

### Chapter III: Fieldwork Methodology

#### A) Overview of the Project's Research Methodologies.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the research project on which this dissertation is based was composed of two parts: 1) the study of children's songs/chants/dances/games in relation to language learning; and 2) the post-fieldwork ethnographic videoconferences.

The post-fieldwork ethnographic videoconferences are discussed in Chapter VI. This chapter focuses on the fieldwork process in which the children's songs/chants/dances/games were collected. A version of the classic method, ethnographic fieldwork with participant observation, was used. I conducted this fieldwork with some Kani tribal people in the mountains of southwest Tamil Nadu, during a period of 21 months: March 2003 to December 2004. Before and after this fieldwork, I interacted with two other groups of Tamil people (Tamil-USA people in Philadelphia, and members of a sea-fishing community in Chennai), and those interactions are discussed in this chapter also.

### B) Visiting Tamil People's Language Classes in Pennsylvania, USA.

Before engaging in fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, for many years in the USA I had contact with Tamil people who had moved to the USA. When I was living in my hometown, New York City, I attended and occasionally gave talks at functions of the New York Tamil Sangam, and the Subramania Bharati Society. Then, during my coursework years in Philadelphia (1999-2001), I regularly visited the Sunday afternoon children's Tamil language and culture classes of the Tamil Association of the Greater Delaware Valley. These classes were organized for their children by Tamil parents, who had emigrated from India to the USA. Many of these children were USA citizens, having been born in the USA. Although these children heard their parents speaking Tamil at home, many of these children were at that time fluent in English only.

The Sunday afternoon classes were held at a large suburban community center. From the Penn campus, I would make a brief underground train trip, and then a one-hour bus trip, which would bring me to a suburban shopping mall. There, Siva, one of the Tamil fathers and a lead organizer of the class, would pick me up in his car, and take me to the community center in which the classes were held.

I did not think of my visits to these classes as fieldwork (if fieldwork can be defined as collecting data about a people or culture). Rather, I attended these classes in two roles: as a volunteer assistant teacher of language, and also as a language student myself. I was there to observe, and to help develop, methods of teaching Tamil language. Although I was a beginner in spoken Tamil, I had some talent for using and teaching written Tamil: primarily involving the alphabet, and simple words and phrases.

My recollection is that these Tamil people, especially the adults, were very kind and cordial to me. Tamil people tend to have a great deal of affection for the Tamil language, and they tend to enjoy helping interested people from outside their culture to also learn the language, and about the language. I was very impressed that the adults seemed to have faith in me to correctly present aspects of Tamil language to their children (I discussed my presentations in advance with Siva). Although the exact subject of my dissertation research project was not yet then defined, they seemed to have confidence that I would find a good approach and would execute it well.

After the classes, I would be dropped off at a suburban train station for the ride back to Philadelphia. Sometimes after class, there would be a gathering at someone's house, and I would be invited. I also attend numerous seasonal

celebrations -- at one of these functions, I acted in a skit (playing a visitor to a village).

It was mostly the children and parents of the Greater Delaware Valley Tamil Association who participated on the Philadelphia side of the October 2004 Chennai-Philadelphia videoconference. For the second post-fieldwork videoconference (in October 2005), they were joined in Philadelphia by members of a Tamil community led by Dr. Vasu Renganathan, my Tamil language instructor at Penn.

C) Participant Observation with Kani People in the Mountains in Tamil Nadu, India.

By the time I arrived in India in October 2002 (my fourth trip to India), my research project was defined in all ways but one. The missing piece of the puzzle was: In precisely what community in Tamil Nadu would I seek to collect children's songs/chants/dances/games?

I was dedicated to doing the fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, as I love the culture and language, and had done previous research in the state. At this time, I determined that I should go as far away from urban centers as possible, to avoid

the influence of mass media, and to have maximum exposure to living traditional verbal arts. The largest Tamil city is the state capital, Chennai, which is at the far northeast of the state. Thus, I looked southward on a map. On the left side (the western side) of the state map, I observed the representation of a forested mountain-range. This mountain range, the Western Ghats, runs north-south and contains much of Tamil Nadu's border with Kerala.

The northern section of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu is known as the Nilgiri Mountains. The Nilgiris are home to a number of tribal groups (including the Toda, Kota, and Kurumba peoples), who traditionally have had complex and interesting vocational and cultural interactions with each other. Due in part to this section of the Western Ghats also having been the location of south India's leading hill station for the British (Ooty), the Nilgiris are one of the most studied regions in all of Asia, mostly by anthropologists (Emeneau 1944-6; Hockings 1989, 1997; Rivers 1906; Sakthivel 1976, 1977; Wolf 1997a). It is said that if the pages of all of the articles and books about tribal people in the Nilgiris were laid on the ground there, the entire Nilgiris mountains would be covered. For this reason, I quickly decided against doing my doctoral fieldwork in the Nilgiris.

