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Srilata Raman

THE SPACES IN BETWEEN: RAMALINGA SWAMIGAL (1823–1874), HUNGER, AND RELIGION IN COLONIAL INDIA

You are food and the pleasure within it. (Ramalinga Swamigal, *Tiruvaruṭpā*, 6.45.4[1])

> This is how hunger begins:
> In the morning you wake lively,
> Then weakness,
> Then boredom,
> Then comes the loss
> of quick reason's strength—
> Then comes calm
> And then horror.
>
> (Daniil Kharms, *Today I Wrote Nothing*[2])

I wish to thank the two reviewers for *History of Religions*, who enabled me to reexamine and restructure this essay considerably; V. Geetha, in discussions with whom my understanding of Ramalinga Swamigal has been and continues to be constantly enriched; and Christoph Emmrich, for his insightful and strategic interventions that have helped shape this work.

[1] "Cō̱ṟṟā̱ṉaic cōṟṟil uṟum cukattiṉāṉai"; Ūraṉ Aṭikaā, *Tiruvaruṭpā Āṟām Tirumuṟai* (Vaṭalūr: Camaraca Caṉmārkka Ārāycci Nilayam, 1989), 730. All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

[2] Daniil Kharms, *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, trans. Matvei Yankelevich (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), 123.

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On May 23, 1867, an inaugural ceremony took place in Vadalur (Vaṭalūr), a small and dusty town in the South Arcot district of what was then the Madras Presidency. The occasion was the founding of a charitable feeding house by the religious poet Ramalinga Swamigal (Irāmaliṅka Cuvāmikaḷ).[3] The launch of the almshouse prefigured his other socioreligious activities, including the start of a new religious movement, the Association of the Equal, Pure, and True Path (*Camaraca Cutta Caṉmārkka Caṅkam* < *Samarasa Śuddha Sanmārga Saṅgha*). On the occasion of the founding of the almshouse, a text was read that subsequently, in the later canonization of Ramalinga's oeuvre, came to be regarded as the central text of his religious ideology. This text was titled *The Conduct of Compassion toward Living Beings* (*Cīvakāruṇya* < *Jīvakāruṇya Oḻukkam*). The history of this document indicates that it was very important to Ramalinga Swamigal. It appears to have been conceived of, originally, as an oral discourse (which would also account for its highly repetitive nature), one that he then expounded on and expanded subsequently into three sections. It remained incomplete till the end of his life.[4] The first section of the text also contains its core teachings. The second and third sections of the text elaborate on the first but essentially do not introduce any new elements.

The Conduct, as I shall now refer to it, begins as a religious, theological text focusing on the kind of ethical conduct that can lead to the obtainment of one's soul (*āṉmalāpam* < *ātmalābha*). The core prescription of the text is that the highest level of ethical behavior, that which also bestows God's grace (*aruḷ*) on one and thereby ultimate liberation, should be based on compassion toward all beings.[5] The conduct of compassion is defined as a life lived in

[3] Tamil popular personal and city names have been reproduced in their popular English spelling, with the Tamil transliteration, following the system of the *Madras Tamil Lexicon*, given in parentheses in the first instance. Tamil theological terms of Sanskrit origin have been given in both Tamil and Sanskrit. Less well-known Tamil words are all transliterated.

[4] The history of the text is dealt with briefly in A. Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, ed., *Tiru Aruṭpā, 2-ām puttakam: Vacaṉap pakuti* (Chennai: Aruṭpā Vaḷākam, Tiyākarācapuram, 1959), 64, where he points out that we do not have any original, handwritten manuscript for this work, only those transcribed in the handwriting of those close to Ramalinga Swamigal. Piḷḷai, therefore, prepared his edition with the help of four of these transcribed manuscripts. Further details are provided by Ūraṉ Aṭikaḷ, *Tiruvaruṭpā Uṟainaṭaip pakuti* (Chennai: Vartamāṉaṉ Patippakam, 1997), 22–25. The text's origins lie in the period when Ramalinga Swamigal was still living in Karuṅkuḻi, before 1867. On May 23, 1867, at the inaugural ceremony of the almshouse (called the *Cattiya Taruma Cālai* < *Satyadharmaśāla*) in Vadalur, the then extant version of the text was read by him. The version of the text that we now have was first published five years after his vanishing, in 1879, by Pu. Pē. Kiruṣṇacāmi Nāyakar. The title page indicates that the first edition was published at the private press of Capā. Māṇikka Piḷḷai at the request of several well-wishers, the foremost among them Caṅku Ceṭṭiyār. The edition of the text referenced herein is Ā. Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vaāāalār aruḷiya tiru aruṭpā vacanap pakuti* (Chennai: Nām Tamiḻar Pattipakam, 2010).

[5] On the semantic expansion of the concept of *aruḷ* in medieval devotional poetry and its significance as a marker of Tamil Śaivism, see Anthony Gardner Harris Jr., *Obtaining Grace: Locating the Origin of a Tamil Śaiva Precept* (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008).

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worship of the divine, a worship undertaken through the human compassion (literally, "melting") that one living being feels for another.[6] The nature of the different kinds of suffering that require the practice of compassion is debated, and seven are listed: hunger, killing, afflictions, thirst, poverty, fear, and longings.[7] Of these, Ramalinga Swami concludes that the one that should be tackled primarily, which generates the greatest salvific benefit for the practitioner of compassion, is hunger—indeed, one who tackles the hunger of others will tackle all other forms of suffering too.[8] This reasoning eventually leads to the crucial section of the text on the nature of hunger. In the long disquisition on the nature of hunger the text veers into another, more activist and at the same time more lyrical mode where it makes an impassioned plea for alleviating hunger. Inserted at this point is the following paragraph, describing the situation of death due to starvation, which is the focus of this essay:

> When living beings experience increasing hunger the living intelligence ceases to shine forth and becomes clouded. As it dims the intelligence within the intelligence, the light of God is dimmed; as that dims the spirit (*puruṭatattuvam* < *puruṣatattva*) becomes exhausted; when that becomes exhausted matter (*pirakirutitattuvam* < *prakṛtitattva*) is dulled; as it dulls the qualities (*kuṇaṅkaḷ* < *guṇa*s) are separated; then the organ of perception (*maṉacu* < *manas*) is shaken and shatters; the organ of intellect (*putti* < *buddhi*) is ruined; thought (*cittam* < *citta*) is polluted; egoity (*akamkāram* < *ahaṃkāra*) is destroyed; the life breaths (*pirāṇaṅkaḷ* < *prāṇāḥ*) swirl, the elements (*pūtaṅkaḷ* < *bhūtāni*) all swelter, the humors of wind (*vātam* < *vāta*), choler (*pittam* < *pitta*) and phlegm (*cileśumaṉ* < *śleṣman*) change their states; the eye is like a hollow filled with cotton wool; the ear deafens, filled up with an echo; the tongue dries up and becomes parched; the nose becomes swollen and hot; the skin thins and loses all feeling; the hands and limbs, exhausted, become limp; the voice changes timbre and slurs; the teeth become loose; the excretory organs wither; the body darkens; the hair becomes wild; the muscles soften and waste away; the channels of the body lose their firmness and become soft; the bones darken and the joints break up; the heart burns; the brain shrinks; the sperm cooks and dries up; the liver is depleted; blood and water dry up; the flesh becomes soft and loses its nature; the stomach hurts and swells, painful sensations increase; the signs and experiences that foreshadow death increase. All living beings experience these afflictions due to hunger.[9]

[6] Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 66: "āṉāl cīvakāruṇiyav oḻukkam eṉpa teṉṉeṉil: cīvarkaāukkuc cīvarkaā viṣayamāka uṇṭākiṉṟa āṉma urukkattaik koṇṭu teyva vaḻipāṭu ceytu vāḻtal eṉṟaṟiya vēṇṭum."

[7] The second section of *The Conduct* (Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 101) has a long definitional passage on these different kinds of social suffering.

[8] Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 74–75: "pacikkut tayaviṉāl ākāraṅ koṭukkat tuṇintavaṉ vēṟuvakaiyāl cīvarkaḷ imcai paṭṭ aḻivataṟku cammatikkavē māṭṭāṉ; ākaliṉum paciyāl varun tuṉpattai nivartti ceyvikkiṟa tarumattai aṭikkaṭi valiyuṟuttuvat eṉṟaṟiya vēṇṭum."

