

## Chapter II: Research Cultures and Locations

The formal fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted with members of the Kani community, a tribal people, in a mountain forest area in the southwest of the state of Tamil Nadu, India. In the course of the research project, I also interacted with members of two other groups of Tamil people: 1) Before my visit with the Kani community, I (as a volunteer instructor) attended children's language and culture classes given by people of Tamil-descent living in the Philadelphia area, in the state of Pennsylvania, USA. And, 2) after my visit with the Kani community, I collected variants of the children's songs/chants/dances/games from Tamil people who live in a seaside neighborhood in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, in the northeast of Tamil Nadu, on India's southeast coast.<sup>1</sup>

All three of these groups are composed of Tamil people. Thus, this chapter will begin with a general discussion of the Tamil people, focusing on the geography of their homeland, and on their history and culture. Then the specifics of the three groups -- the diaspora group in the USA, the tribal group in the mountains, and the urban group in Chennai -- will be considered.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1996, the Government of India re-named the city of Madras as Chennai. This was done because it was believed that Madras was a name imposed by colonizers, and Chennai was a more indigenous name.

## A) The Geography and Climate, History, and Culture of Tamil Nadu, South India.

### 1) Geography and Climate.

The Vindhya mountains of central India form the proverbial border between north and south India. However, in practical terms the South is not defined by a geographical border, but rather by linguistic, cultural, and political ones. In 1956, the Government of India created states largely based on the languages spoken. It was then that the four southern states came into being. (Previously, there had been a plethora of administrative areas which had been ruled by local leaders and then by the British.) Thus, the northern borders of the northernmost southern states -- Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh -- mark the practical border between India's South and North. This practical border is hundreds of miles south of the Vindhya mountains.

There are four southern states. In clockwise order, they are: Andhra Pradesh (Telegu language); Tamil Nadu (Tamil language); Kerala (Malayalam language); and 4) Karnataka (Kannada language). The four major modern southern languages derive from a single ancient Tamil language. The modern Kannada, Telegu, and Malayalam languages have incorporated a good deal of Sanskrit vocabulary and grammar, whereas modern Tamil has incorporated less. In

contrast: in north India, there are seventeen states, whose official languages all derive from Sanskrit.

Being close to the equator, the climate of India's southernmost two states -- Tamil Nadu to the east, and Kerala to the west -- is generally tropical. However, these states have a wide variety of climate and vegetation zones. To give an outline, from east to west: Along the east coast, there is sandy beach, with the sand often extending hundreds of yards before vegetation begins. As one moves westward, the land is flat or rolling. Even today, small-scale agriculture is the primary activity in much of the countryside. There is a relatively small Eastern Ghats mountain range in the northeast of Tamil Nadu, but the state's major mountain range is the Western Ghats mountain range. The Western Ghats, thickly-forested with trees in many places, runs north-south along approximately the western third of south India. It can be very cool in these mountains, but there is no snow. Tamil Nadu's western border, which is with Kerala, is mostly in these mountains. In Kerala, on the far side of the Western Ghats, there is jungle: moisture coming over the sea from the west is trapped here. Finally, there is a narrow strip of flat land along south India's west coast.

The Tamil calendar has twelve months:

- 1) chitthirai (mid-April to mid-May) (the hottest time of the year).
- 2) vaikaasi (mid-May to mid-June).
- 3) aani (mid-June to mid-July).
- 4) aaDi (mid-July to mid-August).
- 5) aavaNi (mid-August to mid-September).
- 6) puraTTaasi (mid-September to mid-October).
- 7) aippasi (mid-October to mid-November) (the most rainy time of year).
- 8) kaarthikai (mid-November to mid-December).
- 9) markaLRZi (mid-December to mid-January).
- 10) thai (mid-January to mid-February).
- 11) masi (mid-February to mid-March).
- 12) pangkuni (mid-March to mid-April).

## 2) History and Culture.

### a) Pre-history.

Archeological evidence suggests that Neanderthals lived in south India from 500,000 to 40,000 years ago (Rao 1990). Homo sapiens (the contemporary human species) came into being over 100,000 years ago in Africa, according to a

commonly-held academic theory (Cavalli-Sforza 1995). Complex and numerous migrations by Homo sapiens then occurred by land and sea between Africa and places eastward -- all the way to islands in the South Pacific Ocean (Hall 1996; Pawley 1993; Toussaint 1966). South India is in the center of this region, and there is archeological evidence that Homo sapiens reached south India at least 60,000 years ago (Nagaraju 1990). These people were what anthropologists have labeled as Negritos, and Australoids (Gardner 1966; Thurston 1909). The racial and cultural bedrock of all South and Southeast Asia is provided by these aboriginal peoples, a number of whom (including Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, Paliyans, Kadirs, Kanikarans, and Vedans) continue to live in the Western Ghats. Numerous scholars have commented on the physical similarities between some of the south Indian aboriginal peoples and certain Malaysian and Australian aboriginal peoples. To quote one such statement: "Paliyans' various physical types fall within the range of South and Southeast Asian-Australoid types, formerly termed Negrito, Malid, Veddid, and proto-Australoid. They are physically most similar to the Semang of Malaya" (Gardner, 1969, p. 390).

There are also cultural similarities between aboriginal peoples from south India to Australia and beyond, including the practices of animism and shamanism, and the use of boomerangs for hunting. By all accounts, complete Austro-Asiatic languages are no longer spoken by tribal peoples of south India, although traces of such languages may be present.

Lemuria is a concept that was introduced in Tamil Nadu by Westerners, especially Theosophists based in Madras in the early 1900s. According to them, Lemuria had been a great land mass, south of India, which enabled people and animals to walk most or all of the way from Madagascar to Australia (Ramaswamy 1999). The idea of Lemuria has been adopted by many Tamils, as it fits with the native legend that the far southern Tamil lands have been covered by a series of floods. Both of these ideas seem to grapple with the aforementioned Africa-to-Oceania presence of seemingly-related aboriginal peoples. Africa, India, and Australia indeed once were parts of a single land mass, the supercontinent of Pangea; but the continents began to separate 150 million years ago (the Early Cretaceous Age), and by 20 million years (the Miocene Age) the continents reached their present positions (Le Grand 1988) -- long before Homo sapiens came into existence.

Beginning approximately 8,000 years ago, aboriginal peoples were joined in India by the ancient Tamils. The leading academic theory is the ancient Tamils were genetically and culturally derived from the Eelamite people, who were based in the area east of the Mediterranean Sea, especially in the territory of present-day Iraq (Cavalli-Sforza 1995). The Eelamites, mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, were neighbors of the Sumerians and Mesopotamians of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, and were among the world's first agriculturalists and urbanites. While most scholars posit that urban developments originated in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley

area and spread eastward to the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa sites (in present-day Pakistan), it may also be that the first urban developments occurred in the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa areas, and spread westward.<sup>1</sup> In either case, it seems that over the centuries the people and culture of the Ealamites extended eastward and southward to what is now known as India.

The ancient Tamils generally were taller and had thinner noses than the aboriginal peoples they joined in India. (The anthropological terms for nose-types are: leptorhine, thin; and platyrhine, broad.) Little is known about the interaction between the ancient Tamils and the aboriginal peoples in India. It may be that when the ancient Tamil people arrived, they tended to settle and to control society on the coasts and on the plains, whereas the aboriginal peoples could continue to live on their own terms only in areas such as the forests and jungles of mountain areas, where some of their descendants have remained to this day.

By 4,000 years ago, there existed on the sub-continent a culture with kings, courts, urban centers, and irrigation systems. Again, according to a widely-held academic theory, it was at this juncture that a branch of the Aryan people arrived in the sub-continent (Cavalli-Sforza 1995). According to this theory, the Aryan people originated in what is today known as the Caucasus area of Russia (that

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<sup>1</sup> George Hart, Personal communication (spoken), 7 October 2002.

is, in the southwest of Russia). Other branches of the Aryan tribe moved westward into Europe, and spoke Latin. The Aryans who came to India spoke Sanskrit. It has been posited -- and there is strong linguistic evidence to support the idea -- that Latin and Sanskrit are derived from the same ancient Aryan language (Jones 1786). The Aryan people were tall, and had light skin and thin noses. Their (Sanskrit) term for the peoples they found in the sub-continent was, "Dravidians." This term seems to group together the aboriginal peoples (related to aboriginal peoples of Africa and Australia), and the ancient Tamils (related to the Ealamite people of the area east of the Mediterranean Sea) in a vague manner.