Thus, I looked further south on the map. I noticed that there was a large forest area with few roads in the far south of the Western Ghats. Upon enquiring, I learned that one people who live in this area is the Kani people, who are

classified as tribal. Although I had not set out to do this fieldwork with a tribal people, I was certainly open to the possibility. I learned that not very much academic research had been done with Kani people, and very little had been published about them in English: it seemed that no foreigner had done Folklore or Anthropology fieldwork with them.

I made a preliminary visit to the area. In Tamil Nadu, most Kani people live in Kanyakumari district, the state's southernmost district. Here there are 48 Kani villages. In the district immediately to the north, Tirunelveli district, there are fewer villages, and they are in what has been declared as the Mundanthurai-Kalakkad Tiger Preserve. I determined that the Kanyakumari district would be best for my purposes, as there are more people, a larger area, and less of a sense of special protection of the area by the Government.

My first step in the fieldwork process in the Kanyakumari district was to take a lodge room near the town of Pechiparai, the only town in Tamil Nadu that is primarily inhabited by Kani people. I would keep this room throughout my fieldwork period. Pechiparai is approximately two hours by bus northwest of the city of Nagarcoil. Nagarcoil is just south of the mountains, and Pechiparai is in the mountains.

I then proceeded to search for a community in which, and the individuals with whom, I would settle to research the children's songs/chants/dances/games. At that point I was not sure if I might focus on a single village, or if I might seek to collect data from a number of the 48 Kani villages in the district. By this time, I had realized that I wanted to engage with people who still had an active life in the forest -- because I wanted to collect verbal arts that reflected this ongoing forest experience. Thus, I was searching for a Kani village, or villages, adjacent to some forest wilderness.

I visited the Kani villages north of Pechiparai, but I decided against doing fieldwork in this area. I made this decision in part because there is a hydro-electric dam north of Pechiparai. This dam and its surroundings are patrolled by the Indian military, and there are numerous checkpoints along the main road. It seemed that it might be best to avoid this kind of sensitive situation.

Around this time, I met an Indian gentleman who was working for a Catholic social work organization. When he heard that I was searching for a home base for my verbal arts-related fieldwork, he suggested that I might meet Rajammal ("Mother of the king"), a middle-aged lady who lived in the village of Vellambi. He knew Rajammal primarily because of her expertise with medicinal uses of plants, but he thought she might also be knowledgeable about verbal arts.

In the Malayalam language, “Vellam” means “water,” and “Vellambi” means “Place of water.” Vellambi is aptly named, as there are five small rivers in the vicinity. Although Vellambi is on the Tamil side of the border that now separates Tamil Nadu and Kerala, prior to 1957 this region was primarily a Malayalam-speaking one. Thus, many of the older people here primarily speak Malayalam, and many of the place names are Malayalam words.

Vellambi is to the east, and slightly to the north, of Pechiparai. A north-south road runs by Vellambi. Vellambi is approximately a half-kilometre to the east of this road. Old Vellambi, a settlement on a mountainside, is another kilometre to the east. At the bottom of this mountainside, there is a small river. On the far side of this river, again to the east, there are approximately 50 kms of forested mountains before the plains are reached.

The social worker took me to Vellambi on his motorcycle. The population of Vellambi is approximately 300 people. There is only one street. The social worker introduced me to Velmurugan, Rajammal’s son, and left me there. Velmurugan was in his early twenties. He speaks and understands spoken English quite well, as a result of his having attended a Catholic school for a number of years. One of the first things I noticed about Velmurugan’s house, which is near the middle of Vellambi, is that a huge satellite dish (for receiving television signals) was on the roof. I would come to learn that Velmurugan had



invested a good deal of time and money in buying and installing this satellite dish, and in hanging television cable throughout the village. However, people had tended to be slow in making their cable television payments. Thus, some time before I arrived, Velmurugan had gotten out of the cable television operator business. Whether or not the satellite dish continued to work, it remained an impressive sight throughout my fieldwork period.

Some of the houses in Vellambi are made of cement, some are made of bamboo, and some are mixed (cement walls and thatched roofs, for example). Vellambi, like the entire area, is lush with vegetation. There is a wild profusion of a many types of plants, vines, bushes, shrubs, grasses, and trees.

During that first visit, Velmurugan and I spoke for some time. Then he asked if I might like to visit his mother in Old Vellambi. I gratefully agreed. I followed Velmurugan to one end of the village, and then through an area in which rubber trees were being cultivated. From there, we proceeded through the woods, walking gradually upward. When we eventually emerged from the wooded path, I found myself on a mountainside, with a breathtaking eastward view of mountains and wilderness. The scale of the view was magnificent, even dizzying. This wilderness, and their culture in relation to it, is a great wealth of the Kani people of Vellambi.

Only approximately fifteen people live in Old Vellambi. There is no electricity, and no cement houses. The house walls are made of mud and bamboo, and the roofs are thatched. A primary occupation is tending to the fields of kilangu on the mountainside. (Kilangu is a general term for starchy tubers. There are many types of kilangu.) People of Old Vellambi often walk down to the river at the foot of the mountain, to catch small fish, wash cloths, and bathe. There is also a spring on the mountainside, near the houses, but this water tends to have a good deal of earth in it.

