2013

Renegotiating a Beheading: Literary Opposition to Varna Hierarchy in Shambuka's Story

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April 10, 2013

Introduction: Retellings and Renegotiations

Within the context of the full epic, the Ramayana's Shambuka story is a relatively minor episode, but its broader social implications have ensured its repeated retelling and reframing in India over thousands of years. Despite its marginal position within the Ramayana tradition, a few storytellers have focused on this episode as a nexus for critical resistance and radical social change. Because the Shambuka incident fundamentally centers around social power and hierarchy, each telling necessarily offers its own formulation of proper conduct among subjects of differential power relations. Several tellings attempt to destabilize notions of social hierarchy by implying new modes of interaction between members of different social classes. Though the narrative contexts and traditions they exist within constrain these retellings in some ways, some use the story as a point of contact with normative ideologies, facilitating direct critical evaluation of India's systems of social power.

Since the first known version of the incident in Valmiki's ca. 250 B.C.E. *Ramayana*, a small oppositional cohort has attempted to reframe this contentious episode.[1] Depictions of transgressive social power relations suggest—explicitly or implicitly—a challenge to India's

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[1] Because this paper is addressed to a non-specialist audience, I will omit diacritical marks.

system of caste hierarchy, or *varna.*[2] While in Valmiki's telling Shambuka is violently silenced

by Rama, the protagonist of the epic, on the basis of his Shudra varna identity, later tellings

question this normative power relationship. Within this context, retelling the Shambuka story

constitutes a historical form of literary opposition in which non-normative interpretations are

added to the ever-growing body of the Ramayana tradition, contributing a multiplicity of

perspectives from which to view the incident. In order to understand this process of expansion,

this paper will provide close readings of four Ramayana texts: Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Bhavabuti's

8th century play *Uttararamacarita*, the *Ananda Ramayana* from the 14th century, and

Kuvempu's 1944 play *"Shudra Tapasvi."* Differences in incident's introduction and the

relationship between Shambuka and Rama illustrate the ways that each telling both challenges

and reinscribes normative conceptions social structure found in Valmiki's "authoritative" telling.

Though the narrative structure and cultural context of the Shambuka incident constrain retellings

in some ways, the act of retelling the story is an act of resistance to varna hegemony, expanding

the tradition, destabilizing normative conceptions, and opening space for more transgressive

tellings.

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[2] For all non-English terms used in this paper, I will italicize the word only the first time it is used, and provide a short definition for each. However, though varna is sometimes translated simply as "caste," there are important particularities of the specific caste system of varna that bear mentioning. The religious origin of varna derives from the Rig Veda, a ca. 10th century BCE collection of texts containing divinely revealed Sanskrit hymns. It states that in the act of creating the universe, a cosmic being known as Purusha was sacrificed, and from different parts of his body the four varnas were born. People of the varna category *shudra* originated from the Purusha's feet, forming a class of unskilled laborers and servants charged with fulfilling duties considered spiritually impure or polluting. From *Purusha*'s thighs came *vaishyas*, a varna of agriculturalists, traders, and skilled laborers. *Purusha*'s arms gave rise to *kshatriyas*, the warrior or ruler class to carry out the duties of protecting the people of the realm and maintaining order in the community. *Brahmins*, the priestly varna committed to performance of religious rituals and maintenance of spiritual purity, sprang from *Purusha*'s mouth. In understanding this mapping of social organization onto a body, it is also important to note that Rig Vedic understandings of the body claim that feet are the most polluting body part and that the top of the head is the most pure, with the rest of the body falling on a continuum between the two. Consequently, this social geography associates individuals of the *shudra* varna with spiritual pollution and individuals of the *brahmin* varna with spiritual purity. These differing levels of spiritual purity translate into different types of actions prescribed and proscribed for all four varnas. (Summary based on Ludo Rocher, "The Dharmasastras," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003)], 103.)

Literary Frameworks and Methodological Considerations

The necessarily limited scope of this paper forces me to restrict my study of historical literary representations of Shambuka in several noteworthy ways. First, this paper focuses on texts themselves, excluding any analysis of their public reception or the contexts within which they were encountered. While these important considerations shape the life of a text in many ways, they fall outside the bounds of the current text-based study. Although this does impose a limit on the claims this paper can make, there is still a great deal of information to be gleaned from close readings of the texts themselves.

Second, these texts were written many hundreds of years apart, sometimes with little evidence to imply a clear lineage between them. The dearth of Shambuka incidents represented in the Ramayana tradition precludes a wider textual sample. In fact, this paper analyzes almost all of the Shambuka episodes currently available in English translation. While many Ramayanas have been written since 250 B.C.E., Shambuka's execution impacts Rama's life relatively little in most full tellings, limiting its influence on the overall epic narrative and allowing most authors to view it as peripheral or unnecessary. This marginality accounts for the wide temporal spread of the four Ramayanas. While time distances these texts from each other in some ways, we see similar processes of opposition and reinscription operating within and among the texts, thereby connecting them with a common lineage.

Before beginning to explore the texts themselves, I will set up the interpretive frameworks that inform my later discussion of the texts. These frameworks draw from contemporary scholarship on the Ramayana tradition and contemporary notions of literary theory

to present a cohesive understanding of the process by which the Ramayana's textual tradition changes over time.

According to the metanarrative which precedes Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Valmiki composed the original Ramayana around 250 B.C.E., inspiring other writers and performers to reinterpret the story in a variety of creative ways. Individualizing the Ramayana's beginnings in this way has had lasting effects on the understanding and ownership of the tradition. Declaring Valmiki's work "original," attaches authority to his telling, thereby exerting power over the tradition as a whole. Ramayanas that adhere most closely to the Valmiki narrative benefit from this creation of authority, while those that differ do not receive the same privileges. Thus, deemphasizing Valmiki's "creator" role is an important step in recognizing voices of resistance within the tradition.

Roland Barthes critiques the exalted status of authorship in his influential post-structuralist essay "The Death of the Author." Barthes writes that "[to] give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."[3] Obsession with authorship of a text creates a mode of interpretation that assumes to possess a single, definitive meaning to be unlocked by determining the author's intent. Fixing ultimate meaning in this way ignores the various forces at play in the writing and the reading of a text. It uses the life and experiences of the author to "explain" the text as it "should be" received. Barthes argues that this view does not adequately represent the multiplicity of meanings contained in a text. The act of writing is not a final distillation of meaning, but simply a vehicle through which the reader will eventually encounter the text. In Barthes' view "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn

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[3] Roland Bathes, "The Death of the Author" from *Image-Music-Text* (Noonday Press, 1977), 147.

from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author."[4] The process of writing is not one of autonomous creation, but an amalgamation of many disparate and already existing concepts, narratives, and forms. Perhaps more importantly, the same can be said for the process of reading. Without a final signified, the text thus serves as a multi-dimensional space for the exploration of many interacting meanings. While some instances may merit further discussions of authorship, Barthes' essay presents a strong case for interpretive freedom and decentralization of textual authority.

