

Ramalinga's Devotional Poems

Creating a Hagiography

THE MODERNITY OF BHAKTI TRADITION

Ramalinga's 1867 verses can be broadly characterized as works of bhakti, devotion. By calling them bhakti poems, I highlight their devotional character and their place in a long Tamil literary tradition of devotional poetry. Ramalinga situated himself in a lineage of Shaiva bhakti poets, as we will see. Most of his verses directly address Shiva, and much of his 1867 work consists of descriptions of the power, beauty, and benevolence of Shiva. Most, but not all, of the poems are grammatically simple, using a lexicon and images that Ramalinga clearly drew upon from prior Shaiva poet-saints. These poems contain few explicit references to his specific historical context, and they appear to be, at least on a first reading, uncontroversial. They contain none of the radical denunciations of caste, hierarchy, and canon of his poems that were published after his death. Their continuity with prior Shaiva traditions led Kamil Zvelebil to emphasize his links to the past, calling him "the last great and true *bhakti* poet."¹

In the 1867 poems, Ramalinga presents himself as a "traditional" poet-saint, writing in verse, emphasizing his special relationship to Shiva, and claiming authority as a Shaiva saint and charismatic guru. David Smith has argued that gurus represent "traditional" dimensions of Hinduism. "Nothing better characterizes the gulf between Hinduism and modernity than the guru." Smith acknowledges, however, that the institution of the guru thrives in contemporary India, describing the "dominant position" of gurus "the great innovation in Hinduism in modern times." He considers their contemporary popularity to be a reassertion of traditional Hinduism, in which "gurus are generally maintaining traditional spirituality, but packaging it attractively for the modern world, and also spreading it

beyond the shores of India. They are living exponents of the truths of Hinduism.”² According to Smith’s logic, Ramalinga’s aspirations to sainthood, and the writings through which he advanced his claim to serve as a leader and guru, were traditional and therefore opposed to modern expressions of Hinduism. Any modern features we find in his persona and teachings are part of a superficial “packaging” that veil the everlasting “truths of Hinduism” in his message.

However, if we simply consign these poems to a literary realm of long-standing Tamil Shaiva bhakti tradition, or consider them to be the writings of a traditional guru, we miss the ways that they contributed to current debates and transformed Shaivism. Indeed, the 1867 publication initiated, perhaps unwittingly, a high-profile, polemical exchange between Ramalinga’s followers and Tamil Shaiva reformers based in monasteries. The controversy suggests the salience of these poems in Ramalinga’s time, compelling us to examine the reasons for their social impact. I argue here that we do not have to choose between describing these poems as either traditional or modern, nor should we see them as imparting a traditional message in a modern guise. Their historical importance lay precisely in the way that Ramalinga drew on Shaiva literary conventions to advance arguments about the accessibility of ritual, the possibility of revelation, and, perhaps most important, his own leadership claims. By framing these arguments with Tamil Shaiva mythological, theological, ritual, and literary tropes and idioms, he participated in a contemporary Shaiva discursive sphere in which leaders contested distinct formulations of ritual, hierarchy, and canon.

One way to highlight the historical import of his poems is to focus on the public implications of the work, including the potential breadth of its audience and the way the poems supported Ramalinga’s leadership claims. These verses narrate personal details that provided the basis of emerging hagiographies about his extraordinary feats. Such firsthand accounts of direct revelation were particularly important to Ramalinga, whose leadership credentials were founded not on ties to established institutions or texts, but on his claims to represent Shiva himself. For Ramalinga, devotion entailed public dimensions as described by Christian Lee Novetzke: “all manifestations of bhakti are performances and, more to the point, public ones, that is, performances that are part of, or help form, publics of reception.”³ I will consider Ramalinga’s verses as “performances” that publicly communicate his extraordinary relationship to Shiva. Although he formally addresses most of his poems to Shiva, or to himself, he had an audience in mind when he composed them, passed them on to his followers, and published them. Here I limit my discussion to the poems published in the 1867 volume.⁴ Ramalinga and others deliberated carefully over its content, knowing that it would be subject to public scrutiny. This was the only publication of his verses in his lifetime, so it is likely that these poems represent most accurately the image and teachings he wished to publicize.

What was this audience? We have seen that manuscripts of his writings, both Ramalinga’s own handwritten originals and copies by his devotees, circulated

among his followers for years before 1867. His primary audience, then, consisted of members of his society. The 1867 publication marked an effort to expand this audience. Ramalinga's insistence that the publication should include only poems to Shiva suggests that he sought a broad Shaiva audience that would respond to conventional Tamil Shaiva devotional imagery and tropes. The published verses stress the accessibility of Shiva to all worshipers, regardless of caste or class. Ramalinga celebrates the power of the most simple Shaiva rituals, which are inexpensive and easy to perform, rather than complex temple rituals that demand significant resources and reinforce hierarchy. Most, but not all, of the poems are grammatically simple and employ a lexicon and narratives that Ramalinga drew from his bhakti predecessors. Zvelebil notes that although Ramalinga was capable of producing sophisticated, complex poetry, "most of his poems are simple in language and diction: common, almost colloquial Tamil, is used to express mystic experience, deep philosophical thought, and prayer to God for mercy, forgiveness and grace."⁵ Ramalinga chose to write in a style that would be accessible to Shaivas with little education, and here he differed from other Tamil poets of his time who wrote poetry that was technically complex and deliberately opaque.⁶ The 1867 publication targeted a broad Shaiva audience that would respond to the message of ritual and personal accessibility of Shiva.

I argue here that Ramalinga's verses were shaped by prior Shaiva devotional literary traditions, but also that they were modern in a number of ways. First, they present autobiographical elements that assert Ramalinga's individual uniqueness among his contemporaries, supporting his leadership claims. Second, Ramalinga viewed Shaiva tradition as flexible and able to accommodate new expressions of revelation and canonicity. Third, he celebrated the power of the most inexpensive, simple, and accessible features of Shaiva ritual. As such, his writings present a subtle critique of the expensive, brahmanic, temple rituals that were instrumental in maintaining caste hierarchies. His writings sought to make Shaivism more accessible, not by expanding the audience of elite messages but by rendering more democratic messages in the idioms and genres of Shaiva devotional literature. He presented all these modern elements through Shaiva models, idioms, and conventions, in a form that addressed the poverty and social inequality around him. His writings were modern not because they incorporated Western messages, but because they redefined Shaivism in ways that addressed the social inequalities of his 1860s South Indian world.

There is, however, some overlap between these modern features of Ramalinga's message and the characteristics of Western modernity, namely, his focus on accessibility, individuality, and the notion that tradition can be consistently transformed and renewed. Timothy Dobe and Brian Hatcher, in their analyses of autobiographical writing among prominent Hindus in colonial India, also noted such overlap, positing a "convergence" between Western modes of autobiography and vernacular forms of literary self-presentation.⁷ As Dobe notes, such "convergence" does

not need to imply direct, Western influence; prior vernacular literature abounded in autobiographical elements, so that “telling one’s unique, personal story” was “*motivated* rather than *constrained* by ‘tradition.’”⁸ The direct influence of Western autobiography in the case of Ramalinga is doubtful. He did not employ the sort of coherent, comprehensive, narrative structure of Western autobiographical writing. More important, he wrote in verse, not prose, in contrast to the more cosmopolitan authors discussed by Dobe and Hatcher. His use of verse suited the hagiographical character of his self-presentation, as the prestige and mystical potential of verse was contrary to the sort of rationalizing literalism emphasized in prose writing. Verse allowed him to claim canonicity for his writings, and thus sainthood for himself, insofar as Shaiva sainthood was in his time predicated on authorship of revered poetry. His verses would be used in ritual contexts, in ways that they could not have been if he had written in prose. We should therefore view the personal elements of Ramalinga’s writing not primarily as a “convergence” with Western sources, but as an extension of bhakti traditions that present the author as a vital aspect of the text. He appears to have expanded on the expression of personal subjectivity in his poems, furthering the evolution of the persona of the Shaiva poet-saint.