Upon us reaching Old Vellambi on that first day, Velmurugan introduced me to his mother, Rajammal. She is a strong and trim person, in her forties. Her house entrance faces the mountainside, but next to the house there is a flat earthen area on which one can sit and enjoy the view. There were a number of children around. Rajammal's husband was also there. Velmurugan's father had died some years ago, as had this gentleman's wife. Velmurugan's mother and this gentleman had then married. In much of India, widows are not allowed to remarry, but this formal restriction does not seem to be followed very much by Kani people of Vellambi.

Rajammal greeted me and asked me to sit and rest. Velmurugan mentioned to her that I was interested in traditional Kani songs. She promptly got a kokkarai from inside their home, as did her husband (who is also Vellambi's leader in

relation to Hinduism, presiding over a small building which serves as a temple). They began to play these instruments and sing (for a discussion of the kokkarai musical instrument, please see p. 110). After approximately 30 seconds, "sami" occurred. Sami is a Tamil expression for what in English is known as, "becoming possessed." Witnessing someone go into this state can be an alarming experience, as the person may be thrashing about and may seem to be in some pain. However, I had witnessed a good deal of this sort of activity in New York City in relation to Haitian dance, so I was acclimated to it. Actually, I was pleased that Rajammal had felt comfortable enough with me to perform this ritual activity in my presence.

There were subsequent visits, and eventually a place was made for some of my things, which I kept in a small tent composed mostly of mosquito-net. This was beside the main kilangu-growing area, approximately 30 yards uphill from Rajammal's and her husband's hut. I explained that I was there to study children's songs/chants/dances/games with an eye toward how these activities might help children to learn spoken language. I also said I was there to study Kani Pasai, the Kani's spoken language, a dialect of Tamil that is a mix of Tamil, Malayalam, English, and possibly other languages. Kani people, like most Tamils, tend to have a great respect for and interest in language in general, so I think most members of the community might at least have found these explanations to be interesting. Rajammal in particular seemed to have a sense

of why I was there and what I wanted to do: she herself believes in the importance of documenting traditional Kani ways.

This sort of fieldwork is delicate and fluid. In the initial stages of my visit, regardless of my explanations, I am sure that it was not fully clear to most of my hosts what I was doing there. I myself was not sure how long I would be staying. I do not know -- I have not yet been able to find an effective way to ask -- if there is any category of behavior in Kani culture that corresponds to the kind of extended visit I was making. I did feel that people were seeking to perceive me in familiar terms. For examples: Was I a Christian missionary? No. Was I a social worker, studying social pathologies? No.

Was I a teacher? I resisted this label, as I felt I was there primarily to learn about, and learn from, my hosts. Kani Pasai has, it seems, been a purely oral dialect: I did not want to be perceived as putting down that spoken dialect in favor of any other spoken dialect or language, or in favor of the medium of writing. After all, I was there to observe oral aspects of an oral-centric culture: the last thing I wanted to do was to make Kani culture more mainstream, or literary-centric! Nonetheless, it seemed that some Kani parents wanted me to teach written Tamil -- and even written English -- to the children. I did have some background as a teacher: I had taught Expository Writing (in English), among other courses, on the college level in the USA; and as mentioned I had been a volunteer teacher

of basic written Tamil with children of Tamil descent in the USA. Thus, in the spirit of making myself useful, I did to some degree accept the label and role of written language teacher in the course of my Vellambi fieldwork. During visits to Nagarcoil, I would sometimes purchase colored markers and paper, and colored-chalk and slates, and with these materials I taught the interested Old Vellambi children a little written Tamil and English. In the process, we also wrote down some Kani Pasai words -- in Tamil script, in Latin script phonetically, and in English translation. We began to compile a Kani Pasai dictionary. In doing so, I suppose we were developing written Kani Pasai, a project in which numerous Kani people and others have expressed interest (Chidamparanatha 1992, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

There were a number of young children in the Old Vellambi community. Some would go to school, others were too young to do so. There was one young girl, Chitra, who had not been able to get along in school. Her memory in relation to reading and writing was not very strong: she was not able to remember most

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<sup>1</sup> I once overheard a Folklore graduate student say, "Fieldwork without learning the local language is a joke." This statement is true in that culture is based largely in language: study of a culture without involvement in the community's language would very likely be superficial. However, it is not that fluency in the local language or dialect must be achieved to make the fieldwork legitimate. Rather, what is necessary is that the scholar must throughout the fieldwork process make a serious and ongoing effort to achieve such fluency -- in the process, one learns a great deal: this is what occurred in the case of my fieldwork.

lessons from one moment to the next. She didn't like to sit still, and she tended to get into fusses with other children. So it seems that she had been excused from school, and she spent most of her time in Old Vellambi, under Rajammal's care and tutelage.