Barthes' intertextual approach to authorship suggests a reevaluation of the Valmiki *Ramayana*'s tacit authority over the tradition as a whole. Similarly, the vast diversity of textual and performative traditions indicates that a view of Valmiki's *Ramayana* as definitive lacks the nuance and complexity to adequately account for its many manifestations. In light of these realities, a more complete framework for representing the Ramayana seems necessary. While it would be simplistic to think of all Ramayanas as variations or distortions of Valmiki, it is also inaccurate to conceptualize them as independent, singular stories.[5] Every new telling engages in a process of creative appropriation in choosing to include or not include elements from existing texts and performances. By incorporating these existing elements in different combinations and arrangements, the new Ramayana constructs a unique perspective on the narrative. This construction of perspective also serves as a form of metanarrative; whether it is explicit or not, the act of selecting which details become part of a particular telling implies valuation and

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[4] ibid, 148.

[5] Paula Richman, "Introduction: The Diversity of the Ramayana Tradition" from *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, edited by Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 8.

judgment, indicating which aspects of the tradition the writer considers most vital to the narrative. Writing or performing a Ramayana is necessarily an engagement with not only Valmiki, but with every available bit of Ramayana tradition.

While each telling exerts influence on the Ramayana tradition in some way, systems of social power structure intertextual relationships and shape the role of each text. Over time certain Ramayanas gain power, granting them some measure of authority over other tellings. Meanwhile, others do not gain widespread recognition, and remain geographically and culturally isolated. In describing this phenomenon, Ramayana scholar Paula Richman introduces a useful distinction between tellings that can be labeled "authoritative" and those deemed "oppositional." While she acknowledges that these are "relative and partial descriptors," they illuminate qualities shared by many texts in the tradition.[6]

An authoritative telling, in Richman's model, may derive its status from many different sources, including the number of people who know it, its geographic range, its connections to an influential literary tradition, or the religious prestige of the language it uses—both in its vocabulary and the language or dialect it uses.[7] The precise mechanisms by which tellings achieve these qualifications vary, but most Ramayanas that can be considered "authoritative" share a "link with normative ideologies or contents."[8] These tellings are fundamentally conservative, serving to uphold the existing social order and institutions of power. Their normativity attracts the interest of an elite that wields power, and by gaining the approval of this elite, the text absorbs some of this power for itself. Though no text in the Ramayana tradition can

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[6] Paula Richman. "Questioning and Multiplicity Within the Ramayana Tradition" from *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* edited by Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 12.

[7] ibid, 8.

[8] ibid, 9.

exist as an independent entity, the composition of a telling's audience profoundly affects the perceived legitimacy of its claim to accurate representation the tradition. When a text appeals to the sensibilities of the elite by celebrating normative attitudes and interpretations, it gains the endorsement of those with power and soon becomes a source of authority itself.

In contrast, oppositional texts seek to undermine the very institutional powers supported by authoritative tellings. Richman writes, "oppositional texts tend to be more involved in telling Rama's story in ways that leave room to question selected aspects of normative behavior and conventional interpretation."[9] Accordingly, these tellings are less likely to be praised by those in positions of power and are consequently often much less well-known. They identify injustices inflicted by existing norms of interpretation on those oppressed by their representation in authoritative texts—most often those with little political and social power—and attempt to reframe the discourse around these issues through the alteration of the narrative. Importantly, Richman notes that "[n]o text is entirely oppositional; if it were, it would lie outside the boundaries of the Ramayana tradition."[10] A certain amount of conformity is a necessary precondition for Ramayana-ness, and therefore a crucial part of creating an oppositional telling is selecting which issues require the most attention and when assent is required by the genre. Oppositional texts must work within the constraints of the Ramayana tradition while creatively adapting and appropriating in such a way that challenges the power of authoritative texts.

In order to erode the hegemony of authoritative texts, oppositional texts must employ a variety of literary techniques to decenter these narratives. Using existing parts of the tradition, they reimagine the narrative by appropriating pieces from other texts and performances, and

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[9] ibid, 11.

[10] ibid.

adapting it to new genres and media. Though this process of appropriation and adaptation is executed with the intention of subverting these authoritative texts, its very usage of the texts also inadvertently affirms their authoritativeness.[11] Drawing upon an existing text within a text relies on the reader's (or viewer's) prior knowledge of that existing text, and thus it is only the survival of the existing text that gives the reference any meaning. For example, if, in an effort to critique the Valmiki *Ramayana*, a contemporary play introduces Valmiki as a character within the narrative—as some do—this character is meaningless to the audience if they do not already know Valmiki and the Ramayana attributed to him. Invoking Valmiki creates intertextual linkages with this hypothetical contemporary play, strengthening Valmiki's place of authority within the tradition.

However, the statement a play makes about the authoritative text it adapts or appropriates also becomes a part of the tradition. Literary theorist Julie Sanders argues that in this case "the important point to recall is the fact that, as readers or audience, we may never view that novel or poem or play in the same light once we have had access to the critique implicit in the appropriations."[12] So while adaptation and appropriation inherently serve to further entrench these authoritative tellings, if they are done in a way that convincingly illustrates a problem with the dominant narrative, the audience remembers this critique every time it is invoked. This understanding of intertextual relationships suggests that direct references to authoritative tellings may supply oppositional texts with an important tool for injecting new perspectives into the Ramayana tradition.

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[11] Sanders, Julie, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22.

[12] ibid, 98.

The ever-expanding web of intertextual relations which comprises the Ramayana tradition contains many (sometimes contradictory) systems of meaning. While no one text can claim absolute authority, power becomes aggregated around those that are perceived to be authoritative. Unequal concentrations of power among these tellings become contested when voices marginalized by authoritative narratives seek to expand their influence. Often these perspectives arise from people that are marginalized in some way from normative or "mainstream" social structures. Their attempts to decenter the normalized oppression of authoritative Ramayana tellings form a tradition of literary resistance that revises present social locations through a restructuring of religious imagination.