[9] Ibid., 83–84. The terminology of this passage relies on the reader's familiarity with classical *Sāṃkhya* categories as much as it does on Āyurvedic ones. I shall return to this point later in the

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There are, of course, many ways of attempting to contextualize such a passage within both Ramalinga Swamigal's literary output (which was prodigious) and his life. For the purposes of this essay, I shall venture only into those contextualizations that, first, foreground the passage as a literary representation within a history of literary representations of hunger and the response to hunger and death and dying in Tamil literature. The reason for this is because it is only through seeing Ramalinga Swamigal's narrative of hunger as part of a larger literary landscape of such representations that predate his own writing that we can begin to make sense at all of these extraordinary yet obscure textual passages. At the same time, it is also in this presence of the past, as we shall see, that his uniqueness is asserted most vigorously. Thus, it is this very contextualization and historicization that will enable us to see what Ramalinga Swamigal does differently and also to consider how such a contextualization might enable us to make some general, albeit somewhat speculative, observations about the transformation of such representations in early Tamil modernity. With this in mind, this essay is divided into two broad sections: we begin, after a biographical sketch of Ramalinga Swamigal, with an account of how hunger and starvation, on the one hand, and the alleviation of such hunger, on the other, are portrayed in classical Tamil literature. The final part of this first section deals with the theme of dying, as we focus on understanding the passage quoted above.

These sections integrate what Ramalinga Swamigal himself has to say on these themes and enable us to see how he deploys the same tropes as the classical texts in other ways. The second section of the article turns its attention to *The Conduct*, to the organization of the text, its genre, the authorial voice, and issues of the self-representation of Ramalinga Swamigal. In doing so, the article finally suggests that Ramalinga Swamigal positioned himself at a kind of border space between elite, normative, and nonelite standards of religiosity, between the premodern and the modern, that made his religious ideology a form of so-called border thinking in colonial modernity.

I

THE LIFE

Who, to begin with, was the man speaking and writing so eloquently about the distress of the dying in the nineteenth-century Tamil region? Ramalinga Swamigal was born in 1823 in the Tamil country in Marudur (Marutūr), a small village near the famous Śaivite religious center of Chidambaram

article. What exactly is meant by the terms *pantam, narampu, nāṭi* (which I translate as "ligaments," "muscles," and "channels of the heart," respectively) can, to a certain extent, only be conjectured. On the problems of translating physiological and medical Āyurvedic terminology, see Dominic Wujastyk, *The Roots of Ayurveda: Selections from Sanskrit Medical Writings* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998), 38.

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(Citamparam). His family moved around following the death of his father and finally came to Madras, then the fastest growing urban center of the Madras Presidency, when he was still a child. Ramalinga Swamigal lived the first thirty years of his life in Madras, where he gradually acquired the erudition of a traditional scholar of Śaivite religious texts and classical Tamil literature. Disciples flocked to him and he was part of a traditional scholarly community. Thus far, it was a conventional life though his later hagiographies hint at the unusual and the miraculous that dot this life and presage the greatness to come. In 1858, at age thirty-five, Ramalinga Swamigal decided to leave Madras permanently and commenced on a journey whose details are unclear. He seems to have led a wanderer's life before eventually returning to the territory of his birth. He finally settled in Vadalur, in the Arcot area near where he had been born. In 1865 he established there a religious institution, whose tenets reflect broadly, yet only superficially, the impulses of socioreligious reform movements emerging on a pan-Indian scale at this period: a move away from "ritualism" to a meaning-centered congregational life and the general tendency toward monism reflected in the central religious teaching, which was the belief in an ultimate divine to be worshipped in an aniconic form as the "Great Light of Compassion," *Aruṭperuñcōti*. Feeding and education of the poor seem to have become the main social priorities. In 1867 he established a charitable feeding house for the poor. The growth of Vadalur as a religious center in this period and all the activities at the almshouse appeared to have created a need in Ramalinga Swamigal for some solitude. In 1870 he left Vadalur for a small village near it called Mēṭṭukuppam. Nevertheless, in 1872, on the basis of his instructions, a temple was built in Vadalur. Its foundations had the form of an eight-pointed star, and it consisted of a central hall in which the community that had formed around him could carry out daily worship in front of a lamp. The temple was named the Hall of True Wisdom (*Cattiya Ñāṉa Capai* < *Satya Jñāna Sabhā*). By 1873 though, Ramalinga Swamigal seemed to distance himself from the organization he had attempted to build up. An important date in the fledging religious organization had been the celebration of the *kārtikkai vrata*, in November, when Ramalinga Swamigal would deliver a public discourse outside his residence. In November 1873 though, he refused to do so, placing instead a lighted lamp in front of his room door and locking himself inside. Over the next three months he emerged from his room only occasionally. On January 30, 1874, a Friday, he called some of his close disciples, spoke to them at midnight, went into his room, and closed the door, which at his request was not opened for several months. He was never seen again.[10]

[10] On the early hagiographical narratives concerning the disappearance, see Srilata Raman, "Departure and Prophecy: The Disappearance of Irāmaliṅka Aṭikaḷ in the Early Narratives of His Life," *Indologica Taurenensia* 28 (2004): 119–35, and, on the hagiographies and biographies of

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Ramalinga Swamigal's writings fall broadly into two groups: the poetry composed prior to 1870 and compiled into five books draws its inspiration from traditional Śaiva devotional poetry that is essentially theistic. The sixth book, composed between 1870 and 1874, in the last period of his life, is radically different—it is essentially monistic, dedicated to a God in the form of the Light of Grace. The prose writings have been neglected and yet it is these, overwhelmingly written or noted down by disciples in the last decade of his life, that give us these above mentioned passages as well as his religious views in their maturity. *The Conduct* belongs to this last phase of his life and—along with the long poem, the *Aruṭperuñcōti Akaval*, which is included in the sixth book of the *Tiruvaruṭpā*—is considered one of the two most important documents of his theology. In the first editions of the text to be published in the 1890s, it is referred to as the First Command (*mutal cāṭaṉam* < *śāsana*) of the Pure, True Path (*Cutta Caṉmārkam*). In these prose writings there is the drumbeat of one consistent theme—that of deprivation and hunger, violence and death.

Anyone attempting to contextualize this theme not just within Ramalinga Swamigal's own body of writings but also with regard to his social and cultural history might well wish to begin by paying attention to the material circumstances under which they might have been written. The semipermanent state of subsistence crises, if not outright famine, brought about by inclement weather (such as uncertain or failed monsoons and droughts) among both the urban and the rural population of the Tamil region in the early (eighteenth-century) and the later (nineteenth-century) colonial period has been the subject of excellent studies in the last decades. An examination of how, first, the precolonial, regional powers and, later, the East India Company and the British Crown dealt with these regular occurrences, shows that much of "famine policy," until the codification of it in the 1830s, was improvised. It manifested itself, as the crises persisted or deepened, in limited measures, such as the establishment of charitable outlets for the feeding of the needy and indigent and through some manipulation of the grain trade.[11] This is particularly true

Ramalinga Swamigal written between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries that contributed to a rethinking of Tamil Śaivism, *The Transformation of Tamil Religion: Ramalinga Swamigal and Modern, Dravidian Sainthood* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

[11] For the subsistence crises and famines of the eighteenth century, much prior to the codification of a "Famine Policy" by the colonial government, see Ravi Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit und das Problem der Arbeit: Eine Studie zur Sozialgeschichte der Stadt Madras und ihres Hinterlandes zwischen 1750 und 1800* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), and a summary of Ahuja's conclusions in "State Formations and Famine Policy in Early Colonial South India," in *Land, Politics and Trade in South Asia* ed. Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 161: "It is clear, however, that dearth and famine struck the city [Madras] and its hinterland rather frequently: 10 subsistence crises, ranging in severity between temporary dearth and major famine, are discernable for the five decades between 1747 and 1798." This situation reached its

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of the crises of the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century, as Arnold has shown, was also no stranger to such repeated catastrophes in the Tamil region. Particular mention must be made of the major famines of 1833–34, 1854, and 1866. W. Francis, writing of the impact of the 1833–34 and 1866 famines on the South Arcot district (the area where Ramalinga Swami spent most of his life) points out that this region, even while it suffered less than other parts of the Madras Presidency, was not spared the ill effects of crop failure and food scarcity. The most affected were, as is to be expected, those who lived at subsistence levels, reliant on daily labor.[12] But we need not even go so far as to assume that Ramalinga Swamigal's deep-rooted concern regarding hunger was necessarily rooted in the direct experience of being an eyewitness to such events. One can merely observe that, during the last decades of his life, his sojourn in the semirural areas of the South Arcot district would have resulted in a direct exposure to families that constituted the rural peasantry. And for such families and such people a scarcity of resources was an ever-present threat. As Arnold points out, "In India the perennial problem of subsistence for the poor was intensified by the extreme dependence of agriculture on the arrival of adequate monsoon rains. The consequences of even a few weeks' delay or a partial failure of monsoon were well-known from experience. It was not therefore from blind or irrational panic that the prospect of drought and dearth caused alarm and generated such widespread suspicion, anxiety and fear."[13] Ramalinga Swamigal's words and actions might be seen as a direct response to this ever-present anxiety and fear, a potential food scarcity or famine forming the foreboding backdrop to the three great themes of *The Conduct*: hunger, the imminence of death, and a compassionate response.