In the sections below, I will often cite Ramalinga’s verses in their entirety, including formulaic lines in praise of Shiva. This will give the reader a better sense of the tone of his poetry, which would be difficult to communicate with a more truncated presentation of his verses. It also highlights that Ramalinga joined the personal and the divine, constantly reminding the listener/reader of the connection between his personal experiences and the majesty and grace of Shiva. I divide my discussion here into four general foci: the autobiographical; Ramalinga’s use of Shaiva literary models and tropes; his conceptualization of textual traditions; and his approach to ritual. These foci are intertwined in many of his poems, but I present them separately for the purpose of analysis.

PRESENTING AN AUTOHAGIOGRAPHY

One of the most notable aspects of Ramalinga’s 1867 verses is their highly personal character. This feature is not unique to Ramalinga, and in fact is common to bhakti literature in Tamil and throughout India. Karen Pechilis Prentiss, comparing bhakti works in a variety of regional South Asian languages, states that “One of the most important commonalities is that authors explicitly refer to themselves in their poetry.”⁹ Norman Cutler describes the transparency of the author as a distinguishing feature of Shaiva and Vaishnava Tamil bhakti literature, and notes that in many of the classical poems, the poet is the subject. Cutler argues that bhakti poetry can be read as providing a historical account of the poet, because the poet describes personal emotions and life experiences, often in very specific detail.¹⁰ In his study of one of Ramalinga’s closest Shaiva predecessors, the early

eighteenth-century poet Tayumanavar, David Shulman argues that Tayumanavar's works communicate an enhanced subjectivity that was less pronounced in the writings of earlier Shaiva poet-saints. Tayumanavar's writing is highly "autobiographical," presenting the reader with "rich internal dialogues" that express a range of inner states within a notion of selfhood that reflects "a new, almost modern sensibility rooted in a changing anthropology." Shulman situates Tayumanavar "within the evolving ethos of his time, on the edge of the modern era in South India."¹¹ Ramalinga's emphasis on personal details of his life, his intimate interactions with Shiva, and his ethical struggles continues this tradition of personalization in Shaiva bhakti writing.

If we take seriously the axiom that any bhakti poet assumes an audience for his poems, then we can further suggest that the author presents a strategic representation of himself to his audience through his poetry. Ramalinga's verses, then, give insight into the ways that Ramalinga saw himself and wanted to present himself to his audience. We can view his poems as autobiographical or even autohagiographical, as the personal details that he included would contribute to emerging hagiographies.¹² Ramalinga's self-representation thus served as a tool to draw new followers to his teachings. As I will show, this self-representation, especially his emphasis on his close relationship with Shiva, had important implications for his bid for authority and patronage. His rejection of traditional, institutional power meant that he needed to invest his person, and his experiences, with an authority that would convince his followers of the truth of his teachings.

Hagiographies of Ramalinga frequently contend that his childhood was marked by extraordinary insights and experiences of god.¹³ In his verses, Ramalinga indicates that his devotion to Shiva began at a very young age. "Even though I was a young boy, I became your servant. Don't abandon me, oh graceful one, who gave your sweet grace" (3034).¹⁴ He specifies that Shiva "took me as a servant when I was nine years old" (2697). According to Ramalinga, his devotion was reciprocated or even initiated by Shiva.

When I was young, without a bit of self-knowledge, you graciously took a seat in my heart. Whenever I was confused, you affectionately told me to call you "mother." Sometimes, you made it clear that I should call you "father," and you stayed with me. How should I refer to you? Should I call you my soul? Should I refer to you my friend, my faithful life companion? Should I call you my guru, who with grace removes all my troubles? What should I call you? I'll call you my beloved (3041).

The favor that Shiva showed Ramalinga, and their subsequent intimacy, are features that Ramalinga emphasizes throughout his written corpus. On the one hand, Ramalinga downplays his own talents by locating agency with Shiva. On the other hand, he sets himself apart from other people, because Shiva chose him specifically as a beneficiary of divine grace.

Ramalinga claims that not only was he devoted to Shiva at a young age, but he also began to compose poetry to Shiva, and to Murugan, when he was just a boy. “When I was young, without any wisdom at all, playing in the streets, my little legs flapping around, at that period of my life you gave me valuable knowledge and had me sing about you, you who took form out of formlessness. Who else enjoys your soothing intimacy?” (2218). Ramalinga almost reluctantly acknowledges his poetic abilities but attributes these to Shiva. “When I was young, knowing absolutely nothing about composing poems, you removed my meager knowledge, and gave me a little bit of valuable knowledge, so that even those with understanding of refined poetic composition appreciate my poems. You put lowly me on the path of pure Shiva, which is the pervasive true path. What can I say about your grace?” (3042). By attributing his literary precociousness and talent to Shiva, Ramalinga is able to acknowledge the quality of his poetry without appearing to be arrogant. At the same time, he asserts the divine character of his verses, which, after all, owe their composition to the grace of Shiva himself.

Ramalinga credits Shiva not only with bestowing the ability to compose devotional verses, but with all his learning.¹⁵ “Oh lord! Oh protector who performs the dance of knowledge and bliss in the hall at Chidambaram! You accepted me as your servant, I who had no faith in anything. You entered inside of me, spoke secretly, and made me understand everything without formal study” (2775). This knowledge of the divine that Shiva teaches Ramalinga is not nebulous but specific and concrete. It includes knowledge of the Vedas and classical arts. “I was in darkness, not knowing anything. You made it so that I would obtain a little bit of knowledge. You gave me knowledge, without formal study, of the various classical arts beginning with the recited Vedas. You gave me that understanding, and showed me the true state of grace” (3053). Later hagiographies invariably repeat Ramalinga’s claim that he learned directly from Shiva, not through study with a teacher.¹⁶

Ramalinga presents himself as an undeserving beneficiary of Shiva’s grace. He stresses his ignorance as a youth, and his moral and intellectual failings as an adult. His moral shortcomings extend to his lack of control of his lust for women. “Oh bright light that destroys darkness! Oh Shiva guru who sits in the hearts of devotees! My father, I, your servant, abandoned the iron chain called ‘woman,’ which binds one to domestic life. But as soon as I did that, I became confused, adorning myself with the powerful shackle of desire for prostitutes that sap the strength. Even lowly beasts don’t do this! If you put up with the faults of this perverse dog, this would be something new!” (2147). The line about abandoning “the iron chain called ‘woman’” is likely a reference to Ramalinga’s marriage, which he elsewhere asserts was against his wishes and which hagiographies insist he never consummated.¹⁷ In any case, Ramalinga frequently gives voice to his struggles with lust, sometimes celebrating his victory over his desire (1009). Perhaps predictably, these admissions appear less prominently in hagiographies.¹⁸

Through his verses, then, Ramalinga presents a detailed self-portrayal of transformative processes of his youth, his acquisition of knowledge, his character, and his struggles with desire. He also mentions very specific events and decisions he made in his life. In these reflections, he invariably refers to Shiva as his most important confidant and companion. Thus, when he contemplates a move from Chennai to his birth area near Chidambaram, he asks Shiva for his advice. "To get rid of my troubles, I don't know if I should remain near Otri, or if I should live at Chidambaram, town of the tiger. Oh Shiva, what should I do? I am an insignificant person of with little of your grace. Why don't you give me your grace, saying 'Come here quickly!?' How can I reach you? Oh, lord of the hall of Otri, which the corrupt cannot approach! Oh lord of the hall of Chidambaram, which everyone praises!" (1083). Ramalinga frames the move in terms of two of Shiva's temples, which are the ones that Ramalinga refers to most often in his verses. Eventually, Ramalinga would choose Chidambaram, moving to Vadalur, just a short distance from his birthplace and twenty-five kilometers from Chidambaram.