Valmiki's Authority and Normativity

With these explanatory frameworks in mind, we now turn our attention to Valmiki's telling of the Shambuka incident to investigate what many see as an "authoritative" voice within the tradition. The incident occurs in the final book of the epic, when Rama has returned home from war to serve as king of Ayodhya. As an *avatara*, or human incarnation, of the god Vishnu, Rama is an ideal king and Ayodhya prospers under his rule. One day, however, a Brahmin arrives at Rama's palace, carrying a child's body in his arms. The Brahmin explains that his son has died prematurely, and concludes that "[w]ithout a doubt, Rama has been guilty of some great wrong, that is why children die in his country."[13] When Rama consults with his advisors, Narada informs him:

> "Just now in an outlying part of your realm a foolish Shudra is practising severe austerities, hence the death of this child. If any foolish man does in a King's realm or city

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[13] Valmiki, *Srimad Valmiki Ramayanam Vol. III: Yuddha Kanda and Uttara Kanda*, trans. N. Raghunathan (Madras: Vighneswara Publishing House, 1982), 569-570.

something that is opposed to Dharma, or that is wrong and thus might produce or bring about the downfall of the realm's prosperity, that King will without a doubt go to hell."[14]

In this short passage, a set of interpretations for Shambuka's renunciation becomes fixed almost immediately. First, the simple fact of the direct causation between Shambuka's act and the Brahmin boy's death creates an expectation of malicious intent. By referencing Shambuka's varna identity, Narada's explanation suggests possible anti-Brahmin, anti-varna motivations for Shambuka's ascetic practices, or *tapas*. Shambuka's asceticism quickly becomes a personal attack on Brahminism and on the codes of behavior known as *dharma*. Compounding this *adharmic* ("not dharmic") assault on the cosmic order of things, is the connection established with Rama's rule and legacy. Narada and the grieving Brahmin father both assert that if punishment is not meted out swiftly, Rama will be complicit in Shambuka's attack on varna. Because this episode occurs toward the end of the overall narrative, the reader or audience has by this point in the epic come to view Rama as a hero. Having seen his sanguine acceptance of banishment by Kaikeyi and his valiant struggle to save Sita from Ravana, the audience comes to view Rama as a model of dharma, making Shambuka's affront to Rama's honor still more grievous. While Rama's struggles are well-documented, little is known about Shambuka at this point, making his asceticism a kind of faceless threat to varna, dharma, and Rama himself.

When they learn that a Brahmin boy has died without cause, Rama and his advisors begin to speculate about the cause of this tragedy. In this scene, Narada begins to frame the strict varna hegemony that colors Rama's interaction with Shambuka. Narada explains that in an earlier era Brahmins alone practiced austerities, and "all men were immortal and far-sighted."[15] As the

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[14] ibid, 572.

[15] ibid, 571.

strength of ascetics' tapas waned over the years, greater suffering and injustice entered the world. The unlimited lives enjoyed by all in the previous era came to an end, and people were forced to till the soil for their livelihood, a practice considered dirty and degrading in more "pure" eras. Coinciding with this degradation of dharma was an expansion of asceticism into new varnas; initially tapas was reserved only for Brahmins, but over time Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were allowed to take up the practice as well.[16] This history constructs the expansion of tapas as a sign of the degradation of dharma, implying a connection between the prohibition of Shudra tapas and the cosmic tragedy of adharma's destructive advance. Given this narrative surrounding tapas and varna, it becomes imperative that Rama, as king of Ayodhya and protector of dharma, kill Shambuka, thereby slowing the world's decline into adharma.

The attitudes expressed in this introduction to the incident extend into the Shambuka-Rama interaction, coloring the very brief conversation they have just before Rama kills Shambuka. When he comes upon Shambuka in the forest, Rama immediately begins interrogating the Shudra ascetic: "I wish to hear what is the caste base on which you base yourself in thus practising tapas, O hermit. Are you a Brahmina, or an invincible Kshatriya, or a Vaishya born in the third Varna, or a Shudra? Answer truthfully."[17] Not even bothering to introduce or explain himself, Rama interrupts Shambuka's asceticism to demand his caste status. Without stirring from his ascetic posture, Shambuka responds, "I was born a Shudra, O Rama of the mighty renown. I have been practising severe austerities from the desire to become a celestial, while remaining in this body. Desiring to conquer the celestial world, I will not tell a

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[16] ibid, 572.

[17] ibid, 574.

lie. Know that I am a Shudra named Shambuka."[18]   The entirety of their brief conversation

revolves around Shambuka's varna, reinforcing its centrality to the incident. This exclusive focus

flattens Shambuka's character, preventing a more in-depth discussion of his motivations. The fact

that Shambuka's varna is the only necessary justification for his death in Valmiki's telling

illustrates its tacit support of normative ideas of varna hierarchy.

Additionally, the only personal information Shambuka shares is his desire to "conquer the

celestial world"—a detail that only further demonizes him in the eyes of the audience. Given

Narada's previous warnings about Shudra tapas as an attack on dharma and varna, this detail

cements an understanding of Shambuka as a one-dimensional and threatening figure who must

be stopped in order to uphold balance in the world. In conjunction with the way the episode is

framed by the introduction, this incident paints a picture of Shudras that emphasizes their

differentness and impurity, and calls for Kshatriyas like Rama to keep them in their (low) place

within the varna system.

The abruptness of the end to Rama's questioning of Shambuka demonstrates the vast

discrepancy in power between the two characters. When Shambuka completes his final lines,

Rama quickly draws his sword to complete the execution. "As the Shudra said this," writes

Valmiki, "Raghava drew from his scabbard a splendid shining sword and cut off his head."[19]

Shambuka has barely finished answering Rama's questions when he is decapitated without

warning. This abrupt end to their discourse demonstrates the one-way power structure in place

between the two characters. Rama's quickness to end Shambuka's life demonstrates the king's

lack of respect and compassion toward any person classified as Shudra, as well as his desire to

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[18] ibid.

[19] ibid.

maintain strict varna hierarchy according to Brahmin codes of dharma. This heavy bias toward Rama's perspective essentializes SHambuka's character, making him a stand-in for all transgressive Shudras rather than a complete person with complex emotions and motivations. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama establishes his power by violently silencing Shambuka, establishing a single authoritative voice in the interaction that shuts down alternative perspectives.