Aryan society and culture was originally nomadic. In those days, the Aryans were adept at conquering sedentary peoples: they used metal, horses, and chariots for this purpose. Aryans primarily worshiped father gods in the sky, largely through the ritual use of fire and the chanting (by initiated men only) of sacred verses known as Vedas. The most popular academic theory is that the Aryans smashed the ancient Tamil urban centers and irrigation systems, and imposed a hierarchical form of racial segregation (later to be known as, the caste system) (Cavalli-Sforza 1995). This system featured themselves, Brahmins, as priests and landowners at or near the top of society, and stressed the impurity of most others. Aryan-Brahmin-Sanskrit people and culture came to dominate

society in the north of the sub-continent; however, in the South, the ancient-Tamil people and culture consolidated, survived, and thrived.

#### b) Literature, Life, and Kingship in Ancient Times.

The earliest south Indian poetry that we have today was written in an early form of Tamil approximately 4,000 years ago. This poetry expresses an optimistic, largely-secular view of life in a heroic age featuring fights for land; and meat-eating and wine-drinking (Nayagam 1966). Religion in this culture seems to have centered around worship of goddesses (Korravai, Palaiyol, Kanamar Selvi, Kadu Kihal, etc.), often along with her son (Murugan, etc.), in rituals involving music and dance, and the sacrifice of chickens and goats. The Brahmins' culture, in contrast, forbade meat-eating and animal sacrifice: theirs was a pessimistic worldview, dwelling upon the impure and temporary nature of material existence. Interaction between the aboriginal, ancient Tamil, and Brahmanic cultures has continued to the present day, and has formed the syncretic religion known as Hinduism -- with worship of local spirits and of ancestors, banished to the periphery of the orthodox version of the religion.

From 2,200 to 1,800 years ago, the Third Tamil Sangam ("association of poets and scholars") flourished, based in the city of Madurai. (The first two Sangams

are ascribed to earlier times and are likely to have existed primarily in legend.) The surviving Third Sangam poems, engraved on hard palm leaves, were rediscovered 100-150 years ago. There are eight volumes of short poems and ten volumes of longer poems: in all, there are 2,381 poems written by 473 poets. Recent translations have brought some of this material to a wide English-reading audience (Hart 1975, 1979, 1999; Ramanujan 1984, 1994).

Contemporary with these poems are: 1) Tholkappiar's *Tholkappiam*, the earliest known Tamil work of phonology, morphology, grammar, and literary analysis; and 2) Thiruvalluvar's *Thirukkural*, a collection of brief sayings in verse which offer advice on how to live a good private life, and a good public life. There are also five literary epics, which were written in slightly later periods. The most prominent of these is the central epic of the Tamil people, the *Silappathikaram*, the *Epic of the Anklet*, which, according to linguistic analysis, was written approximately 1,400 years ago.

Sangam literature evokes a picture of a cosmopolitan, trade-oriented, and tolerant society. In this literature, the three leading ideologies of the day -- Brahminism, Jainism, and Buddhism -- co-existed in relative harmony. Center stage are aristocratic young men and women, questing for heroic action and love. The human condition, albeit idealized, is the subject matter. Spirituality, religion, and mythology are peripheral. This literature is of an urban, courtly

milieu. One famous Sangam poem gently ridicules folk religion: a village maiden is brought to an exorcist, as her parents fear she is possessed by a malicious spirit: in fact, she is secretly pining for her human lover.

The *Tholkappiam* discusses the distinction between Akam and Puram poetry. Akam poetry pertains to love and romance. It is written in the form of conversations between participants, often voicing participants' thoughts and feelings, with the heroine's female friends and relatives playing supporting roles. No names, places, or dates are mentioned. Puram poetry, on the other hand, pertains to matters of state, primarily war; and here specific historical and geographical references are appropriate. Akam and Puram elements are often mingled in a single poem, as in one in which a wounded but victorious young man rushing home from a distant battlefield imagines his love waiting for him.

The institution of kingship was central to ancient south Indian culture. The tradition of justice in ancient south India decreed that a king should inflict upon himself whatever injustices he might have inadvertently inflicted upon others, and there are many stories about this occurring.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *Silappathikaram*, the *Epic of the Anklet*, is one such story: when the Pandian king realizes he has put Kannagi's husband to death due to an incorrect charge of theft, the King says, "I am the thief," and simply lays down and dies. Another instance of this theme is the story of the Chola king who -- upon hearing from a cow that the cow's calf had been killed by the chariot that the king's son had been riding in -- put that son of his to death in punishment.

Many of the written Sangam puram poems are in the form of *Aarruppatai*, a literary device which portrays an oral bard who has received bountiful gifts from a local king and who now, upon meeting other bards in the course of travel, praises that king and his land and directs these others to him. Numerous scholars have speculated that much of the Sangam poetry is derived from the oral tradition (Kailasapathy 1968; Stephen 1999). Much of the Sangam poetry is formulaic, which lends credence to the likelihood that the oral tradition was close at hand. It seems that during the Sangam age, there was lively interaction between the oral and literary traditions. Elements of praise-songs for Tamil kings were later applied to Aryan deities.

An ancient south Indian king tended to periodically spend time in the forest wilderness, so as to renew his mystical connection with nature (Falk 1973). The king's valor was reflected in the land: the physical-spiritual health of the realm depended on his behavior. The greatness of a king was assessed in part in terms of the fertility and the diversity of the regions found within his territory, and therefore descriptions of the kingdom's landscapes often form an integral part of laudatory and heroic verses.

The *Tholkappiam* explains the Sangam poetic convention that there are five landscapes in south India, each one corresponding to a flower, time of the day, season of the year, and stage of a love-relationship (Nayagam 1966):

Coastal areas

Flower: Neytal (water lily).

Stage of love: Heroine expresses grief over separation.

Season of year: (No specific season).

Time of day: Sunset.

Agricultural areas

Flower: Marutham.

Stage of love: Lovers' quarrels; wife's irritability; husband accused of visiting a courtesan.

Season of year: (No specific season).

Time of day: Shortly before sunrise (the hour when an unfaithful husband sneaks into his home).

Barren-land (vegetation is sparse, earth is dried out)

Flower: Paalai.

Stage of love: Longest separation; dangerous journey by the hero.

Season of year: Hot and dry (April-September).

Time of day: Midday.

Pasture-lands (shrubbery)

Flower: Mullai (white jasmine).

Stage of love: Heroine expresses patient waiting over separation.

Season of year: Cloudy (August-October).

Time of day: Evening.

Mountains

Flower: Kurinci (blooms once every twelve years).

Stage of love: Union of lovers.

Season of year: Cool and moist (November-December).

Time of day: Midnight.

In south India, ancient-Tamil rulers and languages remained dominant. By 2,500 years ago, three dynasties had come into being: the Chola (east), Pandian (central), and Chera (west). Buddhism and Jainism, associated with trading and urban groups, were important factors in south India from 2,300 to 1,800 years

ago. These ideologies originated in north India. They denied the authority of the Brahminic Vedas and its division of society into classes, and stressed compassion.

As mentioned, the *Epic of the Anklet* is a central story of the Tamil people, and an ancient written version of the story in verse is linguistically-dated as having been written approximately 1,400 years ago, in the post-Sangam period. This text is ascribed to Ilango Adigal, a Jain monk. It is said that he was requested to write this text by his brother, the Chera king, who while traveling in the forest had come upon women worshipping image of Kannagi. The text therefore is primarily a biography of its heroine, Kannagi. As the story provides a key to Tamil culture, it is briefly told here:

Kannagi and Kovalan married in the great international port city, Poompuhar, on Tamil Nadu's east coast. After some time, Kovalan went off with a dancer named Madhavi. A year later, he returned home. He and Kannagi walked to Madurai, a distance of about 250 km, to start a new life. There Kovalan was falsely accused of stealing the Pandian queen's anklet, and was unjustly put to death by the local ruler, the Pandian king. Kannagi came to the court and proved that the anklet that her husband had been trying to sell had been hers. She did this by showing that rubies were inside each of her anklets, while pearls were inside the queen's anklets (the anklets were tubular). This established that her

husband had been innocent of the crime of stealing an anklet from the queen. The king punished himself for the injustice he had done, by simply laying down and dying. Kannagi walked around the city three times, tore off her left breast and threw it against the city wall, and called for the city to burn -- but for good people and animals to be unharmed. Agni, the god of Fire, accomplished this. Kannagi wandered to the western mountains, where she founded a small community.<sup>1</sup>

This story has been the subject of numerous writings (Danielou 1965; Macphail 1993; Miller 1991, 2006; Noble 1990; Obeyesekere 1980, 1984; Pandian 1982; Parthasarathy 1993). Three morals that have been drawn from the story by modern Tamils are: 1) a chaste woman (that is, one who is utterly devoted to her husband) is all-powerful; 2) the goddess of Justice will strike down unjust rulers; and 3) Fate cannot be escaped.