The Conduct appears to speak in surprisingly contemporaneous terms to the suffering brought about by hunger. This, though, should not mislead us into assuming that the text is, in its entirety, a radical new departure in the history of Tamil religious literature. Rather, as this essay hopes to show, the narrative of *The Conduct* must be viewed from the perspective of its historical construction. As I hope to show in the following sections, there are a spectrum of narratives, beginning with some of the earliest accounts in classical poetry, that underlie older accounts of deprivation, hunger, and death and that inform Ramalinga Swamigal's own depiction of these themes. These include, particularly, the classical Tamil *Caṅkam* poetry and a Buddhist text attributed to the end of the *Caṅkam* period, the *Maṇimēkalai*.

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dismal climax in the great famine of the early 1780s. For an examination of the subsistence crises and famines of the nineteenth century, within and just after Ramalinga Swamigal's own lifetime, see David Arnold, "Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras, 1876–78," in *Subaltern Studies III*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), and *Famine: Social Crisis and Political Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

[12] W. Francis, *The South Arcot District Gazetteer* (Madras: Government Press, 1906), 180–81.

[13] Arnold, *Famine*, 66.

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It is not the intention of this essay to propose a direct citational relationship between the *Puṟam* poetry and the *Maṇimēkalai*, though Richman, suggests that the latter text does take up and parody several *Caṅkam* elements.[14] Even less so, therefore, does it propose such a relationship between *The Conduct* of Ramalinga Swamigal, on the one hand, and the literary texts that will be cited, on the other. In fact, it must be acknowledged that there is only meager evidence for directly indentifiable intertextuality at work here between the very different genres (classical poetry, the *kāppiyam*, the *kummi* genre, and the theological sermon) that will be referred to. To propose even an implicit one, therefore, is speculative. Rather, it is being suggested that we have here the literary echoes of a common theme in Tamil literature, which—seen from a diachronic perspective—is available to both those who compose texts and those who hear or read them at subsequent historical moments. Thus, it also stresses the historical contingency of Ramalinga Swamigal's own writings.

THE STARVING BARD OF CAṄKAM

Classical Tamil *Caṅkam* poetry contains graphic descriptions of hunger most frequently within the context of a specific theme that one might call "the starving bard." This theme is highlighted in the collection of poems titled *Puṟanāṉūru* (henceforth *Puṟam*) contained within the corpus known as the Eight Anthologies (*Eṭṭuttokai*). The *Puṟam* poems, numbering four hundred in all, are generally considered to be a compilation of heroic poetry, focusing on the heroic deeds in battle of warriors.[15] Yet, a persistent subgenre of this main theme is the search of a desperate and poverty-stricken bard for a generous patron who would relieve him and his family of their destitution.[16] Tieken

[14] Paula Richman, *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric in a Tamil Buddhist Text* (Rochester, NY: Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1988), 53–78. In fact, at the microlevel, such a direct citational can be shown between *Puṟam* 18 and *Maṇimēkalai*, 11:92–96, and also between the latter and a verse from the later tenth- to twelfth-century didactic collection *Nalvaḻi* 26, attributed to Auvaiyār.

[15] On this poetry, refer to Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: On the Tamil Literature of South India* (Leiden: Brill, 1973): George L. Hart III, *Poets of the Tamil Anthologies: Ancient Poems of Love and War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); George L. Hart III and Hank Heifetz, eds. and trans., *The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom: An Anthology of Poems from Classical Tamil; the Puṟaṉāṉūṟu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); A. K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War from the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); John Ralston Marr, *The Eight Anthologies: A Study in Early Tamil Literature* (Madras: Institute of Tamil Studies, 1985); Herman Tieken, *Kāvya in South India: Old Tamil Caṅkam Poetry* (Gröningen: Egbert Forsten, 2001); and, most recently, M. L. Thangappa, *Love Stands Alone: Selections from Tamil Sangam Poetry* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), among others.

[16] This has been acknowledged as much by Ramanujan (*Poems of Love and War*) and Tieken (*Kāvya in South India*).

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refers to this theme at some length and quotes as examples of it two of the most striking poems that exemplify it: *Puṟam* 159 and 160, attributed to Peruñcittiraṉār.

Puṟam 159 contains the following passage:

> And my wife, her body gone sallow, is troubled
> by pain and sickness;
> breasts fallen,
> squeezed and devoured by the many children
> all about her;
> needy, she picks the greens
> in the garbage dump
> hardly sprouting
> in the very spot she had plucked before,
> boils them in water
> without any salt,
> eats them without any buttermilk.
> She has forgotten the look of well-cooked food.
> Wearing unwashed tatters,
> my wife who loves me
> goes hungry,
> blames the order of things.[17]

Puṟam 160, attributed to the same bard, repeats this theme in its poignant essentials:

> Since my house is empty of food, and
> my son who has a sparse
> topknot on his head, his stomach turning, seems to have forgotten
> that his house was
> ever there to feed him and he tries many times to suck at an empty
> breast where
> there is no milk and from it he draws nothing! Craving rice and
> porridge,
> he opens the empty jars in the house, one after another, and when he
> is done with that,
> he bursts out crying. When she sees him like this, my wife will tell
> him
> a story, to frighten him, about a ferocious tiger, and in her pain she
> will try
> to distract him by pointing at the moon. She tells him to think about
> his father

[17] Trans. A. K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, 134–35.

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> and pretend to be angry with him while she herself goes on
> grieving
> under the full light of day![18]

These identical motifs—the withered breasts of the mother who cannot feed her children, her futile attempts to cook and serve inedible greens—are also repeated in a late *Caṅkam* work that again refers to the life of the bard, *The Short Guide for the Minstrel [with the Lute]* (*Ciṟuppāṇāṟṟuppaṭai*) of the *Pattupāṭṭu* collection.[19] In all this poetry, and particularly in the *Puṟam* poems, the word used for *hunger* is *paci*, and the word index to *Caṅkam* poetry shows us that there are thirty-five instances of the use of this word, or its derivations, in *Puṟam* alone.[20] Other *Puṟam* poems that repeat these themes incessantly include *Puṟam* 68, 69, 139, 143, 150, 155, 164, 266, 370, 375–377 and 393. Even as all these poems hint at the imminent danger of death, death remains at arm's length, a pale shadow hovering in the background. Sometimes, as in *Puṟam* 227, 230, 237 and 238, death becomes the ultimate devourer, its maw gaping wide, consuming relentlessly the lives of men.

But even this death can always be staved off, averted with the hope of a generous patron. If there is one word in the *Puṟam* that perhaps stands in greatest contrast to *paci*, it is *īkai*, best translated as "giving." The *Puṟam* is replete with the motif of the generous patron, usually the heroic warrior or king, who gives beyond expectation, beyond measure to the extent that the expression, "foolish munificence" (*koṭai maṭam*) is used of this behavior.[21] Kailasapathy reminds us that there are 180 poems altogether, in the *Puṟam* and *Akam* anthologies that might be classified as poems of praise.[22] The king's generosity is most often likened to the bounteousness of nature, to a "rain-like munificence." The terms used are compounds of *īkai*: "distributing gifts without caring for oneself" (*ōmpā īkai*) and "unfailing generosity" (*poyyā īkai*).[23] Subbaih, referring to the earliest Tamil grammar, the *Tolkāppiyam*, and its gloss on the verb, shows us that it refers to a very specific kind

[18] Trans. Hart and Heifetz, *Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom*, 102–3.

[19] The hapless mother in the *Ciṟuppāṇāṟṟuppaṭai* is a female dog. The text, suggests Kamil Zvelebil (*Lexicon of Tamil Literature* [Leiden: Brill, 1995], 156–57), is a late *Caṅkam* work, datable perhaps to 250–75 CE. For a rather Victorian translation of this poem, see J. V. Chelliah, trans., *Pattupattu: Ten Tamil Idylls* (Tinnevelly: SISS, 1985), 147–63.

[20] Thomas Lehmann and Thomas Malten, *A Word-Index of Tamil Caṅkam Literature* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992), 287.

[21] See K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 217, with reference to *Puṟam* 142.

[22] Ibid., 218.

[23] Ibid., 219. Lehmann and Malten (*Word-Index*, 23) show that the word *īkai* occurs in twenty-five instances in *Puṟam*.