On other occasions he refers to less important, mundane events. For example, in one verse Ramalinga recalls an occasion when he forgets to recite Shiva's name before eating. "I'm a lowly degenerate. I forgot the custom of chanting your name, Nilakandam, before having my meal. I stood before you, like iron before gold. Oh beautiful fruit, whose matted hair shines like lightning! Isn't this why you punished me today at Otri, which shines in the world that is surrounded by the vast ocean?" (1050). By including Shiva in minor, everyday events in his life, Ramalinga communicates the closeness and constancy of their relationship.

Perhaps most powerful are those verses in which Ramalinga stresses the intimacy of his relationship with Shiva. He describes specific instances of interaction in ways that suggest physical, not imaginative, encounters. "One night, you came walking, your feet hurting, looking for me, your servant. You opened the door, and happily put one of your flowered feet inside. You beckoned me, saying 'Take this!' When I refused, you firmly disregarded me, and gave it to me in my hand, saying 'Remain here.' In the coming days, I realized the worth of this, and I rejoiced. Oh ruby who dances in the jeweled hall of Chidambaram!" (3066). Shiva's penchant for visiting Ramalinga and giving him things clearly sets him apart from other worshippers and made him the equal of the most celebrated poet-saints of the Shaiva tradition. He describes how Shiva singled him out even among other devotees.

Taking on a divine body of radiant beauty, you appeared in your grace before me, your servant. Smiling with grace, you put me in the middle of an assembly of devotees. You gave them all sacred ash, and then turning to me, your face blossoming with compassion, you took a beautiful red flower of light from your alms bag and gave it to me. I don't understand this sign of yours, my guru! Oh master, taking the form of brilliant light, you beautifully performed the dance of enjoyment in the public hall [of Chidambaram] set with jewels, radiant with a robe of a young elephant (3162).

While Ramalinga questions the meaning of Shiva's special gift to him, the effect of the verse is to mark Ramalinga's relationship with Shiva as a special one, even when compared to other devotees. References to this special relationship pervade Ramalinga's verses, providing material for emerging hagiographies that would have important implications for his authority as a religious leader.

Ramalinga drew heavily on prior Shaiva idioms, symbols, rituals, and poetic forms in these poems. One might suppose that this immersion in tradition eclipsed any sense of his personal individuality, that is, that his poems were dominated by a mimesis that reproduced traditional Shaiva poetry and precluded any possibility of innovation or expression of unique individuality. Yet such a view reaffirms the persistent and pernicious dichotomy between tradition and modernity, in which it is only with Western modernity that we see the emergence of the modern author. Andrew Bennett characterizes the modern "Romantic conception of authorship" as one that places a "stress on individuality, on uniqueness and originality, on the conscious intention of the autonomous subject."¹⁹ The opposition between an autonomous, modern, Western author and a conventional, traditional, Hindu one is misleading in both directions. That is, there is no such thing as an entirely autonomous subject, and any author, Western, modern, or otherwise, composes in the discursive contexts of specific literary cultures. Moreover, Hindu literary traditions have always valued creativity, improvisation, innovation, and individual expression, as much as they have emphasized conformity to convention.

If Ramalinga's expression of unique individuality aligns with Western modernity's idealization of autonomous subjectivity, it is important to recognize that he announces this unique individuality in the context of divine revelation that had a physicality and sensuousness that stands in contrast to Western sensibilities of modernity. However, I consider Ramalinga's emphasis on revelation to be itself modern, as it is through his claims to revelation that he successfully advanced his public bid for authority. His rejection of, and rejection by, powerful Shaiva institutions meant that he needed to build his authority on his personal experiences, which he does through these writings. This basis of authority is particularly important given the unorthodox character of some of his teachings, such as his radical ideology of ritual gifting of food to the poor. Thus, Ramalinga's personal revelations would come to serve his leadership aspirations in his own life, and his legacy and teachings after his death. His verses were not survivals from a traditional past, but they were forceful statements that wielded the potential to transform current relationships of authority and ideologies of social organization.

RAMALINGA'S USE OF BHAKTI TROPES

If Ramalinga advanced his leadership claims by presenting elements of autohagiography, he also asserted his place among revered Shaiva saints by modeling his poems on revered devotional works. Ramalinga drew from classical bhakti

literature for the narratives, idioms, symbols, and models in which he described Shiva, himself as poet, his relationship with Shiva, and a sectarianism that demanded exclusive devotion to Shaiva gods. By juxtaposing personal experience with traditional formulae, Ramalinga's verses anchor his biography in Shaiva literary traditions. Despite his position outside the Shaiva halls of power, Ramalinga presents himself as a Shaiva saint, articulating a vision of Shaivism that emphasizes direct experience rather than Shaiva institutions and their attendant hierarchies.

Ramalinga draws on the rich narrative tradition of Tamil Shaivism in his lavish descriptions of Shiva and his feats. In many instances, these references are to pan-Indian Puranic narratives. "You took a special form, when Brahma and Vishnu looked high and low for you. Your matted locks are crowded with the [Ganga] river, *kondrai* flowers, snakes and the crescent moon. You have countless names and abodes. We'll light holy lamps at the temple where you live, supreme lord visible at excellent Otri" (895). Here Ramalinga cites a well-known story in which Shiva takes the form of a pillar of fire, and Vishnu and Brahma unsuccessfully search for the ends of the pillar. Ramalinga frequently evokes this sort of Puranic imagery. "He has three eyes and a dark throat; he is lord of the Ganges; he is part woman" (888). Or, "He wears an earring; he wears a tiger skin; he rides a bull that sleeps on the ocean; he has a battle-ax and a deer; he carries the skull of the head of Brahma; he is the one of Otriyur; he is of the famed white forest; he has an eye in his forehead; he is my god of grace!" (824). Any Shaiva, Tamil or otherwise, would recognize Shiva with a tiger skin or carrying Brahma's skull. Ramalinga likely learned these narratives through Tamil, not Sanskrit, literature, as his knowledge of pan-Indian Sanskrit works was limited and the narratives he uses are commonly recounted in Tamil Shaiva literature.²⁰

Ramalinga juxtaposes these pan-Indian Puranic elements to references that are unique to Tamil Shaivism, situating Shiva at the important temple at Otri and in the white forest of Venkatu. This technique of linking local and pan-Indian Shaiva myths is one that was commonly used by the authors of the *Tēvāram*. Indira Peterson notes that "the typical *Tēvāram* verse juxtaposes and links—through syntax and implication, as well as explicit statement—the cosmic deeds and forms of Śiva with his strictly local persona and acts." Another common "blending technique" used by the poets of the *Tēvāram* is to link those cosmic and local acts of Shiva with a specific devotee.²¹ Ramalinga, similarly, lists the accolades of Shiva in a variety of scales: as a pan-Indian, universal god; as a local, Tamil god; and as a personal god, the god who bestows his grace on Ramalinga. The power of these verses lay in the wonder expressed by Ramalinga that such a widely celebrated god could also be his personal god. These linkages allow Ramalinga to ground his distinctive experiences in well-established Shaiva literary traditions.

It is with reference to narratives, places, and idioms unique to Tamil traditions that Ramalinga's knowledge is most impressive and detailed. The most important sources for his descriptions of Shiva were works of the Shaiva devotional canon,

most importantly the *Tēvāram*, the *Tiruvācakam*, and the *Periya Purāṇam*. He was also familiar with important Tamil temple Puranas, *talapurāṇam*, like the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam* of the Minakshi temple in Madurai. In his long, 417-verse poem “Viṇṇappak kalivenpā” (A Petition in Kalivenpa Meter), Ramalinga recounts a number of Shiva’s exploits, many of which are unique to Tamil Shaivism. “You were unable to bear the suffering of the piglets, who couldn’t suckle from their dead mother, so you took form as their mother and gave them breast milk. You became a servant and sold firewood for the sake of the bard who had given word to the Pandyan king to take part in a musical competition” (1962.376–377). Ramalinga here refers to two stories from the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*. In the first, Shiva suckles pigs whose mother is killed by the Pandyan king in a hunt. In the second, the Pandyan king asks a local bard, Panapattiran, to participate in a competition with a skilled singer from the North. Panapattiran, doubting his skill, prays to Shiva. Shiva takes form as a humble seller of firewood and sings beautifully in the earshot of the foreign singer, who asks him who he is. Shiva says he is the student of Panapattiran, and the foreign singer, convinced of the superior skill of his opponent, flees the Pandyan country.²²