It is unclear if the story's events took place exactly as told: it is a legend. There are numerous variations regarding the story's details. One folk version has it that Kannagi was the Pandian king's daughter, and that an astrologer warned the king that his daughter would kill him one day, so he ordered her put to death as

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<sup>1</sup> Links to the texts of a booklet, and an article that I have written about the story, can be found at <http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/118.html> . The booklet -- "Tamil Nadu's *Silappathikaram (Epic of the Anklet): Ancient Story and Modern Identity*" -- contains a more detailed telling of the story. The article is entitled, "In Praise of Citizen Kannagi."

an infant -- but instead she was placed in a basket and set adrift at sea. Fishermen found her, and she, like her husband, were raised in a merchant caste.

One striking aspect of the story is that is primarily a human one. Akam (private love) and Puram (matters of state) elements co-mingle. Kannagi is worshipped by some even today, and is an example of a supposedly-historical figure who became a local goddess (at times an angry one). Such figures are characteristic of ancient Tamil culture. However, the story seems to come from a post-heroic period, and can actually be considered an anti-epic, as it criticizes the misuse of state power.

As the story attests, there was extensive trade on both coasts of ancient south India: ancient Greeks and Romans visited, as did Arabs and Chinese. A Tamil word, *yavana*, described foreigners who were employed by south Indian kings. Christianity made an early appearance in south India: Christ's disciple, Thomas, is said to have died in what is now Chennai. A settlement of Jews settled on south India's west coast, in Cochin. Islamic Moghal rulers made some headway in the South beginning 1,200 years ago, but never dominated as they did in many sections of the North.

Beginning approximately 1,600 years ago, Tamils began to colonize Southeast Asia, bringing Hinduism to Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Ghosh 1989). 1,300 years ago, Bhakti (devotional) practices originated in the South and swept across all of India: Bhakti-ism stressed love for and mystical union with the divine and was typically expressed in song. With the Age of Discovery came Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British traders. South India, surrounded on three sides by the sea, has had lengthy and varied traditions of cultural and material exchange with people of many distant lands.

By 1700, the British colonization of India was well underway. Madras was a leading entry point. An essential part of the British project in south India involved sedentizing the population, so as to be able to administrate more easily, and to collect taxes regularly. They attempted -- with assistance from middle- and upper-class Tamils -- to discredit, marginalize, and even criminalize those who resisted settled life. The British tended to support the cultural centrality of large temples (Appadurai 1981). In these ways, the British lowered a bureaucratic grid of systemization and codification (Irschick 1994).

### c) Village Religion.

A cornerstone of south Indian culture -- contributed originally by aboriginal peoples, and developed by the ancient Tamils -- is the sense that the divine is immanent: it is in anything and everything, and can spring up at any moment (Harper 1957). This south Indian animism developed in part from the association of certain trees, plants, animals, stones, and other objects with local divinities (Elmore 1913; Whitehead 1921). South Indian village religion to this day revolves around ancestor-, nature-, and local goddess-worship. Village deities are typically represented by stones, carved or uncarved.

South India is famous for her village goddesses. Many of these figures were once, according to legend, local women. Some village goddesses are "married" to Sanskritic gods, but many are not. The single, or virgin, goddesses are considered capricious, hot-tempered, and mercurial. Sometimes the distinction between central deities and peripheral spirits is not clear (Brubaker 1978; Craddock 1994; Trawick 1983). Sanskritic culture presents its divinities as timeless, transcendent, distant, calm, and benevolent: but even Sanskritic goddesses, in the south Indian village context, sometimes become aggressive and dangerous (Shulman 1986). Scholars such as Christopher Fuller have argued that south Indian village religion, and popular Hinduism in general, needs

to be considered on its own terms, and not as a degenerated or distorted version of Sanskritic culture (Fuller 1992).

In its practices of animal sacrifice -- and its stories of goddesses, such as Isakki, who kill males in fury -- south Indian village religion points to a cyclical sense of time and matter. In some myths, a son of the goddess grows, becomes her consort, and dies. In south Indian versions of the pan-Indian myth of the goddess killing a buffalo-demon, the buffalo-demon is actually the thinly-disguised figure of the goddess' own divine son-consort-husband (Shulman 1980). The goddess-centric-ness of this story is rationalized away in Sanskrit culture, which claims that its gods created the goddess in the first place, in order to have her to defeat a buffalo-demon who had temporarily gotten the best of them.

Local south Indian goddesses are approached especially in times of crisis: when personal or community disasters occur, people call on the goddess. Local goddesses are also celebrated during annual festivals, which are coordinated with agricultural and seasonal cycles. Sanskritic mythology is not generally intimately related to places in south India; Dravidian legends and myths, on the other hand, are very place-centric.

Puja is the characteristic Dravidian form of worship. Puja consists of a complex of activities, including: the drawing of kolams (designs made with powdered chalk); the pouring of liquids over, and the placing flowers on, the deity stone; the offering of gifts; the singing of praise to the deity; and other forms of ritual performance. Deities are believed to demand attention, and puja attempts to please the deity by inviting the deity to enter the idol and also the worshipper's body. Here the act of narrating about the deity, involves invoking and summoning the deity. This gives the deity the opportunity to speak (through the "possessed" worshipper), a process known in Tamil Nadu as *sami*.

In south Indian villages, people of low-status castes often perform certain services for people of high-status castes. Barbers, washerpeople, and other removers of human waste, often also act as mediators with death. Such people can be in touch with dangerous local spirits, and can deal with them through ritual. For example, people of various low-status castes, and tribal groups -- including the Kani tribal people -- are hired by other castes to play drums (made of cattlehide) outside temples. People of low-status castes are also often employed as watchmen. As the low-status castes are to the high, so the South is to the North: the South is the subaltern space of India.

#### d) Women.

In south Indian culture, women are considered to be potentially very powerful. A girl's *sakti* (divine cosmic energy) benefits her parents and siblings. A married woman's *sakti* protects and animates her husband and their children (Wadley 1980). As such, a married woman is considered to be auspicious. On the other hand, a single woman, especially a beautiful woman, is considered to be potentially dangerous: the dominant culture states that her power should be bounded and channeled by marriage to a man. An example of things going awry is presented by Kannagi, the heroine of the *Epic of the Anklet*: upon learning that her husband had been put to death by the local king, Kannagi ripped off her left breast and threw it against Madurai's city walls, whereupon the city burst into flames. Here the female breast, usually the most life-giving of elements, is inverted into the most destructive.

In south India, a girl's first menstruation is cause for celebration and ceremony. In olden days -- and even today, especially in the countryside -- the girl would remain in a specially built hut for some days, where female relatives would bring her food and visit with her. In the South, the menstruating girl's fertility is emphasized, and her pollution is de-emphasized: the opposite is the case in the North (Kapadia 1995).

A traditional south Indian ideal is that a girl should marry her mother's brother or his sons. It is generally believed that a woman's marriage home should be as close to her natal home as possible, both in terms of kin and geography. This practice gives social power to women. The brother-sister bond is very strong in India in general, and this is especially the case in the South (Beck 1974, 1989; Peterson 1988).

Various south Indian kinship systems have been identified as matrilocal, matrilineal, and/or matricentric (S. Daniel 1980; Gough 1955, 1959, 1961, 1965, 1973, 1974; Schneider 1974). None, as far as I know, have actually been called matriarchal (rule by women). What is clear is that Dravidian cultures (both tribal and ancient Tamil) tend to give social and mythological prominence to females, and that the overwhelmingly-patriarchal cultures that arrived from the North (Brahminism and Islam) did not take hold in the South nearly to the degree that they did in the North.

### e) Dravidian Political-cultural Movements.

From the early 1900's onward, Dravidian political-cultural movements in Tamil Nadu have been composed of a thorough mix of religious, theatrical, and civic-political elements. Dravidian politicians developed a grand and sweeping style of political oratory: highly alliterative and rhythmic, with extensive parallelism (repetition with variation of phrases, of sentences, etc.), and numerous classical literary touches.

In the 1930's, N. S. Krishnan, a leading Tamil stage and cinema comedian, toured widely performing a modernized (and secularized) version of Villupaattu (a genre of epic-chanting). One of his Villupaattu performances focused on Mahatma Gandhi's "Salt March." Numerous recent chief ministers of Tamil Nadu have been cinema actors, writers, and producers (a chief minister in India, is similar to a governor in the USA). South India has seen a mix of drama, music, dance, cinema, and politics, to a degree unequalled by any other state of India (Baskaran 1981).

The ancient Tamil tradition of humanism was invoked by E.V. Ramasamy (EVR), leader of the early Dravidian movement, in his attacks against caste discrimination and his promotion of Rationalism (Atheism). This effort built on a number of cultural elements -- including Buddhism and Jainism, and the

*Thirukural* -- that have been prevalent in south India from ancient times, that do not center around divine figures. EVR and many other Tamil people, past and present, identify mythology as an Aryan element, introduced to confuse and subjugate Dravidians.

N. S. Krishnan was a guest of the Soviet Union for a visit. Socialism and Communism have made a big impression in India, where Communist parties still exist and are highly respected, especially in relation to unions and workers' rights. Kerala had an elected Communist state government for many years, and seemingly as a result has a very high literacy rate.