Humanizing Shambuka and Rama in the Uttararamacarita

The *Uttararamacarita* ("Rama's Last Act" or "The Later Story of Rama"), an eighth century play written by poet-scholar Bhavabuti, offers another telling of the Shambuka incident. In the play, Rama has banished Sita in response to rumors of her infidelity while she lived in captivity after her abduction by Ravana. However, he begins to miss his wife and sets out to find her.[20] In Bhavabuti's *Uttararamacarita*, it is during this emotional and uncertain search for Sita that Shambuka and Rama meet. Ultimately, Rama dominates their interaction, but the context of the scene establishes his vulnerability and alters the Shambuka-Rama dynamic.

As he prepares himself to kill Shambuka, Rama's ambivalence and self-doubt become apparent. He seems to be unable kill Shambuka, chastising himself, "O my right hand, bring down this sword upon the Shudra monk and bring the dead son of the Brahman back to life. You are a limb of Rama's—who had it in him to drive his Sita into exile, weary and heavy with child. Why start with pity now?"[21] In this desperate exclamation Rama attempts to express his dissatisfaction with the dictates of dharma he must uphold as king of Ayodhya. He speaks to his own right hand in the third person, demanding that it carry out the beheading of Shambuka, and associating it with the banishment of Sita. By objectifying his hand as distinct from himself,

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[20] Bhavabuti, *Uttararamacarita* trans. Shelden Pollock (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 121.

[21] ibid, 145.

Rama distances himself from the banishment of Sita and the beheading of Shambuka, attributing these actions to the hand rather than his own intentions. Especially in the context of his emotional search, it is clear that he wishes he had not punished Sita for her supposed transgressions of her dharma as a wife. By mentioning this just before he kills Shambuka, Rama links the two punishments, and in doing so, raises questions about the morality of killing Shambuka for breaching his dharma as a Shudra. In both cases, Rama resists the actions prescribed to him by Brahminical codes of dharma. The internal tension represented by this literary device allows room for questioning the definitiveness of Rama's actions in the Valmiki *Ramayana*. While Valmiki's Rama shows no signs of doubt in his abrupt execution of Shambuka, Bhavabuti depicts a Rama who is conflicted—unsure that enforcing normative ideas of varna is the right thing to do.

Making visible the pressures Rama faces—as well as their effects on him—highlights his humanity and fallibility. The audience is able to forget his divine identity for a moment, allowing them to experience a more human side of Rama. The Rama we see here is not the self-assured, god-like model of dharma from Valmiki's Shambuka story, but an unsure, self-critical king who misses his wife miserably. He criticizes himself and his actions, willing himself to perform an execution he does not wish to complete while simultaneously recalling his own callousness and rash decision-making in banishing Sita. Bringing Rama's humanness into his interaction with Shambuka narrows the division between the two characters, putting them on more even footing for their first and only meeting. Viewed within the context of Rama's emotional search for Sita, the *Uttararamacarita*'s Shambuka incident becomes less dichotomized, weakening the binary between absolutely dharmic Rama and utterly adharmic Shambuka. The introduction of greater

complexity and subjectivity into this incident ensures that a single narrative does not dominate the scene entirely. The audience is invited to consider many perspectives toward the events of the play, as well as its social and religious implications, as they watch the Ramayana unfold.

While Rama's questioning of varna norms in the *Uttararamacarita* challenges the authority of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, it also reinscribes normative ideas of power between varnas in certain subtle ways. Though Bhavabuti's play raises concerns about the notions of varna evident in Valmiki's play, it does so from a single Kshatriya perspective. Rama displays ambivalence about carrying out his violent suppression of Shambuka's subversion of dharma, but by putting these questions in the mouth of Rama rather than Shambuka, Bhavabuti reinforces the structure of power that values the opinions of Kshatriyas over those of Shudras. Tellingly, Shambuka has no speaking lines in Bhavabuti's play before Rama beheads him.[22] Rama may give voice to Shudra concerns about varna hierarchy, but importantly, he does so by speaking *for* them rather than *with* them. Rama remains the primary agent in this relationship, subordinating Shambuka's voice simply because of the varna position each character was born into and their attendant norms of behavior. While we cannot fault Bhavabuti for depicting their relationship as it may have realistically existed in eighth-century India, this example demonstrates the ways that even oppositional *Ramayana*s impose authoritative norms.

Again in the *Uttararamacarita*—as in many authoritative Ramayanas—Shambuka is beheaded with little interpersonal exchange with Rama. However, shortly after his death he is reborn briefly as a divine being. The divine being approaches Rama and announces: "Here Shambuka bows his head to your feet. Whatever comes from contact with the good, be it death

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[22] ibid.

itself, will bring salvation."[23] The divine being's assurance that Rama's actions have blessed

Shambuka, even in execution, justifies—and even glorifies—Rama's violence. The

indecisiveness Rama displays moments before is nullified, and the imbalance of power returns.

While Rama's divinity complicates interpretation of the varna dynamics of this scene, Rama is

clearly elevated to such an extent that Shambuka should be grateful for any form of contact with

him. Although this passage could be construed as simply an expression of reverence for Rama as

an avatara of Vishnu, the context this moment appears in lends credence to a view of this scene

as an endorsement of varna relationships. Given that Rama has just killed Shambuka in order to

restore varna stability, varna power dynamics are relevant and active in any reading of this

exchange. Shambuka's beheading, and the *Uttararamacarita*'s subsequent explanation,

neutralize his transgression of dharmic laws and restore normative codes of behavior.

Despite this initial glorification of Rama's violent action, Shambuka and Rama soon

develop a relationship that in some ways challenges the separateness of different varna

categories. Though their interaction begins with a justification of Rama's violence, it quickly

takes on a more oppositional character. Upon seeing Shambuka as this celestial being, Rama is

not hostile or disdainful, but bids Shambuka, "Enjoy then the fruition of your fierce austerities.

May the refulgent heavenly worlds of Viraj be yours forever, worlds of bliss and pleasure

accumulated through merit."[24] Rather than rejecting Shambuka's tapas on purely dharmic

grounds, Rama praises Shambuka's ascetic practices, and expresses his hope that Shambuka's

efforts will bear spiritual rewards. This change demonstrates a more complex view of

Shambuka's ascetic practices: they are no longer simply an attack on varna and Rama, but also

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[23] ibid, 145.