Ramalinga also depicts images of Shiva that are specific to Tamil Shaivism. “I think joyfully about that eternal, beautiful vision of him seated with the woman who bestows grace on devotees, and with the boy holding a spear. Why doesn’t he give me any grace? He is the accomplished lord, the lord of Tillai, the divine lord, Shiva. He is the crazy god, Tyaga Peruman of Otri, the beggar god” (776). Here Ramalinga describes Shiva at the Chennai temple of Otri accompanied by “the boy with the spear,” a reference to Murugan, the much revered Tamil form of Shiva’s son. Ramalinga frequently addresses Shiva in specific manifestations in temples at Otri and especially Chidambaram. He praises Shiva as “my master, who performs the dance of bliss in the flawless, jeweled hall” (3044), and as the “profound truth, who with joy performs the dance in the hall, which is the inner heart of the True devotees” (3045). Ramalinga draws on bhakti literature in describing Shiva in his form as Nataraja, the lord of the dance, and the “hall” here, as every educated Tamil Shaiva would know, is the sanctum at Chidambaram. By situating Shiva at these temples, he accentuates the Tamil character of Shiva. His focus on Tamil idioms and places points to an audience limited to Tamil speakers, especially those with some knowledge of Tamil Shaiva tradition. This is one reason that Ramalinga’s popularity has never extended beyond Tamil-speaking communities.

At times, Ramalinga employs these formulaic references to add significance to his autohagiographical recollections. Here, too, he favors Tamil tropes, such as references to Shiva’s attendance at the poet-saint Sundarar’s marriage. “You went to the wedding of Sundarar, who wore a garland on his shoulders. You had an argument there. If you’re happy to call me your servant, you wouldn’t need to show any document. If you ask me to do not one task, but many, I will do that with pleasure, with no hesitation” (1182). Here Ramalinga describes a story, recounted

in the *Periya Purāṇam*, in which Shiva takes the guise of an ascetic and appears at Sundarar's wedding. He disrupts the proceedings, announcing in the middle of the ceremony that he, in fact, owns Sundarar. When questioned, he produces a document to prove his case.²³ In another poem, Ramalinga notes that Shiva did not come to his wedding as he did that of Sundarar, but that if he had, Ramalinga would happily leave his contracted marriage and wed Shiva (2019). Ramalinga's playful references contrast Sundarar's reluctance to acquiesce to Shiva with his own willingness to be Shiva's servant. Ramalinga imaginatively inserts himself into the narrative landscape of Tamil Shaivism, giving the personal details of his biography a Shaiva character.

Ramalinga also employs a variety of bhakti tropes in describing his relationship with Shiva. He downplays the effectiveness of asceticism, asserting that the deepest understanding of Shiva only comes through devotion and direct interaction (e.g., 2125). He writes that his heart "melts" when thinking of Shiva, using a term, *uruku*, that is one of the most frequent descriptors of the emotional effects of bhakti. He often focuses on Shiva's feet, in part a symptom of his projected unworthiness. "My hard heart melted (*uruku*) when I saw the holy feet of Tyaga Peruman, Lord Shiva, who once gave the golden cymbals, a pearl palanquin, and an umbrella to the benevolent one of the town Kali. How do I describe that vision?" (1369). He emphasizes his unworthiness with respect to Shiva, calling himself a dog, the lowest of the low, another trope of Shaiva bhakti poets. "I have a rubbish bin of a mind, a magnet for deceitful acts. I am the cruelest of all people" (1139).²⁴ He thereby highlights Shiva's grace in accepting such a degenerate devotee and makes himself appear more human, providing an accessible role model for his audience. Ramalinga builds on his personal biography through these common bhakti tropes. In doing so, he gives a strong, Shaiva character to the unique, individual elements of his biography that we saw in the previous section. In following prior poet-saints in describing himself, Ramalinga makes a case for his own sainthood. This also suggests the difficulty of disentangling the personal from the formulaic, that is, what was distinctive in Ramalinga's experiences and what he drew from Shaiva literary tradition.

Ramalinga often portrays Shiva's reciprocation of his devotion in terms of specific relationships, which again follow prior bhakti models. Most frequently, he characterizes his relationship with Shiva using the language of kinship. Thus, Shiva often calls Ramalinga "son," and Ramalinga calls Shiva "father" or less frequently "mother." In referring to Shiva as a father to his devotees, Ramalinga emphasizes specific aspects of Shiva's character, especially his compassion and mercy. "Those who are dear to you, they think of their lives, that are filled with your compassion, and they praise you, 'Our father! Our father! Our father!'" (601). Shiva, like a father, is a protector of his devotees, providing them a place of sanctuary. "My mind, let's seek refuge in the feet of our father" (784). As a father and a mother, Shiva also provides for his devotees. "Father, when your servants beg for food,

you feed them like a mother” (1048). Ramalinga stresses their reciprocal duties as father and son. “Oh father of Otri, it is your duty to show me the path to salvation, and my duty to serve you” (915). He appeals to Shiva not to abandon him, addressing him as “father,” reminding him that he “enslaved” Ramalinga at a young age, and lauding Shiva’s “enormous compassion” (2698). Their relationship as father-son is in part predicated on their association since Ramalinga was very young. “When I was young . . . you made it clear that I should call you ‘father,’ and you stayed with me” (3041). Their relationship is also one of love and pleasure. “In this world of attachments, there are thousands of mothers who have love for their children, but are any equal to you in your love? There are countless fathers, who take pleasure in their children, but do any equal you, oh god?” (1962.386–388). In conceiving of his relationship with Shiva in kinship terms, Ramalinga emphasizes their close connection, while maintaining the sense of hierarchy between them.

Perhaps most strikingly, some of Ramalinga’s poems include descriptions of Shiva as Ramalinga’s lover. In these erotic poems, Shiva makes sexual advances toward Ramalinga, and visions of Shiva stimulate Ramalinga’s desire. In the following verse, Ramalinga writes as a woman speaking to a friend. “I went with the other towns-people to the procession of Tyagaperuman of Otri, fertile and beautiful. On seeing him, my heart was filled with delight. My breasts, constrained by cloth, grew to the size of mountains, and the bangles on my arm loosened. Oh friend with beautiful hair, what is this? I stood there, nothing but desire!” (1493).²⁵ Ramalinga speaks of his early “marriage” to Shiva. “Nataraja, who abides in the hearts of true devotees, came to me with desire when I was young and ignorant. He put a garland on me, marrying me” (3017). Elsewhere, Ramalinga presents Shiva as a sexual aggressor, approaching him in inappropriate ways. “The thief stood here, with pleasure in his eyes. He said that he was from Otri. With his mouth that sings melodies, he said, ‘Give me alms.’ I came and gave it to him. Then he said, ‘Women give something other than this.’ I asked, ‘What offering are you talking about?’ He replied, ‘The sort of offering that you have in your mind.’ Oh, my friend, what is this?” (1779). Zvelebil points out that such erotic poems are common in Tamil bhakti literature, with the poet, whether male or female, usually taking on the persona of the female counterpart of Shiva.²⁶ It is likely that Ramalinga here follows Manikkavacakar, who frames devotion to Shiva in terms of an erotic, even sexual, relationship.²⁷