For many Tamils, the fight to expel the British was accompanied by another fight: one against domination by north Indians and Brahmins. This was especially expressed by Tamils' resistance to the imposition of the Hindi language in schools and workplaces (Hardgrave 1969, 1979; Irschick 1969, 1994). The Tamil language is perceived by many Tamil people as a goddess, bestowing beneficence on the entire world (Ramaswamy 1997).

However, the Dravidian movements in Tamil Nadu have been led by members of high-status (albeit non-Brahman) castes. Members of lower-status castes have only recently begun to speak for themselves in the public sphere, in part through what has come to be called Dalit culture, which is expressed in literary,

performance, economic, and political activities. Dalits claim to avoid hero-worship: theoretically, at Dalit meetings all sit around a circle and each has a chance to speak.

In the 1920s-50s, there was a good deal of sentiment in south India for making south India a separate country, possibly to be called, Dravidanadu. This project was diffused for the most part in 1956, when the states were created according to language (Hardgrave 1965; Irschick 1986; Barnett 1976).

The Tamil struggle on Sri Lanka can be seen as an extension of the Dravidian struggle in India (this struggle now seems to be over in military terms, with the defeat of the Tamil separatists in 2009). Tamil people have lived in Sri Lanka for thousands of years, but it was in the mid-1800s that the British transported large numbers of Tamils to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to work on tea plantations. The approximately two-and-a-half million Sri Lankan Tamils are concentrated on the northeast section of the island. Many of these people have felt persecuted by the majority Sinhalese, whose language is Sanskrit-derived and whose ancestors migrated from north India in ancient times. Thus, some Sri Lankan Tamils demanded an independent Tamil nation on the island of Sri Lanka. The guerrilla war that was waged by some separatists from 1983 to 2009 led to a clamp-down on general tourism and trade, not only between peoples of India and Sri Lanka, but also between peoples of India, and Singapore and Malaysia, as Government

of India forces patrolled the southeast coast of south India very closely and travel was restricted. The war also led to the presence of middle- and upper-class Sri Lankan Tamil “refugees” around the world. These people tend to be extremely motivated and sophisticated regarding the use of interactive telecommunication, which they especially use to communicate with Sri Lankan Tamil family, friends, and colleagues around the world.

#### f) Conclusion.

South India -- and Tamil Nadu in particular -- is a hybrid racial and cultural environment extraordinaire, having been composed especially of

- 1) Negrito/Australoid aboriginal peoples (related to African and Australian aboriginal peoples),
- 2) ancient Tamils (related to people of ancient Mesopotamia),
- 3) Brahmanic people and culture (related to the Aryan tribe and the Sanskrit language),
- 4) People of Islamic culture (who came from the north by land, and from the west by sea),
- 5) and European colonists (especially the English, French, and Portuguese).

Today, Tamil people in Tamil Nadu can look to the large Tamil populations in Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and beyond, as they develop their international networks and presence.

It is hoped that the above review of the cultural and racial history in my fieldwork area gives a sense of the incredibly rich and multi-textured social-intellectual environment of the area. It should also give a sense of the cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and tolerance of India, especially of south India. Add to this the density, variety, and lushness of the vegetation of much of the Western Ghats -- one of the bio-diversity hotspots of the world -- and the wonder of this area becomes very clear.

There is a sense of cultural unity and wholeness in Tamil Nadu. This is in part so because the tribal people, the ancient Tamils, and the Sanskrit culture people have been interacting, and developing a combined culture together, for thousands of years. Reverence and respect for women, tribal people, the rural, and nature, has survived -- even if it is not always acted upon. The unity in the diversity of Tamil culture, held together by the Tamil language, and by reverence for culture heroes such as Kannagi (who interacted with people in all levels of society), affects all Tamils, even those who live in diasporas around the world.

### B) Tamil People Emigrated to the Philadelphia Vicinity, in the USA.

The global Tamil diaspora is, generally-speaking, a middle- and upper-class phenomena (Ghosh 1989). Generally-speaking, it should not be seen not as a forced dislocation, but rather as a search for economic and other opportunities. In a fanciful sense, it can even be seen as an extension of south Indians' ancient colonizing of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

There are over 50 Tamil associations in the USA. They have an annual meeting each summer, which is organized by FETNA (the Federation of Tamils of North America).<sup>1</sup> These Tamil people are mostly professionals -- doctors, engineers, and people in computer-related fields. In many cases, the wives and husbands both have highly-skilled and well-paid employment. They do not seem to be intimidated by getting visas, finding high-level employment, and buying houses in the USA: rather, they seem to navigate very well through the necessary bureaucratic processes. These people tend to live in houses in suburban areas: the possibilities of urban dangers seem to make USA cities unattractive to them.

Some Tamil people in the USA have come from Sri Lanka. These people often have separate community associations. Sri Lankan Tamils in the USA are in a somewhat different position than Tamil people who have emigrated from India, in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fetna.org> .

that Sri Lankan Tamils are refugees from the difficult conditions and the guerilla war that devastated the economy and society of northeastern Sri Lanka, where most of Sri Lanka's Tamil people live. Tamil people from India tend to have great respect for the dialect of Tamil spoken by Sri Lankan Tamils, considering Sri Lankan Tamil to have many ancient words and grammatical structures.

In addition to seeking economic, professional, and lifestyle opportunities, Tamil people from India may have come to the USA to escape certain aspects of India, such as government corruption. They may also have come for the technology, infrastructure, and lifestyle benefits in the USA, such as the stable and (near) ever-present electricity, and paved roads. They may have come so that their children could experience the inquisitive, interactive, and creative education that is available to the elite in the USA. However, they tend to also express fondness for a sense of morality that they associate with India, in terms of such matters as husbands and wives staying together, children obeying elders, and young people not getting involved with drugs.

These days, however, life in the USA and India is becoming more similar. The extended family is tending to dissolve in India also, not just in the USA. And the technology infrastructure in urban India is quickly catching up to the level common in the USA. For this reason, many professional Indian people are staying in India, or are even moving back there.

The Tamil people who have re-settled in the USA face the questions that all emigrants face, such as, “What relation will our children have to our original homeland?” Such questions are very personal, and unique resolutions need to be negotiated by each individual family, and each child. One way to look at this situation is to see it as a problem, and for a child to think in terms of having a split and confused identity. Another, more celebratory approach, is to see the situation as an opportunity for developing a multi-cultural identity, even a global one -- with the possibility of being able to act as a guide for those who are based in only one of these cultures.

### C) The Kani People: A Tribe of the Mountain Forest.

#### 1) Basic Facts.

The Kani people are classified as tribal, and are considered to be a jungle tribe (Thurston 1909, p. 162). They are based in and around the southernmost section of India’s Western Ghats mountain range. There are approximately 25,000 Kani people (Bijoy 2007). Of these, approximately 18,000 live in Kerala (to the west), and 7,000 live in Tamil Nadu (to the east). In Tamil Nadu, approximately 1,000 live in Tirunelveli district (to the north), and 6,000 live in

Kanyakumari district (to the south). My fieldwork was based in the village of Vellambi, in Tamil Nadu's Kanyakumari district.

The Kani people living in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are, of course, Indian citizens. They are also members of other groups, such as the African-Indo-Pacific aboriginal people, and the tribal peoples of the world. Cultural similarities with other African-Indo-Pacific aboriginal people include: methods of collecting honey from boulders and trees, grinding chilies and other foods with stones, and cooking in the earth with hot stones. The Dec. 2004 tsunami, which occurred at the very end of my fieldwork period, served to raise consciousness among some Kani people of their common extended kinship with people -- especially tribal peoples -- throughout the Indian-Ocean-to-Thailand region.

As mentioned above, archeological evidence suggests that some tribal people have been living in India for at least 60,000 years. Kani people seem to be of this group, for while some Kani people look "like any Indian," many look distinctly like what is associated with certain Australian Aboriginal people, and people such as the Bushmen of Africa: short stature, dark-skinned, and wide-nosed. Thus, it is likely that the Kani people are members of the extended kinship group of African-Indo-Pacific peoples who were the first people in this part of the world.

I found this description to be accurate: The Kani are

characterized by a high standard of honor, and are known to be straightforward, honest, and truthful. They are good trackers, and ... in clearing forest paths they have few equals. Their help and guidance are sought by, and are willingly given to, any person who may have to travel through the forests. (Thurston 1909, p 163)

There are a number of ideas about what “Kani” (“காணி”, “kaa-Ni”) literally means. Some say it means, “hereditary proprietor of the land” (Iyer 1937, p. 2). This, so one story goes, was the meaning meant by the Hindu sage, Agasthiyar, when he named them. Others say their name refers to a certain measure of land. This meaning was used by the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati (1882-1921), when he wrote,

காணி நிலம் வேண்டும், பராசக்தி!  
 kaa Ni ni lam veeN Dum pa raa sak thi  
 a measure land I want Parashakti  
 Please give me a piece of land, oh Goddess !