Slowly, over the weeks and months, the children's songs/chants/dances/games appeared. Rajammal knew a number of these, so she played some with the children in my presence. I was looking for a distinction between activities the children might play amongst themselves (more fun-oriented), and activities an adult might lead them in (more teaching-and-learning oriented), but I came to feel that this distinction in this case was not very significant. Occasionally, Velmurugan would help me to write down the words of the children's activities -- again, first as Kani Pasai words in Tamil script, and then as English transliterations and translations. After some time, I purchased a couple of inexpensive audio-cassette recorders in Nagarcoil, and we audio-recorded some of these lyrics, and eventually lyrics of other Kani verbal arts as well (songs, proverbs, etc.).

In the daytime, aside from hanging around with the children, I sometimes helped the adults tend to the kilangu-growing areas. I walked down to the river alone often, to wash my body and clothes, and to fetch water. This was a small river -- on average ten yards wide and three feet deep -- with fast-flowing water in most

places. I had a small hand-pump filter with which I filled bottles of water from the river. The river water seemed perfectly clean, but I used this filter just in case there might be bacteria in the water that might be harmful to me.

In Vellambi, some of the young men let it be known that they would like to begin a light orchestra -- a band, in USA parlance -- and they asked me to help them get started. As in all my work with the Kani people during my fieldwork period, I hesitated to enable anything other than traditional Kani culture. However, in this case in time I gave in -- on the grounds that this was a way of my paying community members for their support and assistance regarding my project, and also that they might consider incorporating aspects of their traditional music into their light orchestra music.

Next to Velmurugan's house there was a one-room building that was being used for storage. I helped to clean up and organize this space, and it became Vellambi's music room. I agreed to purchase some instruments, beginning with an electric keyboard, and for some time I contributed towards a music teacher coming to Vellambi to give lessons once a week. Being the almost comically puritanical person that I am, I covered with tape the keyboard's buttons for pre-recorded automatic rhythms: I insisted that the Kani light orchestra musicians would have to create and play their own rhythms.

I had an electric guitar and an electric bass guitar made in Chennai, each with the body consisting of a solid rectangular block of wood. (I had felt for years that the curves on most electric guitar bodies served no musical function, and this was my chance to test my design ideas in this area). I also got an acoustic guitar, an instrument which in south India seems to be associated especially with Christian singing.

Some of the Kani men requested a *tabla* (the north Indian drum-set that consists of a pair of drums) or a *triple congo* (an African, or West Indian drum-set, widely used in Indian popular music). However, I refused to buy these or any other outside drums, and in this instance I remained firm. I said, “You have perfectly good drums here.” So we found Kani people in neighboring villages who could make an extra *chendai* and *mattalam* for us. A *chendai* is played with two sticks, which strike the skin on the drum’s top side. A *chendai* can be played very loudly. While being played, a *chendai* can be carried (hung with a cloth around the player’s upper body), or it can be placed on the ground. A *mattalam* is generally hung with a cloth around the back of the player’s neck, and is played on both ends with bare hands. These are the two leading traditional drums of the area. Kani people are hired by people of other castes to play these drums outside local Hindu temples.



The idea of using a chendai or a mattalam for a light orchestra was not very popular. It seems that these south Indian drums, and the rhythms that are associated with them, are thought of as belonging to the realm of ritual, and not to the realms of cinema and other popular music. It seems that the north Indian tabla has been accepted in popular as well as devotional music, but that no south Indian drums have also made this crossover. Finally, I just left it up to the Kani musicians for them to get or not get any additional (other-than-local) drums on their own.

As mentioned, Kani people also have flute-like and percussive musical instruments they make out of bamboo, called nanthini instruments. I encouraged some senior men to make more of these instruments.

There used to be drama troupes in Vellambi. These troupes performed a type of folk theatre that was a variant of *Therukkuttu*, the general Tamil form of folk theatre. Vellambi Kani drama troupes had a repertoire of stories and legends, and a set of stock characters, including a Chettiyar traveling salesman, a king, a heroine, etc. These troupes performed mostly for other Kani people. This drama tradition is now mostly forgotten. I began to help people re-construct it a bit. Rajammal's father was a famous drummer and singer, and performed in one of these troupes. Rajammal told me that she had learned much of her knowledge of performance and ritual from her father.

Banu is a young Kani woman of Vellambi. She has trained as a nurse, and speaks English well. She is a dance enthusiast, and organizes some Vellambi youngsters in a performance troupe specializing in Tamil cinema dance (performed to recordings of cinema songs). This troupe gives performances for both Kani and other villages. Once, after I had introduced my video recording equipment (and video projector) in Vellambi, Banu asked me if I might come with the troupe for a cinema music and dance performance, and videotape it. I was very much against this video equipment being used for any purpose other than in relation to traditional Kani culture. I felt that the whole point of having the equipment there was to apply it to, and to invest it in, traditional Kani culture. However, these idealistic views were overcome, and Banu's dance troupe was videotaped. Some days later, we showed the recording in Vellambi, projected onto a large sheet. This was greatly appreciated by Banu and company, and certainly helped to acclimate community members to the video activity involving children's songs/chants/dances/games that was to come. (Please see pp. 483-8, and 498, for descriptions of Banu's participation in the 2005 videoconference.)