[24] ibid, 147.

an admirable and virtuous undertaking that wins Rama's approval. Thus, the *Uttararamacarita* acknowledges the karmically complex nature of Shambuka's death, and recognizes that his actions might have a deeper root than simple, malicious immorality. Allowing this alternative interpretation of Shambuka's actions creates a parallel narrative to Valmiki's authoritative version, creating space to question the norms that dictate that Rama must kill Shambuka.

As Shambuka and Rama converse, one crucial fact drives their relationship to a more equitable distribution of power. The scene occurs in Dandaka, the section of forest where Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana resided during Rama's banishment. As Shambuka describes the beauty of the place, Rama is overcome with emotion. "As I gaze at Janasthana, the place where Khara used to live, I relive the events that once occurred as if they were right before my eyes[...] Here are those very forests, for heaven's sake, what could be more terrifying?"[25] When Rama shares this personal experience, exposing his emotional vulnerability to Shambuka, the distinctions of varna —which have just caused Rama to kill Shambuka—dissolve for the moment, allowing them to interact in a way a Shudra and a Kshatriya couldn't under the expected norms of behavior. This experience affects Rama profoundly. When it is time for Shambuka to go, Rama bids him farewell: "Good fellow, may your path be an auspicious one, may you follow the heavenly route to the worlds of merit."[26] Bhavabuti's stage directions even state that Rama is "choking with sobs" as he delivers these lines. A transformation has occurred during this scene, and by its end Rama speaks with Shambuka on friendly and endearing terms. This intimate scene erodes varna distinctions through a meaningful exchange of personal experience, suggesting a way of transcending the strict distinctions of varna in the wider world. By forgetting their places within

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[25] ibid, 151.

[26] ibid, 153.

normative socio-religious hierarchies, Shambuka and Rama build a relationship that breaks these

identity categories.

Significantly, however, this transcendent moment occurs after Shambuka has been killed

and the threat to dharma and varna hierarchy is neutralized. While it does a lot to distance itself

from the attitudes of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Bhavabuti's play still contains little deliberation or

discussion before Shambuka's beheading. The *Uttararamacarita* waits until after the prohibition

of Shudra asceticism is upheld to develop the relationship between Shambuka and Rama,

allowing it to both challenge and affirm the conception of Shambuka's tapas as a threat to the

normativities of varna hierarchy. By delaying Rama's approval until after Shambuka's death, the

play shifts the focus of ultimate justice from this life to the next, suggesting that Shudras should

accept their regrettable fate in this life and prepare for more auspicious births in the future. It

points Shudras to subsequent lives for hope, but does little to adjust their place in this world.

Although it does nothing to change the present lives of Shudras, the *Uttararamacarita* does

express genuine hope that Shambuka will find happiness and spiritual attainment, setting the

stage for more subversive and systematic challenges to varna hierarchy.

Ananda Ramayana's (Un)Beheading of Shambuka

Ananda Ramayana—though supposedly also written by Valmiki—differs substantially in

its depiction of the Shambuka story. Although its internal claims to Valmiki authorship have been

refuted by most contemporary scholars, who cite its references to post-Valmiki Ramayanas,[27]

these claims show us something about the way certain texts attempt to situate themselves within

the tradition. By associating itself with Valmiki, *Ananda Ramayana* attempts to establish a

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[27] Vidyut Aklujkar. "Crying Dogs and Laughing Trees in Rama's Kingdom: Self-reflexivity in Ananda Ramayana," in *Questioning Ramayanas: a South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 84.

lineage, claiming the authoritativeness of Valmiki and his *Ramayana*. Its divergences from previous tellings therefore are not presented as the fabrications of unknown authors, but as elements that carry the weight of history and tradition. This theoretically frees the text to offer more radical challenges to the normative ideologies supported by authoritative tradition. In invoking Valmiki's name and power, *Ananda Ramayana* affirms his place of authority within the tradition, but in return increases the prestige of its own telling, thereby expanding the tradition to allow greater influence for non-normative voices.

Ananda Ramayana's more sympathetic framing of the Shambuka story places it within a tradition of literary opposition to Valmiki's authoritative epic. Whereas a justification for caste hierarchy immediately precedes Valmiki's Shambuka incident, *Ananda Ramayana*'s introduction of the story raises questions about the nature of varna hierarchy and spiritual pollution. In *Ananda Ramayana*, Rama hears a dog crying and investigates, soon finding that its paw is broken. The dog tells Rama that a monk hurled a rock at him for defiling his food by eating from it. The monk confirms the dog's story, and Rama rules that the dog has been wronged. When Rama gives the dog the chance to choose a punishment for the monk, the dog asks that the monk be made the abbot of the Shiva monastery, much to the surprise of the townspeople. They ask Rama how this appointment serves as a punishment, but Rama declines to answer, instead directing them to the dog for clarification. The dog explains that the excesses and corruption carried out at the monastery will earn the monk rebirth as a dog in his next life,[28] completing a symbolic literary reversal. The dog's "low", "polluting" status does not prevent it from demonstrating greater wisdom than a monk, creating a clear contrast between the normative

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[28] [Anonymous.] *Ananda Ramayana* trans Shantilal Nagar (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2006), 71-74.

karmic assumptions one might have about these figures and their individual characters as demonstrated by their actions. Typically it might be assumed that birth as a dog connotes misdeeds in a past life and a weak moral character, while rebirth as a monk implies a strong dharmic focus. However, *Ananda Ramayana*'s crying dog incident questions whether these assumptions are necessarily accurate in all instances. Notions of pollution and hierarchy are subsumed by the superior spiritual wisdom of a supposedly "low-born" animal, preparing the audience for further challenges to strict religious hierarchy later in the Shambuka incident.

In addition, Rama's relationship to the dog demonstrates a more equitable distribution of power. While in the *Uttararamacarita* Rama speaks *for* rather than *with* Shambuka in questioning the basis of varna hierarchy, the Rama of *Ananda Ramayana* defers to the dog the responsibility for explaining the monk's punishment. Rather than couching it in his own terms, Rama sends the questioning townspeople to the dog so that they can hear the explanation directly from its own mouth. This may seem like a subtle point, but allowing the dog this measure of self-determination and self-definition decenters normative power distribution and provides room for non-normative voices. The marginalized character expresses itself in its own terms, freeing itself from the normative lens of varna-based power structures.