Plural forms of “Kani” are “Kanikkaaran” (“காணிக் காரன்”, “kaaNikkaaran”);

and most formally, “Kanikkaarar” (“காணிக் காரர்”, “kaaNikkaarar”).

Relatively little has been written about the Kani people. There are entries about the Kani people in *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Thurston 1909), and the *Encyclopedia of Dravidian Tribes* (Sasikumar 1996).

The booklet by G. Stephen, *Kokkarai: Life and Culture of the Kaanikaarar* (1997) is an excellent introduction to the Kani people. *Folklore of the Kani Tribe* (2004), by Dharma Raj, based on his dissertation at the University of Kerala, is a major collection of the Kani people's verbal arts.

*Kanikkara Dialect* (1976), by S. Agesthalingom, discusses the Kani people's unique mix of languages in their Tamil dialect. V. Chidambaranatha Pillai's book, *Communication, Language, and Development: An Analysis with Reference to the Kanikara Tribe of Tamil Nadu* (1992), and article, "Thoughts about the Development of the Kani Tribal Language" (2001), discuss the need for newspapers and books to be published in written Kani dialect, in order for the dialect to develop and survive.

The balance of writings about the Kani people that I have found relate primarily to their relationship with vegetation. One example is "The Kanikars of Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu: An Ethnobotanical Study" (2003), a dissertation by C. Kingston, Scott Christian College, Nagarcoil. (C. Kingston teaches in Scott Christian College's Dept of Biology; the above-mentioned Dharma Raj teaches at

the same college's Dept of Tamil Language. Scott Christian College, located in Nagarcoil, is a leading college near the Kani homeland and is thus a center for research and scholarship about the Kani people.) An article about the Kani people's uses of medicinal plants has appeared in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* (Ayyanar and Ignacimuthu 2005). A discussion of Kani intellectual property rights in relation to these medicinal applications appears in *Law and Development Journal* (Bijoy 2007).

Kani people used to be nomadic, migratory agriculturalists. "They had a rotation of two years of cultivation, followed by a fallow period of three years" (Sasikumar 1996, p 99). Long ago, they practiced slash-and-burn cultivation, also known as shifting cultivation. This involved burning the vegetation to clear the land for planting. Now that the Kani people live in permanent settlements, they no longer practice this method.

The Vellambi area has two rainy seasons: in October/November, and June/July. Although Vellambi is in Tamil Nadu, one of the most popular annual celebrations is the Kerala festival, Onam, which occurs in the Western month of September. Onam is a time for families to meet.

People of a Kani village occasionally go down to the local small river for a community celebration. On a bank of the river, a shrine for a deceased ancestor or some other divine figure may be assembled, mostly out of branches, leaves, and flowers. Incense may be burned, and chanting and singing may occur.

At the small mountain rivers, Kani men catch tiny fish, using large loosely-woven cloths. Stones may be heated in a fire, and then -- in a hole dug in the earth beside the river -- these hot stones may be used to cook the fish, which are wrapped in large leaves. Kilangu (a tuber which is cultivated and which is a staple of the Kani diet) can also be cooked this way, although at home people boil it in a pot. In ancient days, Kani people often lived in caves, and in huts built on branches high in trees. When traveling in the forest, or just visiting the local small river, many Kani people today employ skills and crafts associated with ancient forest life.

Until 1956, the Kanyakumari district area was primarily Malayalam-speaking. Then in 1956, India was divided into states by language. Through negotiations between what would become the state the governments of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the area that today constitutes Kanyakumari district became a part of Tamil Nadu. The people in this area then had to adopt Tamil as their official language.

As a result of living in this border area, the Kani people have developed a slang spoken hybrid language (or dialect), known as “Kani Pasai” (“Kani Talk”). One aspect of Kani Pasai is that there is no formal form, unlike in standard spoken and written Tamil. Kani Pasai is sometimes referred to by Kani people as “Kongani,” although most other Indian people seem to use this term to refer to tribal languages that are spoken further north, near Goa. Kani Pasai is a mix of Tamil and Malayalam, with numerous English words added. Kani Pasai may also feature traces of pre Ancient-Tamil languages -- including languages that might have originated in Africa or Australia. Here I am referring especially to guttural sounds that I have not heard anywhere else in Tamil Nadu.

The Kani people’s old songs and chants are mostly in Malayalam. And yet, at least on the Tamil side of the border, conversational Kani Pasai is mostly Tamil, and can be considered a dialect of Tamil. There is a generational gap regarding language among Kani people in Tamil Nadu: the elders and their ancient culture is Malayalam-based, whereas the young people, having attended Tamil-medium schools, are basically Tamil-speaking.

## 2) Creation Myths and Legends.

According to Kani tradition: Boomaadhevi Ammai (Mother Earth) is the mother of all the people of the world (Raj 2004, p. 254). The sun is Female, and the Moon is male. The Earth rests on one horn of a great Ox and is shaken when the Ox shifts it from one horn to another. The Moon is a son of a Serpent, and eclipses occur when this Serpent spreads its hood to hide the Moon. Thunder is the bellow of a Rakshasa (Demon), and the Rainbow is his bow (Sasikumar 1996, p. 104).

There are numerous stories about how the Kani people came to be where they are today, geographically-speaking. Some Kani people claim that their ancestors have always lived in the mountains. Others say that the Kani people once lived to the west -- on the Kerala side of south India, along India's west coast -- and "were forcibly sent to the mountain regions by Dravidians and Aryans" (Stephen 1997, p. 1). If this were the case, some Kani people may have come to the Tamil side through the Courtallam Pass (Ayyanar 2005, p. 247).

Yet others claim that the Kani people once lived to the east -- on the Tamil plains -- and migrated westward from Tirunelveli district, through Kalakadu (Raj 2004, p 63). The Kani legend, *Story of the Two Sisters*, would seem to support this claim. This story states that in ancient days, the Kani people lived on the

plains to the east of the mountains. There were two sisters: the elder sister had four sons, and the younger sister had three sons. The two groups of young men quarreled, and as a result, the Kani people divided, with the children of the younger sister going westward to the mountains to live in the forest, and the children of the elder sister going eastward to the Tamil coast to be a sea-fishing community (Raj 2004, p. 299).

Another Kani origin story is the following: One god created a human couple in a certain location in the mountains. This couple had seven sons. Another god created another couple in another location in the mountains, and this second couple had seven daughters. The seven daughters' parents, while hunting, were killed by tigers. To survive, the seven daughters started growing rice and vegetables. A famine came and the seven brothers were starving. One of the brothers saw ants carrying grains of rice. He followed these ants, and found that they were coming from a fertile forest far beyond the seven brothers' forest. In that distant forest, he saw a hut built on a branch of a tree, and he climbed up into it. There he found a young woman -- one of the seven sisters! She kept him secretly. After some time however, he said he wanted to visit his brothers and parents. The young man then met his wife's six sisters, and invited them to come with him to meet his brothers. They all went with him, and each of the seven sisters married one of the seven brothers. The Kani people are the offspring of these seven couples. (Stephen 1997, p 5).

There is a legend that in the ancient days, Kani people were 40-feet-tall (Raj 2004, p 65). That is known as the 40-feet-tall period.

A primary Kani myth about their formation is that one of their ancestors hunted a deer, and cut it into ten pieces. Each of the ten clans (illams) of Kani people selected a different part of the deer (head, back, leg, etc), and each clan has henceforth been associated with that deer body part. These ten clans are divided into two groups of five: Machchampi (Brother-in-law) illakaarar, and Annan Thambi (Brother) illakaarar. Members of the same group are prohibited from marrying each other.

Rules are not always followed however, and the Kani have an interesting solution to this problem: “Those who have married ... unmarriageable kin, and those men who have had sexual relations with married women and the women concerned, are sent away to the mountain region reserved for such people” (Raj 2004, p 89). “If a boy and a girl of the same group fall in love and get married, they are excommunicated and sent to Vellambi Malai” (Kanmani 1994, p. 21).

The Kani people consider the Hindu Puranic sage, Agasthiyar, to be their guru. As mentioned above, they assert that they were named by Agasthiyar. They also claim that it was from Agasthiyar that they learned their magical-ritual songs -- manthirams (mantras), and Chattu songs (songs relating to the spirit world) --

and their knowledge of medicinal uses of plants. These songs and this plant knowledge are two inter-related centers of Kani culture. These teachings, so the story goes, were imparted in this way:

When Agasthiyar was living on the mountain called Podhigai Malai (in the forest area in what is now Tirunelveli district), some Kani men went there for hunting. They came upon a small deer, and shot it with their bows and arrows. The deer was injured, but it was able to return to Agasthiyar's home in the forest.