Another important element of Ramalinga’s bhakti is a sectarianism that demands exclusive loyalty to Shiva over non-Shaiva Hindu gods, especially Vishnu and Brahma. “You should in your grace accept this simple man, whether I live or die. My tongue won’t stir to sing of anything other than your feet, which are firmly planted in the hall of Chidambaram, even if Vishnu, Brahma, and other gods threaten to hang themselves. This is the truth. If you think of finding evidence for this, why not consider your two feet, which are a refuge fixed inside of me?” (1093). These assertions of the superiority of Shiva are also statements about sectarian

communities that organize themselves around specific gods. "Oh father who is the heaven of true wisdom. Here is a request to you: on this earth, there are many people committed to sects who worship a few minor gods. Please make sure that I don't join them!" (2066). Elsewhere he specifies more clearly what these opposing sects may be. "Oh my mind, tremble, tremble if you see lustful people; argumentative Jains; poor beggars; male slaves; those with a desire for Vaishnavism; or those with jaded tongues. They gather around the eternal one, the faultless pure one, the dancer of Chidambaram, the unique lord, him of pure truth, he of wise bliss that blossoms at Otri, but they don't praise him" (907). Ramalinga's assertions of the predominance of Shiva over other gods, and Shaivas over other sects, is consistent with the Puranic and Shaiva devotional literature from which he draws. His rejection of "minor gods" would not include Shaiva gods like Murugan or Shiva's consort Devi, since Ramalinga wrote many poems to them both. However, by omitting his poems to Murugan from the 1867 publication, Ramalinga ensured an exclusive focus on Shiva, which might be linked, in part, to his caste. As Indira Peterson points out, non-brahman *vellalars* like Ramalinga have been Shaivism's "core constituency and leadership" from its inception. Other non-brahman Tamil castes have tended to worship local deities.²⁸

Accordingly, Ramalinga expresses his desire to associate only with true devotees of Shiva. "Oh my elder brother, don't give me over to those ignorant of him of three eyes! It isn't worthy of your grace. Please place me in the crowd of your servants, who seek you out, telling them, 'This is my devotee'" (2065). Who are these devotees? They are clearly those devotees to Shiva, and can be recognized by their adherence to Shaiva ritual practices. In a poem in praise of Shiva's consort Uma, Ramalinga writes, "I want to lead a truly rich life, which consists of praising the feet of the wise who have knowledge of Shiva. They have obtained unique splendor. They put on sacred ash; they wear radiant *rudraksha* beads; they stand fast on the noble Shaiva path; they hold dear the meaning of the flawless five letters, which embody you; they do *puja* to your feet. Oh ambrosia, please quickly grant me this wish!" (2600).

Throughout the 1867 verses, Ramalinga celebrated a conventional Shaiva path, consistent with certain ritual practices of established Shaivism. There are only hints of the tantric-leaning, death-defying, anti-caste, anti-establishment siddha poet who was to appear with the publication of the sixth *Tirumurai* in 1885. For example, Ramalinga praises Shiva as the one who "doesn't recognize caste or lineage" (2985), and he praises both Shiva and Uma for "removing the bondage created by caste in this world" (1972). However, this is hardly a statement that urges his audience to abandon caste sensibilities. Also largely absent in these verses are his later frequent claims, following tantric and siddha traditions, that he had attained extraordinary powers and immortality. In one rare exception, he writes that Shiva "showed me the state of deathlessness; you showed me the innermost state; you showed me the place where the mind, which is like the blowing

wind, dissolves away.” It is likely that here Ramalinga refers to a figurative sense of deathlessness rather than a bodily one, as the other states that Shiva shows him are mental or otherwise non-physical. Moreover, this is no affirmation of siddha traditions, because in the preceding line, Ramalinga writes “you showed me the unique deviousness of the self-satisfied siddhas” (3038). We can safely conclude, then, that the 1867 verses were poems that adhered closely to the conventions of classical Shaiva bhakti, devoid of the tantric and siddha flavor that characterized Ramalinga’s poems published after his death.

Ramalinga accomplished several things by following these conventions. First, he minimized the potential that he would be viewed as a radical or rebellious figure. By withholding his polemical poems, he presented himself as a figure who conformed to Shaiva devotional traditions. Second, his poems would appeal to an educated Shaiva audience who would be familiar with the narratives and conventions of canonical devotional literature. As an emerging Shaiva leader, it was crucial that his poems have the aesthetic power to elicit responses of devotion among his readers. Third, by depicting himself and his experiences through models of the Tamil Shaiva poet-saints, he placed himself in the lineage of revered saints. This claim to sainthood was accepted by many, enabling him to expand his devoted community of followers. His verses, and fame, spread beyond this community.

Even though Ramalinga employed specific formulae in his poems, this does not mean that he did not experience the emotions he describes, or that did he did not imagine his relationship with Shiva as one of kin or as erotic. I think it would be a mistake to view his poems solely, or even primarily, as unreflective imitations of prior Shaiva models or as cynical vehicles for his leadership aspirations. Indeed, Ramalinga was immersed from childhood in Shaiva traditions, which shaped his individual experiences, perceptions of the world, and emotional responses in formative ways. We cannot definitively separate the personal from the formulaic in Ramalinga’s poetry. He uses bhakti tropes and models not simply to give his individual experiences a Shaiva flavor, because the Tamil Shaiva tradition provided Ramalinga the basic building blocks through which he experienced emotions, relationships, inspiration, and responses. In this sense, his tradition was not characterized by the momentum of the past, but it was a fluid ideology that continued to shape experiences and creativity in the present.

THE CREATIVITY OF SHAIVA TRADITION

Through the nineteenth century, religious and administrative leaders contested the bases of authority and the contents of canons. Hindu reform leaders located revelation and authority in past texts, emphasizing the fixed character of canon and expressing skepticism at the possibility of new revelation. Ramalinga, on the other hand, viewed tradition as flexible and open to additions, publishing his volume of poems as a new contribution to the Shaiva canon. It will be worthwhile here to

expand on Ramalinga's conception of tradition, sainthood, and textual authority, which differed significantly from the formulations of more cosmopolitan Hindu leaders of his day. For Ramalinga, the texts and authors of the Tamil Shaiva canon were not fixed in a traditional past, but they were living presences that spoke to him and inspired his teachings and innovations.

Ramalinga's sense of tradition was dominated by Tamil Shaivism. He had limited knowledge of Sanskrit traditions that were not filtered through Tamil works. His writings display no detailed understanding of the content of the Vedas and Agamas, and he considers the Vedas to be Shaiva works. "Wise people . . . accept the true conclusions of the eternal Vedas and Agamas, which speak endlessly of Shiva, the god who, shining as part woman, sits alongside Parvati at Chidambaram" (2608). "What is the conclusion of the Vedas and Agamas? You made me realize that it is your dance in the hall of Chidambaram" (3050). Shiva is the "deepest meaning at the end of the Vedas" (598); the "hero of the Vedas, which teach the unique truth" (948); the "bright lamp that shines at the apex of the Vedas and Agamas" (3029); the "essence of the famed Vedas, which are recited by great people in the flowered temple of holy Otri" (1962.259).

Despite these associations between Shiva and the Vedas, Ramalinga often suggests the limits of Vedic texts, foreshadowing the critiques of orthodox works that he would articulate much more forcefully in poems of the sixth *Tirumurai*. He praises Shiva as "the profound meaning that grows beyond even the full significance of the flawless Vedas" (2105). "His holy feet are beyond the understanding of the Vedas" (2740). He extols Shiva by asserting Shiva's superiority to the Vedas: "Oh divine brilliant light, you spread the light of wisdom far and wide, to all places that even the Vedas can't reach" (2115); "Our lord, who even the great four Vedas find difficult to fathom" (1267); "The Vedas know nothing about your nature" (860). In a few verses he advances a more critical position. "Doctors, *yogis*, *siddhas*, *munis*, and other celestial beings, they searched for you. They went away, one by one, their wills destroyed, lamenting, 'we examined the Vedas, and other works, but didn't find anything.' They grieve there, Oh you who occupy a deceptive, inscrutable space! Oh god whose space is bliss!" (2130). When Ramalinga laments his ignorance, Shiva comforts him with the words, "That which was spoken long ago by all the great Vedas, that is only speech. Perhaps it is deceptive speech?" (579). When Ramalinga questions Vedic knowledge, he criticizes elite traditions of Sanskrit learning, thus extending the possibility of Shiva's grace to the vast majority of devotees who are unfamiliar with Sanskrit works. He offers these worshipers glimpses of Shiva by other means, including Ramalinga's own poems.