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of giving, one "when the suppliant is inferior to the giver."[24] One could read this, as Raj Gautaman does, in his study of this literature, as the relationship between a hegemonic elite, on the one hand, and a dependent and subaltern group, on the other.[25] Or, alternatively, as Kailasapathy suggests throughout his study, rather than seeing this as the straightforward relationship between a beggar and his patron, the *Puṟam* invites us to valorize a worldview where both are united through a code of honor by which the king earns his greatness by giving and the bard by getting and praising. I would add that this takes place against the backdrop of hunger. In a later classical text, the *Maṇimēkalai*, which we shall consider next, the duty to feed the hungry shifts from the hands of kings into the hands of others. This shift anticipates, in crucial ways, the narrative of Ramalinga Swamigal.

THE BUDDHIST NUN, THE DIVINE VESSEL OF PLENITUDE, AND THE DANGERS OF GIVING

Maṇimēkalai has been the subject of two fine monographs, one by Paula Richman and more recently Anne Monius and there is little I can add to what they have said about how it inculcates female asceticism and Buddhist values and how it anticipates the utopian future Buddhist society based on the principles of care and compassion.[26] The importance of *Maṇimēkalai*, for the purposes of this essay, is the centrality of the motifs of hunger and the Buddhist mission of assuaging hunger by the eponymous central character through her use of the divine vessel that is never empty. In short, the text (possibly stemming from the sixth century), tells the story of a beautiful, young girl, Maṇimēkalai, stemming from a family of courtesans, who renounces the hereditary lifestyle of the women of her family for the life of a Buddhist nun.[27] She does so after achieving an enlightening experience on an island, in chapter 11, that takes place in the context of what might be called the perpetually fantastical appearance of divine and semidivine beings and phenomena that pervade the entire story. In this case, Maṇimēkalai's experience involves her recollection of her past lives, an experience only granted to those who have reached a very high stage on the Buddhist path of enlightenment. In the aftermath of this, she has an encounter with the guardian of the island, Tīvatilakai, who helps her

[24] Raj Gauthaman, *Aṟam Atikāram* (Koyampattūr: Viṭiyal Pattipakam, 1997), 34–39.

[25] Ganapathy Subbaiah, *Roots of Tamil Religious Thought* (Pondicherry: Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture, 1991), 136.

[26] Richman, *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric*; Anne E. Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil Speaking South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[27] On the dating, see Zvelebil, *Lexicon*, 409; Richman, *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric*, 7; and Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism*, 13–14, who all decide on the fifth to sixth centuries.

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acquire the great vessel that only appears once a year, on the birth anniversary of the Buddha. A central and crucial passage in the book, canonical within the aphoristic tradition of Tamil literature, is one in chapter 11 where Maṇimēkalai is entrusted with the famous vessel called "that which yields nectar" (*amuta curapi* < *amuda-surabhī*) that once belonged to another virtuous Buddhist. Helping her acquire the vessel, Tīvatilakai then instructs Maṇimēkalai on the enormity of her task by giving a description of the effects of hunger on the individual and on society (quoted here in full): "The affliction of hunger (*paci-piṇi*)[28] destroys [the dignity] of high birth and kills excellence. It renders useless the surety of acquired knowledge. It removes the ornament of shame and shatters beauty. It drives one to the doorstep [of others] together with one's ornamented women. My tongue cannot measure the words of praise for those who end it."[29]

In many respects, *Maṇimēkalai*'s description of the social and cultural consequences of hunger in the passage from chapter 11 quoted above—the ensuing dissolution of the normal order of things and familial as well as societal bonds—has also reverberated in subsequent Tamil literature. Well into Ramalinga Swamigal's own time we see repeated echoes of this passage as late as the nineteenth century in folk ballads of the *kummi* genre meant to be sung and danced to. Particularly interesting, for instance, are the *kummi* songs from the Kongu region of the Tamil country, to the northwest of modern-day Tamil Nadu bordering on Kerala. This region, historically prone to aridity, witnessed repeated famines but a particularly ferocious one for fourteen years between 1853 and 1867. Several *kummis* were composed during this period by local poets, *pulavar*s, residing in the very heart of the famine regions, and some of these compositions such as the *Karavaruśa pañcakkummi* attributed to Veṇṇaṉtūr Varakavi Aruṇācalam reflect in folk idiom exactly the kind of social and political disorder that we find in the *Maṇimēkalai* passage.[30] After describing the social consequences of hunger, Tīvatilakai further instructs Maṇimēkalai: "Those who give to others who can endure [since they have the means to do so] are like those who trade in right conduct."[31] "It is those who alleviate the fierce hunger of the destitute who [are virtuous]. Their life

[28] The expression "the affliction of hunger" already appears in *Puṟam* 173.11.

[29] U. V. Cāminātaiyar, ed., *Maṇimēkalai* (Madras: Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. U. V. Swaminathaiyer Library, 1981), 11.76–81.

[30] See Cē. Aracu, *Puyalkāttup pāṭṭum pañcak kummiyum* (Tañjāvūr: Koṅku Āyvu Maiyam, 1997), 31–45, for an introduction to and edition of this particular *kummi*. This motif, it must also be acknowledged, has roots in Classical Sanskrit literature as well, as, for example, in a famous passage in the Mahabhārata 12.139.13–63, where the *ṛṣi* Viśvāmitra, in a time of terrible drought that sees the dissolution of social order, wanders around in search of food and is forced to eat the dog of a *caṇḍāla*.

[31] See *Puṟam* 134 for *aṟa viṉai* and a similar understanding of generosity. Here, I translate the Tamil word *aṟam*, related in many of its connotations to the Sanskrit *dharma*, as "right conduct."

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endows a life of righteousness [*mey neṟi*]. Those who give food, in this atomic world, to all on it, they, indeed, give life."[32] In this discourse we see very clearly the resonance of certain *Puṟam* themes: it is not just unnecessary, but it is not even considered true giving if one gives to those who are not in want. Rather, the giving to the needy, to those who are in a nonreciprocal relationship to oneself—it is this that is legitimate and a sign of true virtue.

Let us recapitulate, at this point, the common themes that emerge through our survey of this literature. The themes of hunger and starvation are depicted through modes that are both intimate and distant. Thus, the focus can be, as it is in the *Puṟam* works, on the effect of starvation within the family, or, as in *Maṇimēkalai*, of men who are driven to beg together with their wives. At the same time, the rippling effects of this hunger and starvation spread out to distant spaces, to the whole of society, turning it upside down, destroying the social and cultural order of things. The solution to this, in the *Puṟam*, is the generosity of the royal patron that is a reflection of his royal virtues, while in the *Maṇimēkalai* it is the compassionate response of the ascetic renouncer who is guided also by her own soteriological goals. In the light of these themes, let us examine another remarkable passage, that I have abridged, in *The Conduct*:[33]

> When the fire of hunger burns brightly in the bodies of the poor, the quenching of it with food is the conduct of compassion toward all living beings; when the poisonous wind of hunger is about to put out the lamp of intelligence of the poor, preventing its demise and sustaining it is the conduct of compassion; at the time when the bodies of living beings, that are temples for the natural light of God, are about to decay due to hunger, giving food and illuminating them is the conduct of compassion; . . . when the tiger of hunger attacks the lives of the poor and attempts to kill them, killing that tiger and saving those lives is the conduct of compassion; when the poison of hunger goes to the head and living beings are becoming dizzy, reducing that poison with food and clearing the dizziness is the conduct of compassion. . . . Stilling that painful longing of the poor [who think], "That sinner, hunger, that killed us slowly, yesterday, day and night, will come also today. What shall I do?" Stopping the agony of the poor who, like flies trapped in honey, agonize, thinking, "Daylight is breaking, now the affliction of hunger will arrive. What shall I do regarding this entrapment of fate?"—this is the conduct of compassion. . . . There are human beings who, heart and face exhausted, without tongue to speak, like those mutes who dream internally, hearts languishing, [think], "Daylight has come to an end, hunger gnaws [at me], shame prevents me from going to other places, it hurts my self-respect to ask [for food]. The stomach burns, I know of no way to end my life. Alas, why have I acquired this body!" Giving food to them and safeguarding their respect is the conduct of compassion.

[32] Cāminātaiyar, *Maṇimēkalai*, 11:92–96.

[33] Following the first such mention, I abridge the phrase "the conduct of compassion toward living beings" in the remainder of the translation to "the conduct of compassion."