In addition to the crying dog story, *Ananda Ramayana* includes other significant details surrounding the Shambuka story that color the way it is received by the audience. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Shambuka's asceticism directly causes the death of a Brahmin's son, making varna difference the central focus of the incident. Shambuka's actions are therefore not simply a violation of religious proscriptions, but an attack on the Brahmin varna. *Ananda Ramayana*, on the other hand, alters the role of varna by amending the karmic consequences of Shambuka's

tapas. Following the death of the Brahmin boy that appears in the Valmiki *Ramayana*, six more

people of differing varnas and both genders die as well, and Sita and Rama comfort the grieving

family members.[29]

While this divergence from Valmiki could be read as an augmentation of the negative

consequences of Shambuka's asceticism, Vidyut Aklujkar writes that "[t]he increase in the

number of dead, the inclusion of many castes and of both genders in the count of the untimely

dead, and Sita's compassionate assurance to the grieving parents, all these new details highlight

the inclusive sympathies of the author of [*Ananda Ramayana*]."[30] The repercussions of

Shambuka's breach of dharma no longer serve as a direct threat to varna hierarchy, but as a more

universal karmic consequence. The prohibition against Shudra tapas remains in place, but its

justification does not rely so heavily on a narrative of Brahmin purity and maintenance of varna

hierarchy. Including many varnas and two genders among the dead transforms Rama's execution

of Shambuka from a calculated trade of Shudra life for Brahmin to a chance to restore many

lives to a diverse group. This change allows *Ananda Ramayana* to tell the Shambuka incident

from a more balanced and sympathetic perspective that challenges the Valmiki *Ramayana*'s one-

sided, normative portrayal.

The oppositional nature of *Ananda Ramayana*'s introduction of the story carries through

to the Shambuka-Rama interaction as well. Unlike Valmiki's *Ramayana* and the

Uttararamacarita, *Ananda Ramayana* increases Shambuka's agency in this interaction by

creating a dialogue between the two characters before Rama beheads Shambuka. Rather than

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[29] ibid, 78.

[30] Vidyut Aklujkar. "Crying Dogs and Laughing Trees in Rama's Kingdom: Self-reflexivity in Ananda Ramayana," in *Questioning Ramayanas: a South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 95.

addressing Shambuka simply as a source of trouble and abruptly killing him, Rama converses

with Shambuka at some length, explaining to him that he must kill him in order to revive the

seven people who have died as a result of his ascetic practices. He goes on to praise Shambuka's

tapas, and offers him a boon: "I am happy with your tapas. You speak about your desire to me."[31]

"O Rama," responds Shambuka, "in case you are pleased with me in reality then grant me a boon

by which the people of low castes also could achieve the noble position. Let me also be

redeemed at the same time."[32] By including this exchange between the two characters, *Ananda*

Ramayana shows that Shambuka is worthy of an explanation for his death, and that he deserves

rewards for his tapas. This acknowledgement of Shambuka's merits helps paint a fuller picture of

Shambuka and his motivations, giving him a distinctive voice missing from the Valmiki

Ramayana's flat depiction. *Ananda Ramayana* expands and humanizes Shambuka's character,

suggesting a more balanced mode of interaction between different varnas.

However, while Shambuka takes on a more complex and active role in *Ananda*

Ramayana, there are also several examples from the text of elements used to diminish or belittle

him, especially in comparison to Rama. As Shambuka finishes requesting the boon he has won,

Rama remains firmly in control of their relationship. The text states, "In this way listening to the

pathetic words of the Shudra, Rama was pleased."[33] Rama awards Shambuka the boon he

requests, but his plea is described as "pathetic" and is only granted because "Rama was pleased."

This short characterization negates the power Shambuka might have won by gaining a boon,

framing the exchange in terms of Rama's benevolence rather than Shambuka's merit. Shambuka

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[31] [Anonymous.] *Ananda Ramayana* trans. Shantilal Nagar (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2006), 78.

[32] ibid, 79.

[33] ibid.

therefore remains peripheral to Rama, reinscribing the normative relationship of Valmiki's

Ramayana.

This recreation of normalized social power is further entrenched by Rama's response to

Shambuka. Though he does grant the boon, Rama first decrees, "Let the Shudras recite the name

of Sri Rama and by doing so they would achieve the noble position."[34] In order to enjoy the

benefits of this boon, Shudras must recite Rama's name, thereby asserting his power over them.

While Rama is an avatara of Vishnu, and therefore may inspire devotion as a result of his

divinity, in the context of this story he is also Shambuka's executioner—a figurehead of

normative authority and symbol of varna hegemony. Though his respectfulness and compassion

toward Shambuka in some parts of the scene challenge the normative framings of Valmiki and

others, his very presence in the scene is defined by his duty to kill Shambuka, thus reinscribing

the authoritative tradition.

The "Shudra Tapasvi" Lives

Kuppalli Venkata Puttappa (1904-1994), or "Kuvempu" as he is widely known, is famous

for his innovative reframings of epic narrative, including the radical 1944 play *"Shudra

Tapasvi"* ("The Shudra Ascetic").[35] As a graduate and vice-chancellor of Mysore University,

Kuvempu became one of the most prominent Shudra public figures in India. Respected by elites

for his contributions to academia and literature, he gained access to mainstream tradition in a

way few Shudras had previously. While his participation in these systems might be viewed as a

tacit endorsement of their authority over Indian society, "Shudra Tapasvi" illustrates Kuvempu's

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[34] ibid.

[35] Paula Richman. "Shambuka's Story Anew," in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, ed. Paula Richman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 135.

attempts to subvert normative social power through narrative. Most notably, Kuvempu

formulates a Ramayana telling in which Rama reveres Shambuka instead of beheading him.

While *Uttararamacarita* and *Ananda Ramayana* attempt to shift the incident's emphasis through

changes in tone and characterization, the presence of Shambuka's execution within the narrative

casts a large shadow over other events. By refusing to kill Shambuka, Kuvempu completes a

major break from the established authoritative tradition, allowing it to offer more fundamental

and structural critiques to the varna system.

The way in which "Shudra Tapasvi" introduces Shambuka makes the text's opposition

clear from the beginning. In the first scene of the play, Death approaches Shambuka's hermitage,

but when asked the reason for her visit, she replies that she is not there for Shambuka, but for the

Brahmin admitted earlier in the day. Death explains that the Brahmin must be punished for his

misconduct and offensive treatment of Shambuka.[36] This opening scene already presents a

radical departure from Valmiki's authoritative narrative, signaling the play's overall intent. It

introduces Shambuka not as a threat to varna hierarchy and dharmic order, but as a great sage

who commands respect, even from Death itself. The corresponding shift in the play's

characterization of the Brahmin father further demonstrates its opposition to the Valmiki

Ramayana; even before the Brahmin appears on stage the audience becomes wary of him,

evoking distrust of his motives in demanding Shambuka's beheading. Viewed in relation to the

Valmiki's telling, this reversal serves as a direct challenge to the normative varna representations

of the authoritative Ramayana tradition.