In Ramalinga's estimation, the most useful texts in Shaiva tradition are the writings of the Shaiva poet-saints. The 1867 publication includes a fascinating group of poems dedicated to the *nālvār*, the four great Shaiva poet-saints of the *Tēvāram* and *Tiruvācakam*: Sambandar, Appar, Sundarar, and Manikkavacakar.²⁹ These

poems are the only ones in the volume that do not address Shiva, and they appear at the end of the work.³⁰ Ramalinga calls the four poems *aruṇmālai*, “garlands of grace.”³¹

It is in these poems that Ramalinga reflects most deliberately on Tamil textual traditions. He contrasts the *nālvar*’s poems to the Vedas. He sings to Sundarar that “comparing the best of the Northern [Sanskrit] works to your works is more absurd than comparing the smallest particle to the golden mountain beyond measure” (3249). Ramalinga consistently emphasizes that the *nālvar*’s works are effective vehicles for experiencing Shiva, while “the works starting with the Vedas, even though they are recited endlessly, can’t come close to seeing the flowers that are Shiva’s feet” (3250). He praises Sambandar for giving him deep insight, for granting him the “experience of grace which is beyond words” (3229). Sambandar uses “the holy path of Tamil” to dismiss the misconceptions of others, while a single word of Manikkavacakar’s *Tiruvācakam* unites Ramalinga with his master, Shiva (3234, 3264). The limitations of Sanskrit works are not generalizable to texts per se, because Tamil Shaiva bhakti texts present the fullness of Shiva to their audience. Ramalinga even calls Sundarar’s verses “aruḷ-pāṭṭu,” songs of grace, a synonymous term to the eventual title of Ramalinga’s collection, “Tiru-aruḷ-pā,” poems of divine grace (3254).³² Ramalinga repeatedly refers to the actions of these saints and of Shiva as “full of grace” or “bestowing grace.” By emphasizing the character of grace as the most significant aspect of the poems of the *nālvar*, and by calling his own works “Poems of Divine Grace,” Ramalinga definitively places his poems alongside those of the *nālvar*.

Ramalinga’s Tamil-centrism is consistent with his caste tradition. Peterson points out that from the time of the *Tēvāram*, the literary and ritual practices of *vellalar* Shaivas have been grounded in Tamil devotional and philosophical works.³³ This is in contrast to Smarta brahman Shaiva traditions, which much more actively incorporate Sanskrit traditions, especially those of the Agamas. Ramalinga views himself as continuing the line of the *nālvar*, calling Sambandar his “caṅkuru” or true guru (3227, 3228), and speaking of the saint as being near to him (3228). He gives credit to Sambandar for leading him to the “path of grace.” “When I was a young child, without any knowledge of the world, you came inside of me, and raised me to the path of grace. When I frequently and inappropriately went astray, you put me back on track. Later, you graced me with unerring adherence” (3226). Ramalinga recalls a time when, after he unsuccessfully sought a vision of Shiva, Sambandar appeared and gave him a vision of Shiva’s hair and feet inside of Sambandar himself (3232). Ramalinga also credits Sambandar with Ramalinga’s own spiritual talent: “in one day you bestowed on me all of the skills which are hard to come by, even with great effort over the course of eons” (3235). While Ramalinga at times asserts his unworthiness compared to the “lineage of devotees” (3196), elsewhere in the 1867 publication he includes himself in this lineage. “I am your [Shiva’s] devotee, in the line of devotees born on this earth. You

know in your mind that this is true, so without fail give your grace to me, oh king of Otriyur!" (1068). Consistent with calling his poems "Tiruvarutpā," songs of grace, Ramalinga places himself in the line of revered Shaiva devotees, a lineage which begins with the *nālvar* themselves.

Ramalinga demonstrates his knowledge of the *Tēvāram* by directly citing lines from the work in his own verses. In one, he quotes lines from Appar, "you placed the nine apertures in the one [body]" (3241, *Tēvāram* 6.99.1),³⁴ and from Sundarar, "I reflected reverently and deeply on the meaning of the excellent words you spoke before: 'You are the seven notes, the benefits derived from music, sweet nectar, and my friend'" (3251, *Tēvāram* 7.51.10). Ramalinga includes hagiographical details of these saints, indicating that he was also familiar with the *Periya Purāṇam*, the medieval work by Cekkilar on the sixty-three *nāyaṇmār* Shaiva saints. He cites Cekkilar's accounts of the miraculous feats performed by the *nālvar*, such as an episode in which Sambandar restores a young girl named Pumpavai to life from her cremated bones (3234).³⁵ In a verse to Sundarar, he refers to a story in which Sundarar places gold in a river and then retrieves the gold from a nearby temple tank after Shiva has miraculously conveyed it (3248). Ramalinga follows Cekkilar in praising the superhuman acts of the *nāyaṇmār*, which serve to underline their close relationship with Shiva and justify their place at the apex of Shaiva saintly pantheon. The celebration of the miracles of the *nālvar* may have had a self-referential quality: as we have seen, Ramalinga's own poems provided the seeds for a hagiography that linked him with miraculous abilities and events.

Ramalinga also follows Cekkilar in formulating exclusive and at times aggressive Shaiva sectarianism. He praises Sambandar as "the light who took birth in order to destroy the darkness of Jainism" (3233). He lauds Tirunavukkaracu as "the Shaiva path itself, which was purified after you overcame, with the power of holy grace, all the deception of the Jains, who are devoid of truth" (3238). He praises Sundarar, who "gathered together those who follow the path of despair, which eschews wearing the sacred ash, and threw them into the mud" (3248). Perhaps most aggressively, he celebrates Sambandar as one "who impaled on the stake the deluded, quarrelling Jains" (1673). Both the *Tēvāram* and the *Periya Purāṇam* advocate persecution of non-Shaiva traditions, and Ramalinga's reaffirmation of these views complicates his ecumenical reputation. The actual presence of Jains in the areas where Ramalinga lived would have been unusual, which indicates that he modeled his sectarianism on these canonical bhakti works.

How did Ramalinga conceptualize the process of transmission and reception of these Shaiva canonical works? In one verse, he makes it clear that he is literally reading the verses of these poets. Addressing Sundarar, he asks the saint to take note that "I read and study (*paṭi*) your holy songs daily, completely forgetting myself when I do." This is not silent reading but reading with the tongue, that is, aloud. He then expands the act of reading to include his entire body: "Is it only the

tongue which reads? My flesh reads, my heart reads, my life (*uyir*) reads, and the life of my life reads” (3253). For Ramalinga, this is a participatory, devotional act.

Ramalinga approaches these Shaiva texts not as written documents to be read in isolation. He writes of his encounter with Shaiva literary traditions as oral, or even as visual. He speaks of the *nālvar* as present to him on many occasions. Sambandar appears before him and looks at him compassionately (3232), while Tirunavukkaracu is “in my thoughts, in my eyes” (3240). He addresses them in vocative forms that contribute to the sense of their presence. He also acknowledges their literary skills. He calls Tirunavukkaracu the “god who is the king of words,” and he praises Sundarar for “stringing together garlands of words” (3246, 3247). For Ramalinga, the words of these saints are usually communicated orally, “sung” by the saints themselves, and recited and heard by devotees afterward. The “great Tamil Veda flowered from the holy mouth” of Manikkavacakar (3257). Ramalinga ponders the poetry that Manikkavacakar “spoke” (3262), and he becomes absorbed, “singing” Manikkavacakar’s compositions (3263). Even the “lowest sorts of birds and most vicious beasts” who overhear *Tiruvācakam* develop a longing for truth (3266). This emphasis on the orality of literature is a long-standing characteristic of Tamil literary imaginings. Tirunavukkaracu, after all, means “king,” *aracu*, of the tongue (*nā*), and the *Tēvāram* and *Tiruvācakam* continue to be sung in temples today. Ramalinga spoke of his own composition of poems as a process of “singing” rather than writing. By emphasizing the orality of the *nālvar*’s poems, Ramalinga highlights their living presence.