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"Even if we were to resolve to starve today due to our youth what shall we do regarding the stomach of our poor wives? Mentioning their hunger is not that important, but our mothers and fathers, who are debilitated due to their advanced age will die if they starve today as well. What can we do about this? How can we look at the faces of our children, exhausted from constant crying?" Thus, thinking incessantly, with the fires of hunger, of fear and of enquiry lit within, that have combined like a single fire that has arisen to destroy, the sorrowing poor sit with their hands on their cheeks and with tear-filled eyes. Giving food to them and transforming that sorrow is the conduct of compassion.[34]

In this passage we see how *The Conduct* deploys the modes of intimacy and distance in ways that are both familiar and unfamiliar from the literature we had surveyed. Intimacy here is achieved in the closest possible way: by leading us into the mind and thoughts of the hungering person and through an interior monologue. Indeed, the affective power of the passage lies in this interior monologue. At the same, time the distancing is achieved precisely in the anonymity of the sufferer. It is not someone we know as an individual or even one of a category, like the starving bard but the poor man as everyman, who is speaking here. In this sense, we might see here the construction of an impersonal category, "the poor" (*ē̱lai*), who demand a compassionate response not on the basis of ties of kinship, family, or patronage but on the basis of being a certain social category in themselves. Further, let us consider who is meant to respond to this everyman. The figure of Maṇimēkalai already marked the shift in compassionate activism from that of the elite hero, the royal patron to that of the ascetic renouncer. It has been frequently pointed out and theorized that the emergence of the activist renouncer, the *sannyāsī* in the world, is a marked development and feature of early modernity and of "Hinduism" in South Asia.[35] While the mass of evidence for this is indubitable, it must also be seen that narratives like the *Maṇimēkalai* and others of this kind anticipate such shifts already—if only in the landscape of the imagination—in classical Tamil narratives and echo in the self-representation and the reception of Ramalinga Swamigal in colonial modernity. *The Conduct* now goes several steps further and makes it the central religious duty of each person, each of us who are the addressees of this work, to each become a patron, a Maṇimēkalai, not just in order to assuage the pain of others but also to achieve the soteriological goal

[34] Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 85–87.

[35] On this, see Wilhelm Halbfass, "Practical Vedānta," in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (New Delhi: Sage, 1995), 211–23, on Vivekānanda; Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), on Sahajanand Swami; and J. T. F. Jordens, *Dayanand Sarasvati, His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), on Dayananda Sarasvati—to name a few of the studies of activist renouncers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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of one's own salvation. For, the text, explicitly states, that in the absence of hunger, the conduct of compassion could not function, and without it one would not be able to access the grace of God and become God-like oneself. Hence, hunger is actually "an instrument of [soteriological] help" (*upakārak karuvi*) given to us by God.[36]

What *The Conduct* envisages—namely, the soteriological consequences of the elimination of hunger in the world, in its entirety—is explored and the consequences of it drawn along similar lines in chapters 13 and 14 of the *Maṇimēkalai*, in the story of Āputtiraṉ, the former owner of the divine vessel, the illegitimate son of a Brahmin woman, abandoned by her at birth. Scorned by orthodox Brahmins because of his opposition to animal sacrifice, Āputtiraṉ, destitute, takes shelter in the city of Madurai (Maturai). Each day he begs in affluent households with his begging bowl and then invites the blind, deaf, and destitute to eat from his gleanings. It is once they are done, that he avails himself of the remainder.[37] Impressed by Āputtiraṉ's good deeds the Goddess Cintā appears before him and gifts him the divine vessel with the assurance that he would always be able to still hunger with it. But the story of Āputtiraṉ has a tragic twist. Such is his virtue and prowess in terminating hunger in the world that the throne of the God of gods, Indra (Intiraṉ) himself, begins to shake. Indra descends to earth and tries to reward Āputtiraṉ for his giving (*tānam* < *dāna*), but his overtures are rejected. For Āputtiraṉ the giving is its own reward. Angered at this rejection, Intiraṉ then showers the world with rain. Crops flourish, famine ceases, and there is no longer any opportunity for Āputtiraṉ to put his vessel to use. Thus does Indra deprive Āputtiraṉ of his sole rational for living. Understanding that he is of no further use in the world, Āputtiraṉ eventually throws the vessel into a pond, to be available once a year for retrieval by any person who wishes to do compassionate good to all living beings. Then he himself takes the vow of fasting unto death (*uṇṇā nōṉpu*) and dies. I have narrated the story of Āputtiraṉ at some length because it illustrates, with great clarity, the inexorable logic of giving, a motif that echoes and reechoes in Tamil literature.[38] If this is the activity that earns one the greatest

[36] Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 85.

[37] Cāminātaiyar, *Maṇimēkalai*, 12:109–15.

[38] See, for instance, how this logic is played out to its horrific extreme in the story of Ciṟuttoṇṭar in the twelfth-century Śaivite hagiography, the *Periya Puṟāṇam*, explored insightfully from different perspectives by Dennis Hudson in "Violent and Fanatic Devotion among the Nāyaṉmārs: A Study of the Periyapurāṇam of Cēkkiḻār," in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. A. Hiltebeitel (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 374–404; and David Shulman, *The Hungry God: Hindu Tales of Filicide and Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Shulman, in particular, focuses on the relationship between the demanding and insatiably hungry god and the feeding devotee. It must be further made clear that this is not to suggest that a general motif of excessive giving is unique to Tamil literature. Rather this is a motif that might be considered pan-Indian, in languages as diverse as Pāli and Sanskrit, as the

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merit, if a sign of a very high stage of merit is that one has been gifted with an endless resource to give, one that far surpasses the "foolish munificence" of the kings and patrons as illustrated in the ideology of the *Puṟam*, then one has to give in order to live and reach liberation and one has to die, depriving oneself of sustenance, once giving becomes impossible. Āputtiraṉ, let us recollect, had already established himself within the cycle of giving in which he ate last, the leftovers of what he had given away. Once the giving ceases, he has nothing leftover to eat, therefore he must cease eating. This is what I mean by the inexorable ties that bind hunger, giving, and life and how the logic of these ties also implies their inverse, which is that lack of hunger is similarly linked to not giving and death, or the death that is the deprivation of God's grace, in Ramalinga Swamigal.

DECAYING INTO DEATH

Texts that combine ideas of the destruction of the common weal when hunger stalks the landscape together with the need for compassionate intervention, as we have seen, have a long literary lineage in the Tamil literary tradition. Also present is part of the third motif in *The Conduct*: the almost analytical scrutiny of bodily disintegration. The scrutiny of decay and death or "decaying into death" is not new to Tamil literature. It particularly crops up in literature concerned with an ascetic reflection on the impermanence of life and the meditation on such impermanence. Here, again, a *Maṇimēkalai* passage from chapter 20, where Maṇimēkalai instructs Utayakumāraṉ on the fleeting nature of female beauty, is illustrative. Pointing to an old and white-haired woman, Maṇimēkalai catalogs, pitilessly, the deterioration of her youthful beauty. Her black tresses, once like the cool black sand on the seashore, have now turned white. Her brow that once shone like the crescent moon has lost its lustre, the skin wrinkled. Her eyebrows, once like bows of victory are now like dried-up shrimps. Her eyes, once like blue lotuses, now ooze "sleep." Her nose, once bud-like, now is dripping with pus. Her teeth, once like a row of pearls, are now like the seeds of the bottle gourd.[39] This detailed catalog continues and ends with Maṇimēkalai telling Utayakumāraṉ that such aging should remind one that one should know the true nature of the body whose appearance is but a treacherous illusion we get from our ancestors, one that hides and controls the stench of flesh through the use of flowers and unguents, clothing and jewelry.[40]

Jātaka tales relating to the excessive generosity of the Buddha-to-be. On this, see Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Similar too is the story of King Hariśchandra from the *Purāṇa*s. On this see Adeesh Sathaye, "Why Did Hariścandhra Matter in Early Medieval India?," *Journal of Hindu Studies* 2 (2009): 131–59.

[39] Cāminātaiyar, *Maṇimēkalai*, 20:41–65.

[40] Ibid., 20:67–69.

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Similar descriptions of the decaying body are also to be found in the Tamil devotional poetry, in the post-fourteenth century poetry of the Tamil *Cittar*s and down to Ramalinga Swamigal himself. The contemplation on aging and decaying in the *Maṇimēkalai*, as Richman has again shown,[41] must also be seen in the context of the specific Buddhist framework of the work and part of a larger range of Buddhist-specific visualization and meditational practices relating to developing detachment toward embodiment, appearance, and death through the contemplation of the "foulness of the body" that has been widely discussed in studies of both Buddhist narrative literature and contemporary ethnography.[42] In Tamil religious poetry prior to Ramalinga Swamigal, we see this also to be the case in, for instance, the poetry of Tamil *Cittar*s, particularly that of Paṭṭinattār (ca. fourteenth to fifteenth century) who speaks of the orifices of a woman's body secreting pus, bloody discharge, and slimy mucus.[43] This strain of revulsion toward specifically the private parts of the female body continues also in Ramalinga Swamigal's poetic corpus, in the first five books of the *Tiruvaṛuṭpā*. A sample of just the first book of the *Tiruvaruṭpā* would show us the repeated motif of the dangers of the woman's body: the fiery hole that is the woman's mound of love into which one is in danger of falling, the hole that secretes smells and contains worms.[44] The framework of this imagery also tends to be standard as in the Paṭṭinattār poem cited earlier. It is one where the poet laments his own inadequacies and sinful nature, acknowledges his completely unworthiness to be a recipient of God's grace and yet begs for the latter's benevolence toward him. This kind of poem of appeal, with a long history in the Sanskrit *stotra* genre, is also ubiquitous in Tamil *bhakti* literature, there being innumerable variations of it in both the

[41] Richman, *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric*, 148–49.