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[36] Kuppalli Venkata Puttappa. ""Shudra Tapasvi" (excerpt) Scene 1," trans. Girish Karnad and K. Marulasiddappa, Unpublished. 2008.

In order to articulate this challenge to normative varna representations, "Shudra Tapasvi" constructs the Brahmin as a voice of the authoritative tradition. Kuvempu puts the discourse of the authoritative tradition in Shambuka's mouth, making him an embodiment of this perspective. When Rama asks if it is possible the Brahmin has made some unknowing error that caused his son's death, the Brahmin asserts, "My parents were impeccable in their conduct. Also, my guru trained me in piety. I am a born Brahmin, King."[37] The Brahmin mentions his birth and his parents' conduct as evidence of his blamelessness, leaving out any examination of his own actions. To protect himself from scrutiny, he relies on a normative ideological link between varna and personal morality. This argumentation reaffirms a conception of social hierarchy reminiscent of Valmiki, establishing the Brahmin as a voice of the authoritative tradition.

Having established this voice within the narrative, Kuvempu then uses Rama to challenge the authoritative tradition's normative power structures. Rama, who in many versions personally carries out Shambuka's beheading, in "Shudra Tapasvi" becomes a voice of opposition. Previously depicted as an arbiter of varna hegemony and social control, he begins to question the Brahmin father's normative conceptions of varna. Addressing the Brahmin's accusations that his lax rule directly caused the Brahmin boy's death, Rama responds, "So tell me, where I have erred? You are a guru not only by birth but by practice. So please tell me right away."[38] While Rama does reemphasize the Brahmin's revered status, his reasoning is not solely limited to birth status. The mention of "practice" complicates notions of varna implied earlier by the Brahmin, allowing more complete assessment of his character. Rama emphasizes that the Brahmin is

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[37] Kuppalli Venkata Puttappa. ""Shudra Tapasvi" (excerpt)," trans. Girish Karnad and K. Marulasiddappa, in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, ed. Paula Richman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 123.

[38] ibid, 124.

respected and revered because of things he has done (the "practices" he has undertaken), and not just because of his position within varna hierarchy. This phrasing frames the Brahmin's authority as a result of virtuous deeds, not simply an unquestioned product of normative social structures.

Realizing that the Brahmin's attachment to the absolute sanctity of varna hierarchy will limit further dialogue, Rama attempts to change the Brahmin's mind. "How shall I teach a lesson to this bigoted pedant drunk with the pride of varna?" he thinks to himself, "Shambuka is a great yogi. Dharma, angered by this man's affront to the rishi [seer], has brought sudden death to this child even in my kingdom. But blind to his own faults he vituperates Shambuka openly and me by implication."[39] This statement, coming so early in the play, colors Rama's relationship to Shambuka and the Brahmin for the rest of the play. While in many previous iterations of the story, the Brahmin is placed in an obviously more powerful role in relation to Shambuka, Kuvempu's play reverses this dynamic. In openly validating Shambuka, the Rama of "Shudra Tapasvi" rejects many aspects his traditional authoritative role, thereby becoming an oppositional figure. His stance toward the Brahmin and varna norms represents a challenge to the authoritative interpretation of the Shambuka incident and Rama's role in it.

As the play progresses, Rama continues to assert his oppositional status by challenging the the authoritative tradition as embodied by the Brahmin. Through their conversation, "Shudra Tapasvi" enacts the internal debate between oppositional and authoritative. Richman notes that epithets used by Rama and the Brahmin allow Kuvempu to provide commentary on the Ramayana tradition from within the narrative. Both characters employ epithets designed to challenge the other's motives, forming a self-reflexive dialogue commenting on the narrative

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[39] ibid, 125-126.

tradition in which it is participating. The Brahmin, representing the authoritative tradition, addresses Rama as "King of the Raghu Lineage," "Disciple of Vasistha," and "Protector of Varnashrama Dharma."[40] These epithets remind Rama and the audience of Rama's commitment to maintaining order as king. Referencing the Raghu Lineage draws upon the normative value placed on genetic lineage, simultaneously emphasizing Rama's differentness from Shambuka and other Shudras, as well as Rama's duty to preserve the prestige of his family name. Similarly, naming Rama "Disciple of Vasishtha" recalls the court sage—and Brahmin—who taught Rama in his younger days. The Brahmin father reminds Rama of his guru's lessons about varna hierarchy, imploring him enforce normative power relations out of reverence for his former teacher. "Protector of Varnashrama Dharma" is the least ambiguous of all; here the Brahmin father states plainly his desire for Rama to defend varna and dharma from the perceived threat of Shambuka's asceticism. Through these epithets, Kuvempu enhances his characterization of the Brahmin father as voice of authority, demonstrating through him the modes of argumentation used by the normative ideologies of Valmiki and others. By locating this perspective in a single character, "Shudra Tapasvi" highlights the often invisible normative biases present in this set of interpretations, setting the stage for more direct critiques and alternative understandings.

In contrast, Rama's use of epithets challenges this authoritative voice by providing an alternate value system to the strict observance of prescribed varna hierarchy. Rama appeals to the Brahmin's transcendent spiritual knowledge, calling him "Eminent One among the Enlightened Ones" and "One Who Knows Wisdom."[41] These appellations constitute an appeal to wisdom

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[40] Kuppalli Venkata Puttappa. ""Shudra Tapasvi" (excerpt)," trans. Girish Karnad and K. Marulasiddappa, in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, ed. Paula Richman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 129-130.

[41] ibid, 129.

over law. Richman writes that by calling the Brahmin "Eminent One among the Enlightened Ones," Rama suggests that a person with a high level of spiritual knowledge should cultivate more transcendent understandings, and therefore not demand Shambuka's death.[42] The maintenance of varna hierarchy is no longer a central concern in this alternative conception, demonstrating that morality need not be tied to normative social structures. Similarly, the designation "One Who Knows Wisdom," suggests a need to abandon ignorance and seek the highest forms of knowledge in order to fairly decide Shambuka's fate. It implies that normative justifications of varna hierarchy is simplistic, and suggests that other modes of relation are possible. Rama's exchange of epithets with the Brahmin is a self-referential device that embodies the existing internal dialogue within the tradition between authoritative and oppositional, exposing perceived weaknesses in the authoritative tradition to open space for alternative voices.