Marthandan is a young Kani man of Vellambi (it was Marthandan's father who was married to Velmurugan's mother). Marthandan is married, and has two children. Marthandan spends much of his time tending to his kilangu fields near Old Vellambi. He is also a talented dancer. He has developed a dance style that is a combination of traditional Kani ceremonial dance (which involves a good deal

of rhythmic stomping of the earth), and cinema dance; he often does this dance set to a modern song that Kani people sing about themselves. Vellambi also has a troupe that does folk dances at state-wide tribal cultural meetings and such, and Marthandan is a leader of this troupe.

As mentioned, throughout my fieldwork period, I kept a room in a lodge in a town some distance from Vellambi. I kept most of my things in this room (some were also in storage in Chennai). At first, I would return to my lodge each night, but after some time this proved to be unworkable, as buses do not run very frequently, and two buses were needed. To observe children's songs/chants/dances/games -- as well as lullabies and other domestic verbal arts -- one needs to be on the scene early in the morning and late at night, so sometimes I stayed in my little mosquito-net tent, which was protected from the sun and rain by a slanted thatched surface that some of the men assembled and put in place. In this way, nineteen months passed. I made occasional visits to places such as Nagarcoil (to the southeast), Trivandram in Kerala (to the southwest), and Chennai (to the northeast).

From Nagarcoil, I would telephone my father in New York City every two weeks or so, just to keep in touch. Near the middle of my fieldwork period, during one of these calls my father told me that he had been diagnosed as having a brain tumor. I went to New York City to be with him during the last six weeks of his life.

I brought back with me to Vellambi a xerox of a letter my father had written to me, with his signature on it. I released this piece of paper in the river below Old Vellambi, as a way of saying goodbye to my father.

In the course of my fieldwork process, I discovered that it was a dream of mine (like many Anthropologists and some Folklorists) to live with tribal people in wilderness for an extended period of time. In my case, living in a forest or jungle proved to be not quite possible, as Kani people in Kanyakumari District no longer live in the wilderness. However, some Kani people do live in villages at the edges of the forests, and by staying in such a community, I was able to sometimes accompany Kani people when they would visit the forest.

Occasionally I accompanied the men on their visits to the forest to collect honey, or bamboo for house repairs. I sponsored one ten-day expedition to the forest, on which I was taken to many of the forest's well-known places. A purpose of this trip was for me to learn the names of places in the forest, and the stories behind the names. Each bend in the rivers seemed to have a name. One name referred to a particular spot along a river as a place where people had come during a drought, and had survived on forest flora and fauna. One place was named as the place where a man had wrestled with an elephant. Another place was named after the two boulders that crushed the badly-behaving man who had

been chasing an udumbu (this story is told and discussed on pp. 106-7).

Through names and stories, the forest was illuminated with moral and practical lessons.

I never became sick during my stay in the Vellambi area, but from walking through the brush in short pants, I did develop cuts on my legs which took a long time to heal. Anti-biotics and long pants eventually cleared things up.

Life in Old Vellambi is as close to timeless existence in nature as one is likely to find in much of India today. And yet, even here, some people have battery-operated clocks hanging on their walls, and battery-operated FM radios are often playing old and new Tamil cinema songs. It is only a kilometre walk to Vellambi, and from there it is a short walk to the main road, where, perhaps ten times a day, buses stop that can take one, in approximately two hours, southward, down out of the mountains, to Nagarcoil, which is a sizable city. Thus, even in Old Vellambi, one isn't all that far from civilization. However, when one is in Old Vellambi -- the wilderness to the east also beckons (visually, spatially, emotionally, and spiritually)!

Traditional tribal ritual "preserves the continuity of the mythic experience and in doing so resets the grounds for constituting a home in the forest, which would be impossible without appeasing and pacifying the spirit world" (Hebbar, 46).

However, in modern times, to some extent “The centre of life and activities [has] shifted from *Sarna*, the natural grove, to the Church”, and other urban-based institutions (Paty 2003, p. 98). Practical terms in which this shift is occurring include ways that the land is used, and ways that people make a living. I observed this development in Vellambi, and did my best to invest in the forest whatever glamour was associated with me.

I paid Velmurugan for his time and efforts to assist me, and paid people of Old Vellambi for my taking up space that might otherwise have been used for growing kilangu. I also gave some money to Velmurugan to distribute to other members of the community when it seemed appropriate. It is correct for folklorists to give some payment to the people of a culture under study. This payment communicates that the traditions have value, and expresses respect for the subjects' time and effort in communicating with, and presenting material to, the visiting fieldworker.