Agasthiyar had been rearing the deer, and now saved it from death using medicinal plants to help the wound heal quickly. The Kani hunting party arrived at Agasthiyar's home, and demanded to take the deer. Agasthiyar became angry and cursed the Kani men saying, "The tiny strip of cloth that a man wears to cover his penis is all you will wear." The Kani men pleaded with Agasthiyar to revoke his curse. He would not do so, but he did teach them manthirams and Chattu songs -- with the condition that they were never to teach these songs to anyone else, and that they should visit his mountain once a year and perform puja for him (Raj 2004, p 224-5).

It is a Kani belief that even today Saint Agasthiyar is living atop Podhigai Malai (6000 feet above sea level), meditating, doing penance, and praying for their welfare. Each year -- in the Tamil month of Maasi -- a group of Kani people climb

the mountain, worship, and while returning collect various herbs. The Kani people consider the mountain itself to be holy (Raj 2004, pp. 37, 114).

In ancient days, a group of Kani people made an annual visit to the Maharaja at Trivandrum (southwest of the mountains), “and he always receives them most kindly, accepting their gifts such as bamboo joints containing different varieties of honey, and fruits. He rewards them with presents of cloth, money, salt, and tobacco” (Thurston 1909, p 164).

There was also a tradition of a Kani group annually visiting the king of Singampatty -- to the east, on the Tamil plains, near where Kani people live in the mountains in Tirunelveli district. The story states that one year, the king of Singampatty made the Kani party wait outside his palace for a long time. Finally, the Kani leader started a fire and burned all of the items that he had brought as gifts, including skins of deer, snakes, and other wild animals. This made a strong unpleasant smell.

The king said, “That is a bad smell. Where is it coming from?” The doorman explained to the king about what had happened, and the king invited the Kani people to enter the palace.

When the Kani leader entered, the king of Singampattii got angry. The king shouted, "You have the guts to oppose me? If you have the strength, cut this stem of a banana tree!" The center of the stem of this banana tree had secretly been removed and replaced with an iron rod. Regardless, the Kani leader raised his sword, and cut the banana stem -- and the iron rod -- into small pieces. The Singampattii king was shocked. The Kani leader left the palace with his people and said, "Hereafter we will not visit this king" (Stephen 1997, p 22).

In the course of my fieldwork period, I had the good fortune to meet the present king of Singampattii, and to visit his palace. He is a kind and charming senior gentleman. He is considering opening the palace for heritage tourism. He expressed regret about the rift between his ancestor and the Kani leader of the time. It would be wonderful if a symbolic rapprochement could occur.

Another Kani legend states that approximately 500 years ago, one Kani leader, Veeramarthandan, built a dam in a river near Kalakadu, also in Tirunelveli district. This was for cultivation and irrigation purposes. In order to satisfy his deity and to keep the dam intact, he sacrificed his sister's seven-year-old daughter, Karumpandi. "Veeramarthandan brought her to the center of the river, and sacrificed her by beheading. The head of Karumpandiamman continued crying as it floated along the river, circling around the mountain. The Kani people were afraid, considered her a goddess, and prayed to her" (Laksmamana, as quoted

by Stephen 1997, p. 20). It should be noted that in ancient days, it was a common practice in much of India to sacrifice a child especially to give strength to a dam or bridge.

The Kani people believe that a king gave them the forest land in which most of them live. It is said that a maharaja by the name of Marthandavarma of Travancore, around the year 1743 AD, had needed to flee from his enemies. He retreated into the forest. For four days, Kani people protected Marthandavarma, and helped him move through the forest. When he regained power, in gratitude to the Kani people, he granted to them a large tract of land, free of all taxes, and specified that the lands should be enjoyed by them “as long as the sun and the moon shall last” (Sasikumar 1996, p 96). In Pecchiparai, Mr. Rajan Kani, the Panchayat president there, showed to me what he said was a copy of Marthandavarma’s grant.

### 3) Practices, Beliefs, and Stories.

#### a) Village Leader Roles.

In each Kani village, there are a number of traditional leaders. Four of these roles are:

The *Mootukaani* is the chief person of a village. He presides over meetings in which problems are resolved. It is his responsibility to determine whether or not visitors who claim to be Kani people are indeed so. He does this by asking them a series of questions about Kani traditions, such as about their family tree, and how to catch various animals (with traps, for example). He may also ask them to recite certain manthirams.

The *Vilikaani* assembles the people in one place to inform them about the Mootukaani's orders. He is also responsible for official communication with Kani people in other villages.

The *Pilaathi* knows all of the manthirams, and Chattu songs. An aspiring Pilaathi will go to the forest for meditation ("vritha") for 41 days, ideally beginning on the first day of the Tamil month, Thai. When he returns, it is believed that the gods have taught him the magical-ritual songs (manthirams, and Chattu songs), and about the medicinal uses of the plants of the forest.

The *Moodhavan* decides dates relating to agriculture, such as when to begin planting seeds.

The wife of each of these figures communicates with the women of the village regarding these matters.

b) Sami (Spirit Possession).

Traditional Kani culture, like many traditional tribal cultures around the world, is animistic and shamanistic. That is, spirits are felt to dwell in many rivers, mountainsides, trees, and so on. A primary form of worship in this context is calling such spirits into oneself, and then having the spirit speak through one. This is done by a shaman in a ritual known as (in English), becoming “possessed.” The Tamil term is, “sami.” Sami is popular not just among tribal people, but among certain classes of people throughout south India, including those who live in big cities. Later religions such as Christianity may interpret the sami deities as demonic, but this is not necessarily the point of view of practitioners of sami: to them, sami figures may be good or bad, central divinities or wandering spirits.

The sami religious experience does not involve the division of labor associated with the so-called Great Religions. In sami events, there are not necessarily separate roles for singers, musicians, and the person giving the sermon. All of these roles can be played by a single person. In these shamanistic cultures, there is often no written text that expresses the words of the divine figure. The divine oral verbal expression therefore comes solely through the sami ritual specialist -- some of the words may be formulaic and memorized, and some may be unique to the occasion. In the Kani community in which I did fieldwork, there

were certain women who communicated with spirits especially in relation to women and girls. One woman, Rajammal (my fieldwork assistant's mother), went into sami on behalf of individual men and women, and the entire community.

In the course of sami events, divine figures often scold people for not building or maintaining a proper shrine for him or her, and for failing to live in unity. The two sami events I witnessed were not seasonal: rather they were done, by Rajammal, for special occasions (upon first meeting me; and for a video recording her son was making).

### c) Vegetation.

Kani culture holds that the divine is in all nature. This includes vegetation, of course. Thus, for example, before felling a tree, puja is performed for the spirit dwelling in that tree. Phrases in Sangam Literature such as Kaadurai Kadavul (god dwelling in the wood), highlight the fact that beliefs that spirits dwell in trees, forests, and water-resources are very ancient and widespread in south India (Raj 2004, p 256).

Until not too long ago, Kani people wore "shells, seeds, tree leaves, and nails of tigers as ornaments" (Stephen 1997, p 17). Even today, many Kani people live

in villages which are adjacent to forests, and these Kani people collect from the forest plants used for food and medicine. In their villages, they live in houses that are largely made of cement, although vegetation still is used very widely for roofing and other supplementary building materials.

Kani people do not seem to have a distinctive style of dress. They do not have identifiable jewelry, tattoos, or scarification. Their primary visual and plastic art is the very practical craft of using leaves, stems, branches, bark, and strips of vine to make all sorts of useful and decorative objects -- including walls, roofs, sunscreens, mats, cooking and eating utensils. For example: when doing agricultural work in a field, when it comes time to eat, sometimes a porridge is given. This porridge may be served by making a small indentation in the earth, and placing a large leaf in that indentation. The porridge is poured into that improvised bowl. Another type of leaf is folded to serve as a spoon.

Kani people are masters at weaving together strips of vegetation. One example is the necklaces and bracelets that are made by stringing together small plants and flowers. Another example is the sleeping mats which are made by weaving together leaves from opposite sides of a stalk of the bamboo plant. In ancient days, and even today in ceremonies, Kani men wear the bark of a tree called Aranjila Aayini as a skirt: it is beaten to a soft texture (Raj 2004, p 44). Kani people are known for building tree-houses ("eru madam"), primarily using

bamboo and strips of bark. A vine ladder is often attached, which is typically pulled up by people after they reach the tree-house, so that wild animals cannot easily follow. Many of the fences in and around Vellambi are “green fences” (“pacchai veeli”) -- that is, the poles of the fences are living plants. Numerous Kani houses feature a mature living tree as one of the supporting pillars.

Kani people eat many plants that grow in the forest. They also make many medicines with these plants: some of which are eaten or drunk, some of which are applied to the skin. They are knowledgeable about methods of combining parts of two or more plants to make these foods, drinks, ointments. Among the conditions that are treated with plant medicine products are skin disorders, cold, fever, cough, headache, diarrhea, fertility problems, tooth and gum diseases, stomach aches, wounds, rheumatism, and poison (snake, scorpion, and insect bites).