For Ramalinga, then, the works of the *nālvar* were the most authoritative of all texts because they have the following characteristics: (1) they were meant to be recited and heard; (2) they were composed by poet-saints who had direct experience of Shiva; (3) they were composed by poets who were connected with miraculous events, which testify to Shiva’s grace; (4) they have the ability to impart divine grace, transporting the listener to a state of experiencing Shiva; (5) they are not works of hoary tradition but have a living presence; and (6) they are in Tamil, accessible and spoken, rather than in the more obscure, and elite, Sanskrit. These features constitute the bases for Ramalinga’s sense of textual authority. Notably absent is any notion of ancient tradition or reference to institutional backing and promotion. The living quality of these works indicates that for Ramalinga, canon was not a closed category but could be expanded to include new works that share these features. Ramalinga’s verses appear to satisfy all of these criteria, and his implicit agreement to call the collection of his verses *Tiruvaruṭpā* asserts that his works should be placed alongside those of the *nālvar*.

As we will see in the next chapter, Ramalinga’s sense of tradition differed from that of cosmopolitan leaders. Hindu reformers increasingly imbibed Western, historicist sensibilities that distinguished the time of tradition from the modern present, and that located revelation and its authority in the traditional past. For

Ramalinga, Shaiva tradition was not of the past but of the present, speaking to him and inspiring him. He interacted with his tradition not as a historian viewing a past marked by radical difference, but as a interlocutor and participant. Tradition, for Ramalinga, was modern in the sense of being a vital force in the present.

SIMPLIFYING SHAIVA RITUAL

We have seen that Ramalinga's food-giving ideology departed significantly from established Shaiva ritual practices of *dāna*. He also expressed his dissatisfaction with Shaiva temple-based ritual by building a temple that served as a site for new worship practices. His 1867 verses do not reject Shaiva rituals but advocate adherence to the most simple practices, namely, the wearing of sacred ash and the chanting of the five-syllable mantra, "civāya nama" (praise to Shiva). These are the most accessible of Shaiva rituals and also the least hierarchical, unlike the more complex agamic ritual practices that dictate temple worship according to caste hierarchies. Ramalinga's emphasis on inexpensive, simple, and accessible ritual practices suggests that his intended audience was broad and cut across caste boundaries. He also extolled the benefits of singing verses in praise of Shiva, and his own poems were being sung by devotees in Shaiva temples.

The wearing of sacred ash, *tirunīru*, marks the devotee's body with a powerful symbol of Shaiva identity. Unlike more expensive, complex worship practices that require a ritual specialist, applying sacred ash is a simple gesture that costs nothing. For Ramalinga, it was a practice that was within the grasp of any devotee, and so it suited his bid to speak to a broad audience that was not limited by caste or class. Despite this relative simplicity, Ramalinga asserts the power of the gesture and its important consequences. He composed a poem called "Civa Punṇiya Tērram" (The Certainty of Shiva's Virtue), which praises the virtues of wearing the sacred ash and warns of the dangers to those who eschew it. "Oh, eyes, turn away from looking, even in a dream, at the wretched people who don't wear god's ash. Instead, look with love at the devotees who wear the holy ash, which removes all blemishes of the heart. Then we can approach the lord of Otriyur" (997). Ramalinga asserts that the ash is an important marker of moral character and of sectarian identity. "Oh, my body! If those who do not wear the holy ash, which gives liberation, were to touch you with their hands, tremble with anger as if they pierced you with thorns. If those devotees who wear the holy ash, which fosters devotion, were to jump on you and kick you with their feet, you should cherish that and rejoice. Look at this as wisdom" (1003). Ramalinga calls those who do not wear the sacred ash "degraded" (998), "small" (999), "demons" (1000), "dogs" (1001), and "fools" (1005). These verses are highly prescriptive, advising a human audience to maintain Shaiva ritual behavior and sectarian boundaries. Ramalinga formally addresses these verses to various parts of himself—his eyes (997), nose

(1001), tongue (1002), body (1003), feet (1005), et cetera—but it is clear that he is speaking to an audience of Shaiva worshippers.³⁶

The other simple Shaiva ritual convention that Ramalinga urged his devotees to follow was the recitation of “civāya nama,” praise of Shiva, known as the *pañcāṅcaram*, or the five-letter mantra. In a letter sent on Aug 13, 1860, Ramalinga reminds Irattina Mudaliyar to “always keep Shiva and the five letters in mind.”³⁷ In another letter to Mudaliyar, he writes, “meditating without pause on our Shiva’s feet and on the five letters, is the only important thing.”³⁸ In another he advises that “meditation on the five syllables is the most important way to attain [Shiva’s grace].” He gives evidence in support of this, citing his own verse that would appear in the 1867 publication: “If one asks what is the good deed that I have done, it is attaining the fleshy tongue that recites ‘praise to Shiva.’” He tells Mudaliyar that “if you understand this and meditate, everything will become clear.”³⁹ Ramalinga conceives of the five letters as sounds to recite aloud, but also as a mantra that serves to focus the mind on Shiva.

Ramalinga’s verses promise that with the recitation of the five letters, the devotee will receive not only Shiva’s grace but a range of associated benefits. “The words ‘civāya nam(a)’ will confer the ability to sing sweetly; they will gladly dispense milk and rice; they will provide the company of sweet devotees; they will instill good character. Don’t fear, my heart, which delights in dance. You have observed my oath to wear the holy ash and chant these words, which give a sweet bounty that is rare to find” (834). Ramalinga details a long list of benefits that come with chanting “civāya nama.” These words “destroy dark delusion; reveal the path that conquers death; and extinguish the desire for foolish women, who bewitch with great lust” (835). They “eradicate fierce karma at the root, and reveal the stainless path of liberation, through which one achieves the place of true knowledge” (836); they “create the great medicine that destroys disease” (840). The recitation of the five syllables, while wearing the holy ash, confers a range of worldly, ethical, and soteriological benefits. In most of these verses, Ramalinga addresses his heart or mind, or he leaves the addressee obscured, indicating a more deliberate cognizance of a human audience of followers and potential recruits. Ramalinga urges this audience to adhere to these simple ritual practices, and he entices them with somewhat grand promises of the effects of those practices.

The ritual implications of Ramalinga’s verses were not limited to their content. His poems were ritually performed in temple and other contexts, placing him in a long-standing Shaiva tradition. The *Tēvāram* and *Periya Purāṇam* are replete with episodes in which the *nālvar* sing extemporaneous verses of praise to Shiva at specific temples. Cutler argues that the Tamil bhakti poet-saints, both Shaiva and Vaishnava, played a vital role in the emergence of temple-centered worship practices. He suggests that the initial process of canonization of the *Tēvāram* works in the Chola court might be linked to their recitation in the Brihadesvarar temple in Thanjavur as early as the tenth century C.E.⁴⁰ As Peterson and others have

noted, the recitation of the *Tēvāram* poems remains an important ritual element in Shaiva temples and festivals.⁴¹

Ramalinga's poems in the 1867 edition describe Shiva at two temples, Tiruvotriyur and Chidambaram, which Ramalinga appears to have frequently visited. His poems describe Shiva especially vividly in his dance posture at Chidambaram. These rich descriptions perpetuate a literary tradition, but they do more than this. The images that he lovingly paints of Shiva in residence at Chidambaram or Tiruvotriyur portray and evoke a ritual context that he and his followers participated in, actively encouraging temple worship. "My mind, come with me to the beautiful Otri temple. There, chant 'Om Shiva, Murugan, Shiva, Om, Om to Shiva,' so that you will be able join with the devotees who are praised in poems, and cross forever the ocean of birth" (801). Ramalinga's criticism of the elite, exclusionary ritual practices at temples did not extend to simple worship to temple deities, a practice for which he held great reverence. He sings to Shiva that "all your devotees sweetly sing of the glory of your grace. They worship you, seeing your beauty" (601). The public recitation of poems to Shiva is transformative to both the singer and listeners, extending the ritual benefits of recitation to devotees without the training to learn and recite poems. "If we reach a state of devotion, and stand close and listen to those who sing his praises in poems, all our karma will leave us" (1965.234–235). Although Ramalinga does not explicitly suggest that devotees sing his own poems in public, ritual contexts, it seems clear that he composed his verses to be recited. This would be consistent with his conception of poetic composition as an act of singing, not writing. He described his songs as vehicles for his personal experience of Shiva. "I, an insignificant person, have received a great boon, singing of you alone. I have attained a state of grace!" (3170) Ramalinga certainly viewed his poems as worthy for public recitation, noting that they are full of "sweet, honey-like words" and that "even eminent people of true wisdom" delight in his verses (1975, 3055). Perhaps most important, Ramalinga's songs please Shiva, who "hears me sing and rejoices" (1965.186).