One young man in Vellambi had a special interest in Tamil cinema music, and had a good sound system. For some months, he played this music loudly, often late at night and early in the morning. His parents tried to stop him, but he was relentless, and I was told that at times he even hit his parents if they tried to interfere with his sound production. Eventually this music stopped: it was said that the equipment had broken down. I regret that I did not directly encourage

this young man to join the effort to electronically document Kani singing and other music; or to use elements of Kani music in the making of new music.

Near the house in which Velmurugan and his wife and daughter were living was a family compound that had come to house Christian activity. This household often played Christian music and sermons (both pre-recorded and live) through loudspeakers for much of Vellambi to hear.

The projection of amplified sound into public space is quite common in India. There seems to be little concern that such sound might be experienced as an imposition. Such sound, however, generally strikes me as an aggressive expression of individual or organizational ego, and domination over territory. Often the publicly-amplified music is up-tempo and has a strong beat -- actually much popular music in India in general has such qualities -- which seems designed to make people feel themselves to be members of a boisterous group. In my fieldwork area, there was often not much I could do about such amplified sounds.

For example, on the mountainside of Old Vellambi, sometimes recordings of Christian music could be heard before dawn. This sound came from a village two kilometres downriver, which was inhabited by (non-Kani) people working on a

rubber plantation. It seemed that this music functioned as a public alarm-clock for the rubber tree workers.

In the past, Kani night watchmen would often gather around a fire and sing and play drums, in part to scare away the wild animals that might otherwise come to eat the crops. These days, Kani night watchmen protecting the crops more often play FM radios. Dear Reader, you might imagine the chagrin I felt, having come all of this way, to this glorious mountainside wilderness, with my romantic notions of nature and tribalism and traditional verbal arts -- to have to listen to an FM radio blaringly play cinema songs from Chennai. What made it worse was that at times it seemed that the money I was paying to my hosts was in part being spent on batteries for the radios! I discussed this with Velmurugan, and he spoke with the people concerned. The volume of radio was turned down.

A general dilemma of ethnographic fieldwork, it seems to me, is that built into the situation is that one often helps to destroy that which one comes to study. For just by meeting people, people become similar to each other -- people pick up each other's habits, ways of doing things, and technology. This can be countered by the anthropologist also adopting some ways of the people under study; and as much as possible, investing the glamour of one's self and equipment in the study of one's host's traditional ways.



In the old days, in small villages throughout Tamil Nadu, community members would often gather in the evenings for sessions of “Story and Song” (“kathaiyum paaTTum”), which featured the telling of various types of folktales, and also the saying of proverbs and riddles. Formulaic beginnings of such stories are, “in those days” (“antha kalatthile”), and “in a certain village” (“oru uurile”). These events were often held partly inside a home, partly outside, and might, especially if people from numerous families were present, be said to have occurred in a kind of public. The same can be said regarding children’s songs/chants/dances/games.

However, the recent booms in popularity of television, FM radio, and other entertainment technologies have greatly decreased the cultural emphasis on traditional verbal arts in general, and on group storytelling sessions in particular, in small-village India -- as around the world. Earlier milestones in the fading of the old storytelling culture include the advent of cinema in the 1920s, and the widespread appearance of portable audio cassette players in the 1980s (Manuel 1993). In India today, even on the outskirts of small villages, the playing of cinema songs on FM radios is a very common practice. The standard public entertainment at many Kani weddings is recordings of cinema songs. This is part of a general cultural shift. Another aspect of this shift was expressed by the posters announcing numerous Kani weddings that featured photographs of Chennai-based cinema stars. Until I was corrected, it seemed to me that these

posters signified that the actor might be getting married, or might be attending the wedding.

Women usually do not perform folk verbal arts in public in Vellambi or in other south Indian villages. This may in part be a result of the local people's (usually men's) use of technology and culture from outside the local environment, which can actually even make it difficult for women to perform folk verbal arts in private! For due to the use of the electronic sound-producing machines -- whether they are used to play recordings of cinema music, religious music, or other -- there often isn't any such thing as privacy in terms of sound in much of inhabited India anymore. The electronic sounds not only often fill public spaces, they often pervade private spaces also. Many evenings this electronic music is so prevalent that it is almost impossible for mothers to sing lullabies to their children.

In the course of my fieldwork in Vellambi, I thought a good deal about the loud playing of recordings of non-locally-produced music that I heard there. One line of thought I traversed regarding the playing of these recordings was: Power is often expressed in terms of the ability to speak and be heard in public spheres. The loud-volume playing of cinema song recordings can be seen as a demonstration of power. It silences the local. It can be seen as an expression of identification and association with, and loyalty to, the urban, modern, and

electronic; and as an expression of disdain for local culture and traditions, disdain perhaps in part for the local culture's seeming powerlessness and insignificance.