Although Rama challenges varna hierarchy through his conversation with the Brahmin father, his relationship to Shambuka reinscribes normative social locations in important ways. As in the *Uttararamacarita*, Rama speaks *for* Shambuka rather than *with* him, implicitly reaffirming the notion that Kshatriya voices carry more legitimacy than those of Shudras. Though much of the play's dialogue centers around Shambuka, he has no speaking lines himself, and must therefore rely on Rama in order to be heard. Though Rama voices concerns shared by many Shudras, he remains the primary agent of opposition to normative varna hierarchy, taking up rhetorical space that might otherwise be filled directly by Shudras. By remaining silent, Kuvempu's Shambuka allows the reiteration of Rama's place of authority within the tradition, thereby reinscribing normative attitudes toward varna hierarchy.

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[42] Paula Richman. "Transforming a Brahmin," in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, ed. Paula Richman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 120.

Although Rama remains the sole voice of opposition in "Shudra Tapasvi," the character

of his relationship to Shambuka is markedly different than the ones rendered in Valmiki's

Ramayana, the *Uttararamacarita*, or the *Ananda Ramayana*. In "Shudra Tapasvi", Shambuka

does not simply exist as a passive observer to Rama's actions, but becomes a powerful figure in

his own right. Rama calls him "Great Rishi ['Seer'] Shambuka" and speaks of him with

reverence and respect. So deep is his meditation that "Thick foliage covers him. His wild

whiskers and knotted hair have grown entwined in vines. An anthill has climbed up the lower

half of his body. A glow envelops the entire scene."[43] This description—which is, tellingly, more

detailed than any other explored for this paper—exemplifies the power Shambuka has developed

through his ascetic practices. In relation to his agency-less depiction in authoritative Ramayanas,

the spiritual power he gains in "Shudra Tapasvi" is itself an act of resistance to traditional norms.

This challenge to authoritative tellings is compounded by a veiled reference to Valmiki

contained in the description. Valmiki, whose name means "he of the anthill" in Sanskrit is said to

have sat in one place meditating for so long that an anthill grew around him.[44] Therefore the

anthill that "climbs up the lower half of [Shambuka's] body" mirrors this ancient story, creating a

parallel between Shambuka and Valmiki. This appropriation of Valmiki connects the two figures,

granting "Shudra Tapasvi" and its portrayal of Shambuka access to the authority of Valmiki and

his Ramayana. In doing so, the play expands its place in the Ramayana tradition, giving it the

power to shape the way tradition understands Valmiki. By placing Valmiki in oppositional

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[43] Kuppalli Venkata Puttappa. ""Shudra Tapasvi" (excerpt)," trans. Girish Karnad and K. Marulasiddappa, in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, ed. Paula Richman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 126.

[44] Velcheru Narayana Rao. "The Politics of Telegu Ramayanas: Colonialism, Print Culture, and Literacy Movements," from *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 164.

contexts, Kuvempu destabilizes its authoritative interpretation and subverts its attendant social power structures.

This transformation of authoritative to oppositional is echoed by "Shudra Tapasvi"'s radical conclusion. Rama and the Brahmin converse about Shambuka for some time, and finally the Brahmin demands that Rama kill Shambuka. Rama shoots an arrow, commanding it "Seek out the sinner and destroy him."[45] When he fires it, however, the arrow prostrates itself in front of Shambuka then turns around then sets its sights on the Brahmin. Given Rama's command to the arrow, this seems to imply that the Brahmin, not Shambuka, is the "sinner." At this, the Brahmin father has an epiphany, and, realizing his error, prostrates himself at Shambuka's feet. His son is immediately revived, and the two of them do obeisance to Shambuka in thanks for saving the boy's life.[46] Viewed in relation to Valmiki's Shambuka episode, Kuvempu's radical renegotiation of Shambuka's role in the Brahmin boy's death signals a complete reorientation in regard to varna hierarchy. At the beginning of "Shudra Tapasvi," the Brahmin father closely resembles Valmiki's vengeful Brahmin, steeped in varna hegemony and normative social power relations, but by the end this same character bows to Shambuka with gratitude and reverence. Building on the transgressive relationships depicted in the *Uttararamacarita* and *Ananda Ramayana*, Kuvempu's play diverges sharply from Valmiki's portrayal of the incident. While previous Ramayanas attempted to reframe the episode within the confines of the authoritative narrative structure, Kuvempu breaks from tradition by refusing to kill Shambuka. This radical

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[45] Kuppalli Venkata Puttappa. ""Shudra Tapasvi" (excerpt)," trans. Girish Karnad and K. Marulasiddappa, in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, ed. Paula Richman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 131.

[46] ibid, 133.

change to the structure of the narrative interrupts the reiteration of the authoritative tradition, allowing the play to offer deeper structural criticisms of normative varna relationships.

Conclusions

The complex web of intertextual relationships that makes up the Ramayana tradition exists in a constant state of flux. Some strands of the tradition gain authority and exert greater normative influence than others, while others seek to destabilize these same texts. Because no one text can claim absolute authority, systems of meaning are always contested and ever-changing. In order to help us navigate these intersecting understandings, Paula Richman introduces a distinction between oppositional and authoritative Ramayanas. These labels organize narratives according their mode of interacting with normative ideologies, creating a useful system of classification. However, participation in the Ramayana tradition necessitates elements of both opposition and authority, and therefore each text develops its own unique relationship to the various aspects of normative social control found in the narrative.

The historical development of the Shambuka story—as illustrated in this paper— highlights the transformative power of creative and courageous narrative. Juxtaposing the Valmiki *Ramayana*'s swift and unapologetic beheading of Shambuka with Kuvempu's nuanced deconstruction of varna hegemony, we begin to get a sense of the Ramayana tradition's radical potential. To fully grasp this reorientation, however, we must also understand the intervening texts. The *Uttararamacarita* and *Ananda Ramayana*, while perhaps not as transgressive as "Shudra Tapasvi" in their opposition to the normative social power of Valmiki, challenge the authoritative tradition in ways that open space for voices silenced by oppressive norms and expectations. The life of an oppositional Ramayana does not end with its publication. Its

influence is not bounded by the pages it inhabits. Each transgressive text expands the tradition to provide space for previously silenced narratives, cultivating a multi-vocal challenge to oppressive social constructs.

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