Partly due to the Vellambi area being very humid, with extensive rainy seasons, skin conditions often need to be treated. This is done on the spiritual level as well as the physical level, as skin conditions are often seen as the work of a local deity. For example, Kani people believe that if one speaks too loudly or otherwise behaves incorrectly in parts of the forest, one may be punished with various types of skin rashes.

One Kani proverb is --

மெரம் அறிஞ்சி கொடி விச்சணும் .  
 me ram a Rinj ji ko Di vich cha Num  
 tree know vine planting  
 Know the tree before planting the vine.

(Miller and Kani 2003)

This proverb indicates that Kani people know a great deal about how plants interact with each other. It is based on the idea that certain vines will grow well on certain trees, and refers to such plant behavior as a metaphor for human relationships, the implication being that one should know about a person's character, before becoming close to that person or permitting a loved one to become close to that person.

Whether addressed to spirits of the dead or of natural elements, or to combinations of the two, numerous Kani rituals seek to ensure an abundance of fertility of nature, as well as protection from nature's possible fierceness. It is a Kani tradition that women -- as well as plants -- have seven stages of growth in their lifetimes. A girl comes of age in the fourth stage of her life. When she thus reaches puberty, she sits under a pandal (a wood and leaf structure) and seven pots of water are poured through the pandal and onto the girl's head. Only if a similar ritual is performed around that time for the soil also, it is believed, would the rain come (Raj 2004, p. 107).

Another example of how Kani people relate humans, especially women, to natural elements, is exhibited in their belief that the branches of the tree which is cut for making a cradle for the child should have a lot of milky substance in them; otherwise, the mother would not have enough milk in her to breast-feed the child (Raj 2004, p 275).

There is a tradition among the Kani of embodying messages in knots of string, or strips of bark. "Whenever Kanikars from different settlements have to be gathered for a meeting, or go together for a common purpose, a messenger amongst them carries a knot of fibres or creepers, which serves as a symbol of call" (Thurston 1909, p. 177). When each part of the message was announced, a knot was undone.

Two drums that Kani people play are the *chendai* and *mattaalam* -- which are deeply ritual instruments -- are made out of the wood of particular trees, and animal skins. Kani people also make a number of musical instruments with bamboo: these are called *nanthini* instruments. One such instrument -- a percussion instrument -- is a piece of bamboo (approximately two feet long, and five inches in diameter), with two strips of the bamboo raised and stretched (small pieces of wood are placed under each end of the raised strip). The two strips are hit with two sticks. A flute is also made of bamboo.

Kani people tend to be very careful to maintain the forest. Therefore, a forest near human habitation can be thought of as a tended wilderness area. An example of their nature-sustaining approach is that while plucking herbs for medicine, they take care to not damage the roots. They believe that if the roots would tear off, this could negatively affect the intended patient (Raj 2004, p. 115).

Ethnobotany, the relationship between humans and plants, is studied in disciplines such as ecology, economic botany, pharmacology, and public health. Kani people have made a number of contributions to this modern discipline (Kingston 2003). For example: in 1987, a team of scientists from the Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute (TBGRI), in Kerala, undertook a field survey in Kani inhabited forest area in that state. The Kani guides chewed the fruits and leaves of a certain plant, and had energy to walk all day. The scientists inquired, and were told that this plant is called "Arogya Pachai" ("Green Life"). A partnership developed between the TBGRI and these Kani people, which led to the making of a commercial powdered health-promoting product, called Jeevani. The United Nations gave an award in 2003 to the team, as an example of a partnership between members of a tribal people, and the national government within whose territory they live. Some Kani people continue to work at gathering or growing Arogya Pachai. A Trust has been formed, through which some of the income from the process is paid to members of the Kani community. However, criticisms of the Arogya Pachai / Jeevani project include: 1) Very little money has

actually been made by Kani people in this process; 2) What has been made has not been widely distributed; 3) Some Kani leaders object to aspects of the commercial production process; and 4) The Kerala Forest Dept., in its dedication to protect the forest, has made it difficult in ways for the project to proceed and develop (Bijoy 2007).

#### d) Animals.

Collecting honey, which involves interacting with bees, is an ancient art and craft of Kani people. The bees are often stung by smoke. A puja for the bees is often performed directly before or after the honey is collected. Three different types of honey combs the Kani distinguish between are those which 1) hang from trees, 2) are found inside trees, and 3) are found in and between boulders.

Kani culture holds that the divine permeates all nature, and that this nature will reward good behavior, and punish bad behavior. One example of this belief is: Kani people traditionally hunt udumbu (giant lizards, up to five feet long) for meat. These lizards still live in local forests, but since they have been declared a protected species by the Forest Dept, one can no longer speak of hunting or eating them. According to one folktale: In ancient days, a Kani man who had been behaving badly was chasing an udumbu. The udumbu slipped between

two boulders. When the man tried to follow, the two boulders came together and crushed the man.

Dogs play a very important part in Kani life. Whether at home or in the forest, dogs are “danger informers.” Good dogs are thought to act on the owner’s behalf as intermediaries between wild nature and humans.

Kani people believe that the cries of various birds can be good or bad omens for the humans who hear these cries. There are references to this belief in Sangam literature (Raj 2004, p 206). It is a Kani belief that spirits often take the form of humans, animals, birds, and natural elements such as wind and fire. For example, they believe that spirits of dead ancestors are often in green beetles (vettukkiligal), and that if these beetles visit a house this foretells something good (Raj 2004, p 143). Many Kani folktales involve people changing into animals to escape an enemy, to avoid some other misfortune, to visit one’s forbidden lover, or for other reasons. In these stories, people often turn into birds to deliver important news over long distances.

### e) Manthirams, and Chattu Songs

The Kani people are famous for their manthirams (mantras). They also have a genre of songs, Chattu songs, that are sung especially at the time of death.

Actually, Kani people have ritual songs for every stage of life.

Manthirams are chants which are associated with magical powers. Kani people have particular manthirams for singing in the forest, for safety there. There is at least one manthiram for chanting when spending a night in the forest. It is

believed that the divine and magical power of this manthiram establishes an invisible fence of energy around the men's camp (Raj 2004, pp. 39, 206, 208).<sup>1</sup>

Another manthiram is said to cause nearby animals to stand where they are without pouncing. When the men leave the place, they chant a manthiram which releases the animals and turns them active once again. If they would fail to do so, the animals would stand there inactive and so would eventually die, it is believed (Raj 2004, p. 208; Stephen 1997, p. 26)

It is a Kani belief that there are six beings in a human body, and that these beings are responsible for the six senses. It is believed that these

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<sup>1</sup> In some Kani areas, solar power for electrified fences to keep wild animals away is becoming available -- this is an example of technological ability catching up with mythological ability.

beings -- like the aforementioned wild animals -- can be “tied” and made inactive by manthirams (Raj 2004, p. 218).

Traditionally, people of other castes sometimes come to senior Kani manthiram specialists for practical assistance, for which they may pay money. Kani people are admired, but sometimes also feared, for these spiritual traditions, around which there is a great deal of secrecy. This work with verbal arts and rituals is mostly not visual, and thus is difficult to share with people who can not understand the archaic version of the local dialect. This privacy is compounded by the traditional Kani belief -- also held by Sanskrit priests about their ritual chants of the Vedas -- that their verbal rituals should not be exposed to the uninitiated, as this might lead to their divinities becoming angry and the weakening of the power of the ritual language.

The genre of singing at the time of death is known as Chattu pattu (song). These songs are often addressed directly to the spirits. A different song is sung depending on how the person died. For example, there are songs for people who have been killed by particular wild animals. These songs are thought to help the dead person’s soul go peacefully. After burying the dead, Kani people leave the place, without casting a backward glance. There is a belief that if they would turn back and look, the spirit of the dead would take hold of them (Raj 2004, p 100).

Chattu songs may also be sung at times other than times of death. They are sung to invoke blessings and relief in many situations. “Kani people, led by the Pilaathi, sing Chattu songs to calm the gods, and whenever they “clean” (or sanctify) the forest, river, pond, agricultural land, etc. (Stephen 1997, p. 36).

Chattu songs are also sung to help people recover from disease. It is a traditional belief that certain Chattu songs can give life to a dead person, and can transform a person into an animal.

Chattu songs are often accompanied by the playing of a “kokkorai.” This musical instrument is a cylinder made of sheet iron (approximately eight inches long, and one inch in diameter). The tube’s seam does not close fully, and the edges of the seam are serrated. “The player holds the kokkorai in the left hand and draws an iron pin over the serrated edges to-and-fro very quickly, producing a rasping musical note” (Sasikumar 1996, p. 97). The iron pin is attached via a link chain to the body of the kokkorai.