One reason that it is usually men who are playing the radios and cassette players may be that men have more frequent access to places outside the village, where they can obtain money and purchase batteries. (It seems it is always men who play the recordings of cinema songs at weddings; it is men who carry and install the sound machines; and it seems it is men who own and operate the businesses that provide such services.) It is especially the local women's culture which is silenced by the machines. If a woman has a lively verbal arts scene going with the children of the household, the man of the house might feel marginalized. Thus, the man might turn a radio on loudly, and so to put a halt to aspects of the mother-child communication process from which he might have felt excluded.

For the first six months of the fieldwork, I brought no video technology to Vellambi. During this time, I was dedicated to learning the traditional pre-electronic ways of doing things. This was counter to Kenny Goldstein's suggestion (1963) that the scholar might display recording technology from the beginning of his/her appearance, so that people can get used to it, and associate the fieldworker with the technology. This approach might make sense for brief visits, but in the context of an extended stay I definitely wanted people to get to know me as an electronic-technology-less human before anything else. And

I wanted to, as unobtrusively as possible, experience the Kani people's relationship with nature.

Whenever we would walk in the forest, I took special care to communicate that I did not feel that I was in any sort of leadership position there. This was their realm, and I was there solely to follow and learn. One thing I was very struck by was the interaction with udumbu (the almost human-size lizards). Presently, udumbu are a protected species: the Government prohibits their being hunted and eaten. Some Kani people might -- using ancient technology (such as sticks and dogs) -- still do a little hunting of udumbu, just for personal use of the meat. In the past, udumbu skin had some value, for making components of musical instruments for example, but I never witnessed the taking and processing of skins. Hunting udumbu involves a basic aspect of Kani identity. Even if the young men no longer know many songs and rituals fully, many still know how to go into the woods with their dogs and do various things there, including catch udumbu. There were many udumbu in the forest adjacent to Vellambi, so it is clear that they were not being over-hunted. Whatever hunting might have been occurring was being done in a sustainable manner.

One ancient method of cooking among Kani people is cooking with heated stones. In this method, first some stones are heated in a fire. Then the hot stones are moved -- with a piece of split bamboo -- to a shallow indentation in

the earth. The food is wrapped in plantain leaves and placed on top of the stones. Additional hot stones are then placed on top of the food. By the time the stones have cooled, the food is cooked. This method works very well for cooking fish. A more modern way of cooking is to cut the food into pieces, and cook it as a stew in a metal pot.

In Old Vellambi, Rajammal would cook in the evenings. Dinner typically included boiled kilangu and some vegetables cooked in masala (a sauce of ground chilli [milagu], ginger, salt, etc.). When this would be ready, Rajammal would call for me to come from my tent and join the family for dinner. The family often consisted of herself, her husband, her mother, and Chitra (the young girl she was taking care of).

Velmurugan usually stayed with his wife and child in their house in Vellambi, but sometimes he joined us in Old Vellambi. On some evenings when Velmurugan visited, by my request Rajammal told stories in Story and Song style -- that is, alternating between narrating and singing. The singing sections seemed to recount and summarize the plot, and to announce that she was in the process of telling the story.

We decided to audio record her telling of one story, the *Story of the Youngest Brother* (this story is summarized on p. 112). To do so, we developed the

technique of having the senior person (Rajammal) tell the story to a group of young people in the community, and having one of these young people (in this case, her son, Velmurugan) operate and hold the recording device. As Rajammal would tell the story, Velmurugan would make the encouraging sounds and gestures that good listeners often make, to indicate that they have understood and are ready for more. This recording method could be described as an artificial version of a natural context, but it certainly was not fully artificial (Goldstein 1964).

We used one of the inexpensive audio-cassette recorders (with a built-in microphone) that I had purchased to audio record Rajammal's stories, and also (during the early stages of the fieldwork) the words of the children's activities. The recording quality of this device was rather low, but a great advantage of the device was that it was not outlandishly exotic or costly (unlike the mini-digital-cassette video camcorders that I would later introduce). Especially in the early stages of one's fieldwork in a community, one does not want the performer and the material to be upstaged by the technology.

The way that Velmurugan operated the audio-cassette recorder gave me the idea to continue in this style when we (12 Kani adults, 12 Kani children, and myself) visited Chennai in October 2004. On that occasion, the troupe performed the children's songs/chants/dance/games and other Kani verbal arts at Dakshin

Chitra, the cultural center on East Coast Road, south of Chennai. There, one of the events consisted of Rajammal telling a story to the Kani children. Again, her son Velmurugan operated a recording device (this time, a video camera on a tripod), Kani children sat at her feet and listened, and other Kani women sat beside her and informally assisted and learned from her. However, a difference between this scene at Dakshin Chitra and the similar one in Old Vellambi was that at Dakshin Chitra, instead of just myself, numerous outsiders watched the storytellers and listeners from the perimeter of the storytelling event.

In Vellambi, in addition to the light orchestra, I helped to facilitate a number of other small projects, including: 1) The re-furbishing of a the Old Vellambi well on the mountainside: water was plentiful, although it remained mixed with a good deal of earth. And, 2) Marthandan's daughter had a sizable cyst on her neck: I paid for her stay in a Nagarcoil hospital, and for the surgery to have the cyst removed (it was benign).