Ramalinga's 1867 edition did not specify a particular musical mode for his verses. This is in contrast to the *Tēvāram* poems, though it is clear that the musical modes that are today connected to those poems were not established by their authors.⁴² Ramalinga employed a variety of metrical forms used by the *nālvar*, including *viruttam* (especially *ācīriya viruttam*, but also *kali viruttam* and *canta viruttam*), *turai* (*kaṭṭalai kalitturai*, *kalinilaitturai*), *nēricai venpā*, *kocakak kalippā*, and *kaṭṭalai kalitturai*.⁴³ Given the prevalence in Shiva temples and other ritual contexts of the recitation of canonical Shaiva literature with these same meters, it would not have been difficult for worshippers to render Ramalinga's poems in song for ritual recitation.

Indeed, they do just this today. In 2010, I visited his temple and almshouse in Vadalur, and observed that his verses were sung at the almshouse prior to the distribution of food to the poor and then at the neighboring temple that he established

in 1871. It is unclear precisely how far back these practices go, but it seems that in his own day, his poems were being sung by devotees at temples. In his “History of *Tiruvaruṭpā*,” Tolvuvur Velayuda Mudaliyar writes about the verses published in 1867. “There were just a few people who knew them, but in time, some ignorant people came to know of them. There was a learned man of the name Muttusami, a man of abundant grace. He displayed his devotion, singing aloud [Ramalinga’s] verses in the divine presence of Shiva at holy Otri. His devotion was full of the grace that produces tender affection. A few people, of true devotion, spoke about their desire to know Ramalinga’s flawless songs of grace (*aruṭpā*).”⁴⁴ Muttusami was singing Ramalinga’s verses in praise of Shiva at Otri, and this was overheard by others, who also wanted to know these songs, perhaps for their own recitation. Arumuga Navalar would later, in his 1869 polemic, write that Ramalinga’s verses were being sung in temples at the expense of *Tēvāram* verses.

In reciting Ramalinga’s poems, devotees would take on his persona, effectively identifying with him in their reverence of Shiva. Cutler notes that bhakti poems present an “occasion for a ritualized reenactment of the events and emotions portrayed in the poem. During the ritual recitation of a bhakti poem, the identity of the reciter temporarily merges with that of the poet-narrator, and the devotee listening to the recitation becomes a direct observer of the poet/reciter’s experience. Ultimately, through the reciter, the devotee identifies with the poet, and, in this way, the devotee becomes an immediate participant in the poetic reenactment.”⁴⁵ Ramalinga’s poems effectively join an audience, the reciters of his poems, and Ramalinga himself in relationships of identification. They can do this in part because they are in Tamil, rather than in Sanskrit or Telugu, which are prevalent in more elite ritual and musical contexts.⁴⁶ Ramalinga’s verses, in a literary form but relatively accessible, could be savored by many Tamil worshipers who had some exposure to Shaiva literature. In this way, Ramalinga’s verses function very much like the *Tēvāram* in bringing together “mantra and *stotra* [praise poems], classical and popular song, and ceremonial and personal scripture.”⁴⁷ The literary qualities of his work give his poems prestige and make them suitable to praise Shiva, yet they are accessible enough to “melt the hearts” of devotees.

It may be, then, that the publication of Ramalinga’s verses in 1867 was at least in part an attempt to bring his poems to devotees for their recitation in worship of Shiva. Like other Shaiva bhakti works, the poems were not composed and then published for silent, individual reflection, but for private and public recitation and consumption. Although Ramalinga would later gain a reputation as a radical thinker who rejected conventional rituals, in these 1867 verses he sought to make a new contribution to Shaiva ritual. He emphasized the most accessible elements of Shaiva ritual, in conformity with his project to foster a broad Shaiva community. If this seems like an innocuous project, the attacks on Ramalinga that ensued highlight that his publication and message presented a fierce challenge to established Tamil Shaivism.

CONCLUSION

Ramalinga's poems link him with his audience in veneration of Shiva. He made liberal use of bhakti literary tropes that would resonate with devotees familiar with Shaiva canonical literature. He viewed past tradition not as a ossified source of authority, but as a flexible and living tradition. He embraced Shaiva rituals that were simple and accessible. Deploying his poetic skills and his knowledge of Tamil devotional literature, Ramalinga re-presented the world of the *nālvar*. It seems that he did this effectively, since devotees began to recite his verses at Shaiva temples alongside the works of the *nālvar*.

To mobilize this audience and build a community of worshippers, however, it was not enough that Ramalinga merely follow traditional tropes and models. He had to create a new work, and a new vision, that would capture imaginations and hearts. His 1867 verses announced a new revelation, even if it was one that conformed in many ways to conventional Tamil Shaiva models. This was a "respectable" revelation, which did not advance the polemical critiques of Shaivism that would appear in the poems of the sixth *Tirumurai*. The modernity of this revelation lay in its power to transform Ramalinga's world in novel ways. This expression of revelation asserted the salience of accessible ritual and literary elements with almost no reference to elite or brahmanical practices. These verses advanced a Shaivism that was not defined by caste hierarchy or established institutional authority. For Ramalinga, this new vision was not so much a modern departure from tradition as it was a development of tradition, since he saw tradition as a living source of inspiration that continued to shape present-day experiences of the human and divine worlds.

Perhaps most importantly, the "newness" of his vision was located in the person of Ramalinga himself. Shaiva bhakti literature provided an effective model not only for the articulation of his love for Shiva, but also for his leadership aspirations. The strongly personal character of his verses, and their many auto-hagiographical details, contributed to an emerging legend which continues to this day. Ramalinga's poems, for those whom they moved, served as testimony that a saint-poet lived who was the equal of the revered saints of canonical lore. As auto-hagiography, the 1867 poems made a significant impact in the Tamil Shaiva world. Ramalinga was a leader whose star was on the rise. He had a number of capable followers who worked to propagate his teachings and spread his fame. His close followers could participate in Ramalinga's sainthood in their daily interactions with him. The publication of his verses extended this experience to a wider audience, who could join in Ramalinga's devotion through the recitation of his verses. Ramalinga's claim to sainthood, and the soteriological potential of his poems, proved to be a powerful draw.

The transformative power of Ramalinga's work becomes most clear when we view it within two contexts: long-standing Shaiva tradition, and Ramalinga's

specific present. These are not opposed contexts, nor do they coexist in a state of tension. Ramalinga's volume was published in February 1867, just three months prior to the opening of the almshouse, which presented a much more explicit and critical challenge to establish Shaiva ritual ideology. In the context of this more radical challenge, and in light of Ramalinga's growing reputation as a leader and saint, the 1867 poems presented the public with another element of his movement, a corpus of poems that invited comparisons with canonical literature. Ramalinga was building an innovative institutional and ideological complex that could serve as an alternative to the institution of the mathas. Part of the power of this challenge lay precisely in Ramalinga's employment of aspects of tradition, which continued to exert authority. For Ramalinga and his followers, Shiva was alive and well, not just in past texts, and all true devotees could experience his presence. Ramalinga was not out of tune with his times, nor was he a Shaiva fossil who refused to modernize. Indeed, his dedicated following in his day suggests that his message resonated strongly with Tamil Shaivas, and his continued popularity to this day highlights that tradition contains within itself the power to innovate and modernize.