[42] Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Configurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange of the Dead in Thailand* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). *Maṇimēkalai*'s description of the aging female body itself may be strongly indebted to one of the oldest compendium of poetic verses, part of the *Khuddakanikāya* of the Pāli canon, the *Therīgāthā*. See particularly the song of Ambapālī (*Therīgāthā*, vv. 252–70).

[43] See translations of Paṭṭinattār in Kamil Zvelebil, *The Poets of the Powers* (London: Rider, 1973), 93–109, and particularly poems 9 and 10.

[44] *Tiruvaruṭpā* 7.10: "mi<u>n</u><u>n</u>āḷum iṭaimaṭavār alkulāya veṅku<u>l</u>iyil vī<u>l</u>ntā<u>l</u>ntu melintē<u>n</u>"; and *Tiruvaruṭpā* 18.9:

paṭiyi<u>n</u> mākkaḷai vī<u>l</u>ttum paṭuku<u>l</u>i
pāvam yāvum pa<u>l</u>aku<u>r</u>um pā<u>l</u>kku<u>l</u>i
kuṭikoḷ nā<u>r</u><u>r</u>ak ku<u>l</u>ici<u>r</u>u nīrtarum
koṭiya ū<u>r</u><u>r</u>uk ku<u>l</u>ipu<u>l</u>uk koḷku<u>l</u>i.

See, in addition, poems 1.2–3, 3.8, 9.10, 19.8, 22.5, and 25.6 in the first book of the *Tiruvaruṭpā* for the recurrence of this imagery.

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Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite, corpuses of medieval, Tamil devotional poetry. But only a small sample of it has this disturbing imagery we are confronted with, this overt misogyny directed at the female body. The point I wish to make here is that, precisely because Ramalinga Swamigal uses this kind of imagery in certain contexts, it becomes very clear that his representation of the hungering and dying body, in the context of *The Conduct*, is meant to evoke very different emotions from that of repulsion and detachment. Let us recollect that, in *The Conduct*, the description of the body is highly enumerative, almost like a forensic examination of disintegration. The description of the deterioration is based on a classical Indian terminology and understanding of embodiment: thus, the disintegrating body is the one that is disintegrating back into the elements as defined, in its earliest form, in the schools of *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* and subsequently modified and adapted in all the other classical systems: the body being seen as an evolute, emerging from the coming together of the basic principles of the individual monad (*puruṣa*) and materiality (*prakṛti*). Based as this description is on these classical conceptions, taking them for granted and then building up an analysis of the disintegration on the basis of this—these diagnostic and forensic qualities to the description are important indications of its rootedness in a premodern world of human physiology. In other words, Ramalinga Swamigal's description of what happens to the three different humors of the body as they lose their equilibrium draws our attention directly to the context of classical Indian medicine. It is when we turn to Indian medicinal texts or sections of texts containing chapters on medicine that we find the kind of descriptions of the dying human, in particular the dying male, that have a strong elective affinity with Ramalinga Swamigal's own writings.[45] Consider the following passage already from the compendium considered the harbinger of classical Indian medicine—the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, dated to the third or second century BCE, interestingly associated, due to the assumption that the author was a physician in the court of the Kaṇiska, with a Buddhist milieu.[46] In the fifth part of the work, titled *Indriyasthānam* and devoted to diagnosis and prognosis, we have the following account of the symptoms that presage death:

Now (I) will describe, as enumerated in the scriptures, the various forms and changes in condition of the embodied one (*śarīrī*) who has lived in the body for the allotted time span, who has accepted departure from the body, abandoning the beloved and enduring life breaths and the agreeable abode and who enters into the ultimate dark-

[45] See, for instance, the brief but striking description of the dying human in the *Garuḍa Purāṇa*, *Preta Kalpa*, 2.2.40–47; see also Wujastyk, *Roots of Ayurveda*, 5, on how the paradigmatic Āyurvedic body is male.

[46] Ibid., 39–40.

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ness (*tamo 'tyantam*) when all the systems and organs fall apart. [In such a state] the life breaths (*prāṇāḥ*) are afflicted, understanding (*vijñānam*) is obstructed, organs (*aṅgāni*) emit their strength, activities (*ceṣṭā*) cease, senses (*indriyāṇi*) are ruined, consciousness (*cetanā*) is isolated, restlessness (*autsukyam*) and fear (*bhīru*) enter the mind (*cetas*), memory (*smṛti*) and intelligence (*medhā*) are lost, modesty and grace (*hrī-śrī*) leave, disorders (*pāpmānaḥ*) increase, energy (*ojas*) and lustre (*tejas*) are lost, good conduct (*śīla*) and predispositions (*bhakti*) are inverted, shadows (*praticchāyā*) undergo transformation and shades (*chāyā*) turn into apparitions, semen (*śukram*) flows down from its location, the wind (*vāyu*) takes the wrong course, flesh (*māṃsa*) and blood (*asṛk*) deteriorate, the fires (*uṣmāṇah*) disappear, the joints (*saṃdhayaḥ*) come apart, smells (*gandhāḥ*) are transformed, the complexion and voice (*varṇa-svara*) fall apart, the body (*kāya*) becomes discolored and its aperture (*chidram*) dries up, vapors (*dhūmaḥ*) together with a chalk-like (*cūrṇakah*) paleness appear, all the pulsating parts (*spandanā deśāḥ*) of the body stiffen and become immobile, the qualities (*guṇāḥ*) of different parts of the body such as cold, warmth, softness, and hardness are inverted and are now found in other parts, nails (*nakhāni*) acquire spots, teeth (*dantāḥ*) become discolored, the eyelashes (*pakṣman*) become matted and lines appear on the forehead (*murdhan*), medicines are not available as desired and when obtained are without strength, different kinds of cruel diseases, of differing origins and requiring different medicines arise quickly destroying both strength and energy. During the course of treatment tastes and smells, activities and thoughts arise, fearful dreams are seen, a state of meanness comes about, servants make haste, the appearance of death emerges, the normal recedes and the abnormal ascends and all the portentous signs of death are seen. All these are stated to be the characteristics of those on the verge of death as enumerated in the scriptures.[47]

Thus, it is in the medical texts that we encounter the kind of excruciatingly precise enumeration of a process happening to the human body of the kind we saw in Ramalinga Swamigal. At this point it becomes useful to recollect his self-proclaimed and repeated assertions that he was well versed in the system of medicine indigenous to the Tamil country, *Siddha* medicine, that he himself had obtained all the powers (*siddhi*s) that characterize a *Siddha* and his intimate knowledge of the medical properties of plants and herbs that he displayed in the short, prose treatises such as *List of the Properties of Medicinal Plants* (*Mūlikai Kuṇa Aṭṭavaṇai*), *Herbs for Longevity* (*Cañcīvi Mūlikaikaḷ*), and *Medicinal Observations* (*Maruttuva Kuṟippukaḷ*).[48] This essay does not seek to go into the historiographical issues plaguing the geneal-

[47] *Caraka Saṃhitā*, *Indriyasthānam* 12.43–61. I have been greatly assisted in my translation by the comprehensive glossary of medical terms in Wujastyk, *Roots of Ayurveda*, though certain terms, such as *kāyaśchidram*, remain obscure inspite of their literal meaning.

[48] See Ramalinga Swamigal's references to himself repeatedly as such in the final book of the *Tiruvaruṭpā*, bk. 6. These include poems 49, 81 (*Aruṭperuñcōti Akaval*), 84, 85, 89, 94, 100, 112, and 125, among others.

