a: xvii), is “the privileged medium in which we ‘make sense’ of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language. In consequence, language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings.” The production of meaning, then, can be conceived of as a process, a cultural practice, that is open-ended and fluid.

What is more, the ways in which we produce meaning are linked to the notions of culture and identity: “Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we ‘belong’ – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups (...)” (Hall 2013a: xix). This is an essential question which will be addressed and discussed in the context of analyzing the different religious, social and cultural practices linked to the oral-performative Siri tradition and

1 In contradistinction to “identity,” self-awareness, self-conception, self-appraisal and so on are gathered under the umbrella of “the self,” in the sense that the “I” is serving as the object here, is reflexive.

other such traditions of Tuḷunāḍu, as well as the world view underlying the practices and narratives. In addition, these deliberations concern the conceptualization of gender identity and its impact on Tuḷuva women, their behavior, relationships and self-perception as presented in Tuḷu oral texts (see chapters 6, 7, 8, 9). I have chosen to discuss the issue of identity and language rather elaborately because oral epics are a medium which is by definition rooted in spoken language, in performance, and therefore seems predestined to serve as a means of creating and reiterating, but also negotiating, identity.

1.2 Conceptualizing gender identity

Identity is created, negotiated, interpreted and re-interpreted within a performative-discursive framework. John E. Joseph (2004: 20), a professor of applied linguistics, points out that the “notion of identity as a ‘performative discourse’ has become a powerful one in recent years.” He further observes that it has “become commonplace to assert that group identities in general – be they national, sexual, generational or what have you – are claims made through performance. An identity exists by virtue of the assertions of it people make” (ibid.). This approach is also applicable in regard to gender, with the renowned philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler being the most prominent and controversially discussed representative of the theory of “performing gender”.

Butler’s theory is based on the presumption that “[a]ll bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no ‘natural body’ that pre-exists its cultural inscription” (Salih 2002: 62). Yet, gender is not simply something we have or are, but something we do; we are “doing” gender rather than “being” gender, consciously or unconsciously, according to Butler’s argumentation in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler (1990: 33f) defines the act, or more precisely, the continued and repeated process, of performing gender as follows: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” What is important here is the assertion that we cannot freely choose the gender we enact, as we are born into an already existing “regulatory frame” from which we can then select gender styles and desired behavioral patterns. Performativity, in general, is understood as a regularized repetition of norms through political, social, cultural, verbal and bodily acts, thereby actively creating meaning and characterized by reflexivity, repetition, conventionality and stereotype (Tambiah 1986 cited in Brückner, Schömbucher 2003: 621).

Sara Salih (2002: 64) points out that gender identities too “are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language. If you like, it is not that an identity ‘does’ discourse or language, but the other way around – language and discourse ‘do’ gender.” Altogether, the notions of performativity and “doing gender/identity” are of great importance in the context of identity formation and the production of meaning. Furthermore, they underlie all kinds of verbal and non-verbal communicative interaction and social practices. For this reason, the concepts may prove useful in the process of analyzing how followers of the Siri narrative and ritual tradition (and other Tuḷu oral-performative traditions) conceptualize and reaffirm identity and create their own (social, cultural) space. They may do so in the context of the sacred Siri ritual or in the context of being