How did the Kani people adopt these pieces of metal as their most sacred musical instrument? This struck me as a great mystery. My questioning of Kani people regarding whether or not this adoption was a recent development went nowhere. As far as the Kani people are concerned, the kokkorai has always been their sacred instrument. This indicates that the Kani people are not necessarily averse to using new technologies in traditional practices.

e) Additional Verbal Arts, and Stories.

Kani people have a genre of songs and chants that seem to be designed and sung especially to impart linguistic skills. These songs are called, “Thodukku Mozhi,” and “Naakkuththirattu.”

For the children to get training in good pronunciation and also to teach them the differences between similar-sounding letters, language-skill songs are used. When the children repeatedly utter the words that prove difficult for them to pronounce or memorize, their pronunciation becomes accurate. When repeating the words again and again at great speed, the way their meanings change can be very amusing... These songs make the children happy. Through the manner of merry-making, these songs help to enable children to pronounce the words with clarity and precision. (Raj 2004, p 282) <sup>1</sup>

The story of Kannagi is well known among the Kani people. A girl in my fieldwork village was named Manimehali, after the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi.

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<sup>1</sup> A number of these “tongue-twister” songs and chants (as we call them in English) are given in the annex of Dharma Raj’s book (2005). That book is written in Tamil. I had an English translation of the book made, so that I could read it easily. However, for the Kani songs in his book, Dharma Raj gives direct transcriptions of the Kani Pasai dialect (written in the Tamil script). The person who translated the book is a poet-scholar based in Chennai: she was unable to translate these Kani Pasai songs into Tamil, not to mention English. This is not surprising, as it seems that there are many “nonsense” syllables in these songs. Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of this dissertation process to have these songs translated into Tamil or English with the help of members of the Kani community. However, this is something that certainly could be done in the course of future scholarship by and about the Kani people.

Both Madhavi and her daughter, incidentally, cut off their hair and became ascetic monks after they heard what had happened to Kannagi and Kovalan.

*Kunja Kathai (Story of the Youngest Brother)* is a popular Kani story. Comparing and contrasting this story to the story of Kannagi can help to make clear some similarities and differences between Kani culture, and general Tamil culture. The *Story of the Youngest Brother* goes like this:

Once there were seven brothers. The six older ones asked their youngest brother to accompany them on a trip to the forest, to hunt for wild pigs. The seven brothers went, but at one point, the six elder brothers turned on the youngest and threw their hunting spears at him and he died. The youngest brother's two dogs went running back to the village. They persuaded the youngest brother's wife to come with them to the forest to see her husband's body. She went, and upon seeing her husband, she knelt over his body and began to lament over him. A snake and a mongoose were nearby, taking turns chasing after each other around in circles. Usually these two animals are enemies, but on this day they happened to be playing together. The snake saw the lady weeping, and said to her, "Don't worry! We will get the necessary plants, and we will make the medicine." So the snake and mongoose prepared the medicine and spread it over the youngest brother's body. Soon he came back to

life. The youngest brother, his wife, and his two dogs went back to the village.

The six older brothers had to move away from the village.

This is a paraphrase of the story as I heard it told by Velmurugan's mother, Rajammal. There is a similar telling of the story in Dharma Raj's book about the Kani people (Raj 2004, p 304).

Both Kannagi's story (the *Epic of the Anklet*), and the *Story of the Youngest Brother* involve a lament (oppaari) by a wife for her deceased husband. Both women attempt to revive their husbands. According to Ilango Adigal's version of the *Epic of the Anklet*, Kannagi momentarily perceived her husband as coming back to life and saying to her, "Do not worry! Soon we will be together again!" -- but then she realizes that he really is deceased (it is unclear whether his brief revival actually occurred, or occurred only in Kannagi's imagination). The Kani wife, on the other hand, is successful in reviving her husband (with the help of nature's animals and vegetation). Both stories concern the potential regenerative power of the female -- although in the case of Kannagi, her grief and anger causes this power to be reversed into a power of destruction.

It seems that the Kani people, on certain levels, legitimize themselves by believing that many aspects of their existence were given to them by members of the later-arriving upper classes. One example is the above-mentioned story of

how the land many of them inhabit was awarded to them by Marthandavarma of Travancore.

Another example is the Kani belief that they learned their manthirams and Chattu songs, and their knowledge about herbal medicines, from the Hindu saint, Agasthiyar. They consider Agasthiyar to be their guru. Agasthiyar is also credited as the founder of Siddha medicine, a system similar to Ayurvedic medicine, one of the leading traditional medical systems of India.

However, let us look at the dates involved. If the standard anthropological views are accurate in asserting that Kani and other aboriginal tribal peoples have been living in south India for approximately sixty thousand years, and that Sanskrit culture (of which Agasthiyar was a member) arrived in the Western Ghats area approximately four thousand years ago: then Kani people would have been developing their knowledge of medicinal plants for over fifty-thousand years before the time of Agasthiyar.

From what I saw in the course of my fieldwork, it is primarily mature women who know where to find medicinal plants, and how to prepare and apply them. This is because, among Kani people as elsewhere, it is mature women who do the great majority of informal nursing of people. This is work for which they are usually not paid, at least not directly, and not in cash.

What seems to have happened here is that something that has been practiced primarily by mature women of a low status group has been appropriated by, or attributed to, a male professional of a high status group. This is an occurrence that tends to happen all over the world. Practices tend to only be thought of as valuable and significant if they are associated with professional men who use high status language (in this case, Sanskrit), and a high form of technology (in this case, writing).

A full discussion of the land issues of Kani people, and of other tribal people in India, is beyond the parameters of this dissertation. However, to say a few words: In Kanyakumari district during my fieldwork period, the rights of Kani people to continue living in the forest area was very much being respected by the Government. In the district to the north, Tirunelveli district, however, it was not fully clear whether or not the Forest authorities' plans for the future might include the continued presence of Kani people in the forest area. This was in part due to the fact that the Kani people in Tirunelveli district were living in what has become the Kalakaadu-Mundanthurai Tiger preserve. I am hoping that the Forest authorities might come to see the Kani people there, as elsewhere, as a tremendous cultural resource, and so nurture their development and allow them to help in the processes of protecting and tending the wilderness, as well as of educating the public about this wilderness.

In Kanyakumari district, I witnessed a fire set in the forest by non-Kani people who seemed to be clearing land so that cattle which had been brought into the forest might graze there. Kani people think twice before reporting such human-made fires to the authorities, as the fires might be blamed on them. It is tribal people who know when activity destructive to the forest is occurring in the forest. Moreover, the remaining forest areas in Kanyakumari district include estates -- first developed by the British, and now run privately or by the Government. The borders of these estates are often not publicly well known -- but they should be, for sometimes these estates expand without permission. Wealthy and powerful business people sometimes pressure Forest officials to permit destruction of the wilderness. In this context, the presence of tribal people to help keep an eye on things in the forest can be helpful to the forest preservation effort, especially if they can communicate easily to the top officials.

#### D) A Community in Chennai, Tamil Nadu's State Capital on the Coast.

Following my fieldwork in the mountains, I returned to Chennai. Chennai is the capital city of the state of Tamil Nadu, situated on India's southeast coast.

As I was living near the beach, I became friends with some people in Ayodhyakuppam, which until relatively recently was primarily a fishing community.

Even today, approximately 50 small fishing boats can be seen opposite Ayodhyakuppam, at the coast on Marina Beach (this beach is one of the largest in the world that is adjacent to a major city: it is approximately a mile long, and there is approximately 300 yards of sand before the road). When the opportunity arose to participate in two additional videoconferences, I recruited children from this community to take part. These children knew numerous songs/chants/dances/games which were similar to the ones known by the Kani children.

Chennai Tamil is considered very improvised. Chennai Tamil has many Telegu words in it, as Andhra Pradesh is nearby. Chennai Tamil also features many English words. For thousands of years, Chennai was primarily a fishing village. When the British came to India, Chennai (then called Madras) grew as a place where Indian people could trade with, work for, and perform services for the British. Chennai is the gateway between the interior of Tamil Nadu and the world beyond. Chennai in general and Ayodhyakuppam in particular is very much a hybrid culture, and this is especially reflected in the mix of Tamil and English words in the children's question-and-answer chant, "Enna Biscuit?" (please see pp. 266-81). The children of Ayodhyakuppam are very acquainted with television, and they know of many of the USA professional wrestlers, as this material has appeared on cable TV in Tamil Nadu. Young boys in Ayodhyakuppam had trading cards with pictures and statistics of these USA wrestlers. The boys also visit video game parlors in the neighborhood, where one of the favorite games

involves images of these wrestlers. Watching young Indian boys manipulating the animated brutish USA professional wrestlers, causing the images to strike each other, and pick each other up and throw each other down, was quite a shocking experience.