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ogy of Siddha medical knowledge and the Tamil nationalist imperative to vouch for its antiquity vis-à-vis *Āyurveda*; this has been ably dealt with by Weiss.[49] Rather I take for granted the antiquity of the existent Āyurvedic literature available to us in contrast to the earliest extant Siddha medicine manuscripts, as well as the conceptual closeness of Āyurveda and Siddha with regard to human physiology and how remarkably similar in its tenor if not in its details the *Caraka Saṃhitā* passage is to the passage in *The Conduct*.[50] On analysis, the literary echoes and resemblances to Ramalinga Swamigal's own writing on dying are unmistakable. It is the framing that is radically different: for, ironically, the *Caraka Saṃhita* passage is located within the framework of describing a situation that the physician is advised to avoid—that is, he should avoid taking on as a client a person afflicted with these signs of dying. In contrast, *The Conduct* demands the opposite response, encouraging one to rush to the succor of the person who is starving. So, let us review what *The Conduct* has shown us, thus far: it draws on a rich tradition of previous Tamil religious literature to speak of an ethic of compassion toward those suffering from hunger. It builds on such texts in focusing, in its most powerful passage, not on the social, not on the familial, but on the process of starvation as it unfolds in the human body and does so through its affinity with an entirely different genre of texts—medical literature that may be directly or indirectly transmitted from the Āyurvedic canon and through *Siddha* medical treatises. At the same time, we must be very clear that one cannot adopt a reductionist approach to understanding Ramalinga Swamigal. It is not the intention of this essay to parse the work into a compendium of its literary antecedents. For, this would be an exercise that is not only misconceived in its intentions but even more so it could well lead to a misunderstanding of his religious vision. Rather, this essay also wishes to ask questions that concern issues of representation and self-representation—how does Ramalinga Swamigal present his ideology, what is his relationship to what he claims, how does he validate it, who are its addressees? These questions might enable us to arrive, not only at a more nuanced understanding of what his ideology is but enable us to consider the debate about the nature and the moment of South Asian modernity from other perspectives, particularly ones that are not only restricted to social and cultural history but to transformations in thinking that affect self-representation, genres, and theology.

[49] Richard S. Weiss, *Recipes for Immortality: Medicine, Religion, and Community in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[50] Weiss (ibid., 49–50) suggests that the oldest extant Siddha manuscripts are no older than the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. See also Harmut Scharfe, "The Doctine of the Three Humours in Traditional Indian medicine and the Alleged Antiquity of Tamil Siddha Medicine," *JAOS* 119, no. 4 (1999): 609–29.

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II

In looking more closely at the theology of *The Conduct of Compassion*, I would like to focus on two further issues: authority and practice. In reading *The Conduct*, the first remarkable feature of it that leaps to the eye is the complete absence of citations. Indeed, the strongest reason why we cannot make the definitive claim that the text is specifically indebted to classical Tamil literature or Indian medicinal literature is because it makes no such claims itself. On the contrary, it is conspicuously silent about this lack of bolstering authority. Yet, as we shall see, the text asserts its own truth value, urges that we take it seriously as a document of religious revelation, and makes unequivocal claims as to what would result if one does what it advocates. In the absence of *śāstric* citations, where is its authoritativeness located?

The Conduct begins by making four foundational statements. First, the singular opportunity provided by a human birth is that it enables one "to obtain one's self." Second, this is nothing but the attainment of that "complete, natural bliss" (*pūraṇa iyaṟkai iṉpam*) of God. Third, this bliss is given only through the grace of God. Finally, the only path to obtaining that grace is through "the conduct of compassion toward all." "One must know this with conviction" (*uṟutiyāka aṟital vēṇṭum*), says Ramalingar, and he further adds, "There is no other authority for this."[51] One asks, "No other authority than who or what?" and is forced to conclude, as the text unfolds, that there is none other than these words themselves that he has pronounced. Later he will speak reassuringly of other beings (*cāttiyarkaḷ* < *sādhyas*) who have attained the desired soteriological goal and point the way.[52] Scanning the entire text (approximately forty-five printed pages long), one is struck by the repeated use of phrases that qualify the doctrines, phrases such as "one should know this truthfully" or simply "one should know this." There are two significant modifications of this sentiment: in a passage that deals with definitions of compassion, Ramalinga Swamigal also says, "this has been ordained in the Veda of God."[53] Yet his refusal to clarify this statement and his refusal throughout the text to name this God make it clear that he is not speaking from a traditional *Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta* point of view that Śiva is the source of the Vedas.[54] Rather, he seems to be referring to an elaboration of these doctrines in a more extensive work of his own, yet to be written, one he refers to as "the Veda of Equality" (*camaraca vētam*).[55] Finally, he concludes the main por-

[51] Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 65.

[52] Ibid., 66.

[53] Ibid., 72: "kaṭavuḷ vētattil vitittirukkiṉṟapaṭiyāl."

[54] For a statement of this position in *Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta*, see texts such as *Civañāṉacittiyār* 8.13 and *Tirumantiram* 7.276.

[55] See Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 93 and 94 n 424, for details regarding this.

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tion of *The Conduct* by asserting that it should be known that all this has been stated truthfully, with the omnipotent God as witness.[56] If the text leads us to the inexorable conclusion that the veracity of it rests solely on the veracity of the speaker/writer who is both the sole witness and transmitter of this revelation of God, it also makes it clear that those who are authorized to receive it are all those who choose to listen to Ramalinga Swamigal. There can be, it explicitly says, no ritual or caste qualification to know and implement this teaching.[57] This discursive prose style, the emphasis on personal revelation, and the invitation to all to partake of it as part of an open public discourse—all this was not new to the Tamil country and the South Arcot district of the 1860s. Religious tracts that inculcated virtues and public preaching that dispensed with textual citation and involved an exhortation to believe had been part of the Protestant Christian repertoire in the Tamil country for at least a century before this, having its beginnings in the early eighteenth century with the establishment of Protestant Christianity in South India—from 1706 when two Protestant and pietist German missionaries belonging to the Dänisch-Hallesche Mission (which had only recently been founded by August Hermann Francke, contributing additionally to the missionaries' zeal), Bartholamäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, landed in the east coast of the Tamil country. Their base was Taraṅkampāṭi (Tranquebar), not more than a stone's throw from Chidambaram and the environs that were Ramalinga Swamigal's own home territories.[58] Indeed, the Danish Mission Society sent Carl E. Ochs, originally from the German Leipzig Mission, to set up a missionary station in South Arcot in the 1860s at the same time that Ramalinga was most active there.[59] Protestant missionaries acted as a catalyst for social and cultural transformation in at least two ways. They built on the considerable achievements of seventeenth-century Jesuit contributions to the emergence of a new prose style in Tamil that came to be the predominant language of public discourse. Contributing to this was

[56] Ibid., 93: "carva caktiyaiyuṭaiya kaṭavuḷ cāṭciyāka cattiyañ ceyyappaṭumeṉṟu aṟiya vēṇṭum."

[57] Ibid., 87, 93.

[58] On the history of Protestant Christianity in South India see, among others, Michael Bergunder, ed., *Missionsberichte aus Indien 18. Jahrhundert: Ihre Bedeutung für die Europäische Geistesgeschichte und Ihre Wissenschaftlicher Quellenswert für die Indienkunde* (Halle: Frankeschen Stiftungen, 1999); Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000); Henriette Bugge, *Mission and Tamil Society: Social and Religious Change in South India, 1840–1900* (Richmond: Curzon, 1994); J. F. Fenger, *History of the Tranquebar Mission Worked Out from the Original Papers*, trans. Emil Francke (Tranquebar: Evangelical Lutheran Mission Press, 1863); Hugald Grafe, *The History of Christianity in India*, vol. 4 , pt. 2 (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1990); Dennis Hudson, *Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706–1835* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000); and Arno E. Lehmann, *It Began in Tranquebar*, trans. M. T. Lutz (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1956).

[59] Bugge, *Mission and Tamil Society*.

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some of the earliest Tamil Christian literature: catechisms, polemical tracts, hagiographical poetic literature, and, most important, the Tamil translation of the Bible—first undertaken by Ziegenbalg and completed by Benjamin Schultze in 1728. The decisive version, though, was the translation by Johann Phillip Fabricius (1711–91), whose New Testament came out in 1772, followed by the Old Testament in 1776. Generally regarded as a richly poetical and accomplished prose translation, the Fabricius Bible remained canonical for the Tamil Lutherans for a good one hundred years till it was replaced by the so-called Union Version in the last decades of the nineteenth century.[60] It is this version of the Tamil Bible that must also have been in limited circulation in Ramalinga's own time. The Protestant missionaries, though strapped for funds, more than made up for this through evangelical enthusiasm characterized by the public sermon. As Blackburn points out, "armed with their Tamil print bibles," the Tranquebar missionaries proceeded to have clear success in winning converts.[61] Central to this spiritual enterprise was the strongly pietistic form of Lutheran Christianity that had emerged in the German context in the wake of the devastating Thirty Years' War. If one were to speak in broad strokes of the pietistic message that the missionaries conveyed in their writings and sermons, then it would be accurate to point to the stress on the subjective and "inner experience" of belief, the conviction that God actively seeks out the individual soul, the Passion of Christ as central to human redemption, and a daily practice of virtue actuated in good works. The soul would be called to account before Christ on Judgment Day, when the life lived would be judged and assessed.[62] Even while being cautious about drawing explicit parallels and reductive conclusions, Ramalinga Swamigal's (1) stress in *The Conduct* on the significance of personal conviction and belief that supersedes or elides textual authority, (2) emphasis on both suffering and the need to address it through individual and constant ethical practice, and (3) statements in his letters that the dead should be buried and not cremated because they would be raised by "his Father" the Omnipotent God (*kaṭavuḷ*) who would appear in the hall (*Cattiya Taruma Cālai* < *Satya Dharmaśāla*) that Ramalinga had constructed to raise the faithful dead all point to an unmistakable Christian influence, if not directly on his terminology, then most definitely on his theology in the last phase of his life.[63]

[60] D. Rajarigam, *The History of Tamil Christian Literature* (Mysore: Wesley, 1958), 22–24.

[61] Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism*, 55.

[62] See Hudson, *Protestant Origins in India*, 38–40, on a typical such sermon preached by Ziegenbalg.

[63] Pālakiruṣṇa Piḷḷai, *Vacanap pakuti*, 105: "karuṇai kūrntu eṉatu tantaiyārākiya ellām valla tiruccirṟampalak kaṭavuḷ pārvatipuram camaraca vēta caṉmārkkac caṅkat tarumacālaikku eḻuntaruḷi kātcik koṭukkum taruṇam mikavum aṭutta camīpamāka virukkiṉṟatu. Antat taruṇattil cālaikku uriyavarkaḷaki yiruntu iṟantavarkaḷaiy ellām eḻuppik koṭuttaruḷvār. itu cattiyam. itu cattiyam." The

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Further, it is also important to reflect on the core ethical creed of *The Conduct* that is the conduct of compassion toward all living beings, which is sketched in the following terms:

- It is the recognition of the common humanity of all of us without discrimination and thereby an instinctive response to react and help alleviate the suffering of a fellow human being.
- The most elemental of sufferings, more basic than all others, is that of hunger, hence it is this that should be targeted by all of us with whatever resources—meager or abundant—we might possess and on a daily basis.
- One should curb extravagance in one's social life and conserve one's income and resources in order to feed others.
- The practice of compassion balances the workings of predestination and karma. It is true that those who suffer from hunger in this life do so because of the consequences of their karmic residues from previous lives. Yet, at the same time, God has created others who will feed them due to his own compassion, and hence in feeding others, we become like a God ourselves.
- The practice of compassion is both a means and an end (in medieval scholastic terminology, one would speak of *sādhana* and *sādhya*, and indeed Ramalinga also uses this terminology)—when it manifests itself in us, it is already a sign of God's grace, and when we grow in it, then the grace becomes fully manifest and leads, finally, both to immortal powers (*siddhis*) and deathlessness (*maraṇamillātal*) and the complete bliss of God.

When we consider what triggers this compassion, it is the physical disintegration and suffering of the dying person so graphically described with which I began this essay. It is this person, the text says, who should generate compassion. Peculiar passages, very similar to this, appear is other pieces of Rama-

Christian influence on Ramalinga Swamigal's later theology becomes particular clear when we consider the prose writings in entirety and look at his discourses (*upadeśa*) as well as his public notifications in the last decade of his life. These are centered around a millennial and messianic religion in every sense of both terms—a gathering together of his flock of believers into a this-worldly ideal existence, immanent part of a greater cosmic plan of which he was the sole prophet, saying that God has raised him to a state where he could impart the truth to his followers. The *Caṉmārkkam* no longer had anything to do with *Śaiva Siddhānta* but with a transformative moment in history where one purified oneself through right efforts, cast off the veils of illusion to a point where there would be the physical transformation of one's own body, the obtaining of extraordinary powers including deathlessness and the raising of the dead. On this, see Raman, *Transformation of Tamil Religion*.

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linga Swamigal's prose writings.[64] I call them peculiar, even incongruous, because they create some kind of disjuncture within the doctrinal texts they inhabit. The reader/listener is jolted from a state perhaps of calm attentiveness or intellectual involvement or, for that matter, even detachment, which may ensue from listening to a theological sermon, to a visceral sense of the corporeality of the human being and the horrific, physical suffering involved in dying painfully, dying from hunger in this case. In this context, food is godly, those who give it akin to gods who mitigate the horrors of life. At the same time, the very lyricism of the passage lends it a forensic beauty—a kind of relentless fascination with the beauty of decay that is akin to the beauty of the aster flower in Gottfried Benn's famous poem *Kleine Aster*, planted in the chest cavity of a corpse and blossoming in the fluids of blood and decomposition. In the ultimate analysis, this juxtaposition of pain and beauty leads us also to see that the suffering and dying person becomes a source of grace, the sole means through which one might attain salvation—leaving one to speculate and consider how deeply and intimately the Passion of Christ might have worked its way into the very core of Ramalinga Swamigal's theology.[65]

A close reading of Ramalinga Swamigal's later writings and a contextualization of them in his biography (he came from a nonelite, non-Brahmin caste of lower-level Vēḷḷālas) and social context (primarily semiurban or rural for most of his life) show us very clearly that he was not involved in a project of religious reform of an existent elite scriptural tradition—like his foil and contemporary Arumuga Navalar (Ārumuka Nāvalar) and Navalar's reform of Śaivism.[66] Rather, Ramalinga's was a characteristically subaltern response to the encounter with missionary Christianity. How might this response be

[64] See, e.g., the description of a murdered and dying person in his first prose piece, *Maṉumuṟai-kaṇṭavācakam*, dealt with in Srilata Raman, "The Tale of the Righteous King: King Maṉu in Ramalinga Atikal (1823–1874), in *Passages: Relationships between Tamil and Sanskrit*, ed. M. Kannan and Jennifer Clare (Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondicherry, 2009), 246–47, and "Justifying Filicide: Ramalinga Swamigal, the *Periyapurāṇam*, and Tamil Religious Modernity," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (2013, forthcoming).

[65] A close scrutiny of how the figure of Christ was perceived in specific vernacular textual traditions—such as the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Tamil one—would be a desideratum if we are to understand, in its specificities, the imbrication of Christianity in non-Christian, religious traditions. For the theological narratives about the resurrected Christ in patristic and medieval literature as well as the discussions about the nature of and the need for the resurrected body, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). For the representation of the suffering Christ in late medieval English devotional texts, see Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1996). For how Christ's Passion was an important trope in Indian-Catholic martyrdom narratives already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Ines G. Županov, *Missionary Tropics: The Catholic Frontier in India, Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

[66] On the contrasts between Arumuga Navalar and Ramalinga Swamigal and the controversial dispute between them and their followers, see Raman, *Transformation of Tamil Religion*, chaps. 1 and 3.

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understood? In some crucial sense it might be understood as markedly different from the responses that emerged in the discourse of religious reform leading to the construction of modern Hinduism, even while it borrowed elements from it. The difference, I would further suggest, lies in the space one inhabits. Ramalinga had, for a significant portion of his life, been immersed in a Tamil Śaivite, *bhakti*-oriented milieu. In the last phase of his life he had reached a point where he decisively abandoned these familiar signposts and chose, instead, to call forth a new religion. He wandered for several years and in these years he was exposed to the views of Christian missionaries. In some sense this was an encounter. But what kind of encounter?

In his book *Comparative Theology*, Francis X. Clooney, has pointed out the implications of the act of comparison undertaken sensitively:

> Comparison is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other. It ordinarily starts with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities—texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons—near one another, so that they may be seen over and again, side by side. In this necessarily arbitrary and intuitive practice we understand each differently because the other is near, and by cumulative insight also begin to comprehend related matters differently too. Finally, we see ourselves differently, intuitively uncovering dimensions of ourselves that would not otherwise, by a non-comparative logic, come to the fore.[67]

But even is this act of comparison, as he himself has suggested, one is always walking on an edge. Speaking of "our own" and "the other" necessarily sets up a border or a boundary across which the exchange can and does take place, with the explicit acknowledgment that there are two different sides to the border that we acknowledge, maintain, and mutually respect. Ramalinga Swamigal, in contrast, appears to inhabit or have decided to inhabit the border. Can it be that when one stands on the border, there also emerges the possibility of transcending it, through a kind of "border thinking"?[68] His theological trajectory confirms him as seeing all around him a religious continuum that could be appropriated in different ways. This enabled the emergence of certain kind of "subaltern knowledge" in the border space between Christianity and Hinduism. This subaltern knowledge did not function through a conscious borrowing between discrete religions. Nor did it attempt to construct modern Hindu universals. Rather, emerging as it did from an acute consciousness of premodern regimes of power that had been denied to those such as him, and

[67] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Boundaries* (Malden: MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 11.

[68] Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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encountering the new regimes of colonial power, it attempted to position itself in between and beyond the two, seeking to remain embedded in local histories and to exist as a form of border thinking in the life and afterlife of colonial modernity.

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