A number of times, men of the village went off to dance in state-wide performance festivals, usually organized by Christian organizations. As mentioned, Kani people of Vellambi have a tradition of presenting various sorts of performances, both for Kani people and for outsiders.

As my collecting of children's songs/chants/dances/games proceeded, I kept an eye out for how mothers gently rocked, jiggled, and tickled their babies. I came to feel that a core of village life is the interaction between mothers and children in and around their homes. In the course of this interaction, mothers often participate in language play with their children: this includes singing songs for them. In the case of infants, the mother's singing is often accompanied by her holding and gently bouncing the infant, finger-walking on the infant's skin, etc. This activity serves to help teach spoken language to the child, and sometimes to distract the child from crying. In a sense, an infant begins as not being a member of the community, and it is in part through the experience of this folklore that the infant begins to be acculturated into the group. Thus, mothers' verbal arts for children are very practical and functional, and are used in the context of a nurturing and teaching relationship.

Mothers' verbal arts -- and verbal arts that some children perform amongst themselves -- are two of the very few traditional verbal arts that continue to be widely practiced on a daily basis throughout village India. For, at least in my experience, one is hard put to find in villages much folk performance being performed by people for and with each other anymore. Of course there remains a great deal of folklore built into the local languages themselves, especially in the everyday sayings and metaphors -- in the ways of thinking about things, and in the ways of saying things -- that people often are not even aware of using.



Many rural Tamil women share a nasal, high-pitched, wavering style of chanting and singing, varieties of which they have traditionally used both for singing lullabies (“thalaATTu”) and for lamenting over the dead (“oppaari”). This expressive nasal sound is often mimicked and ridiculed by boys and men of the community. This ridicule might contribute to the women’s general hesitance to be heard in public.

Once the 14 children’s activities had come to my awareness, I suggested that they be done in a particular order. At this point, we were preparing for the first trip to Chennai, where we would be performing these activities in schools in the days prior to the 2004 videoconference. Before that Chennai visit, we had two days of videotaping sessions of the activities, one a “practice” day, one a “performance” day. The latter occurred in a field on one side of Vellambi. After the activities were performed that day, Velmurugan’s mother did a demonstration (but also real) sami event for the video recording. In this sami event, a forest god came into Rajammal, and demanded that more respect be paid to him, in terms of prayers and upkeep of his shrine. The camera was being operated by her son Velmurugan, and this was totally their and other community members’ idea. What it said to me was: this is how these people see themselves, and how they want to be seen.

Having taught Velmurugan how to operate a video camera, I finally gave one to him. For me, documenting leads to teaching people in the community how to document themselves. Velmurugan has used the camcorder to record a number of Kani weddings.

Kani life in Vellambi struck me as very informal, practical, warm, and relaxed. I never witnessed any drunkenness, private or public, there. Vellambi's heritage as a performance center made me feel that enabling members of this community to take part in educational and artistic videoconferences -- with them as the primary teachers and performers -- could be seen as an extension of their local traditions. In retrospect, I am wondering if Vellambi being a place where people could be sent who might not follow certain social norms regarding whom one could marry (please see p. 93), might have made the atmosphere especially conducive for Kani people of that place to be open to meeting new people -- such as myself (in-person), and the Tamil-USA people in Philadelphia (via videoconference).

All in all, my fieldwork experience in Vellambi was not particularly dramatic, but finally quite satisfying. In terms of learning Kani Pasai, and experiencing the forest wilderness, it was just an introduction; on the other hand, the children's songs/chants/dances/games were collected thoroughly.

There were two instances in which I suggested that the Kani children make some modifications in the songs when they would perform them in Chennai at schools, and in the videoconferences.

One instance concerned the counting-out game, “Rolling,” Activity 9 (pp. 310-6). In the second line, the original lyric was, “Kill a [member of a certain low-status caste]”. I suggested that when the Kani children might play this activity in Chennai for others, and teach it to others, it might be good to change this word, to avoid possibly hurting anyone’s feelings. After discussion, it was decided, for the purposes of this visit to Chennai, to change the line to, “Kill an old man.” When I mentioned this to Prof. Dan Ben-Amos, back in Philadelphia, he was indignant: he called the new version “fakelore,” and protested that he was offended by the insult to old men in the modified version. I am afraid that this incident confirmed to him that scholars being involved with helping to present folklore to the public involves various problems, including a perceived need to sometimes clean up or soften the material.

The other instance of temporary modification of an activity was somewhat more complex. Of the activities I collected, one of my favorites was “Please Give!” (Activity 7, pp. 289-95; pp. 486-8; pp. 500-1). I love how this activity seems to put into play mixed emotions about sharing. It could be any object that the children ask each other if they can borrow -- but in fact it is an *iiRaaLi*, which is a

piece of wood used to pick lice eggs off of one's scalp. I felt that raising of the subject of lice eggs in one's hair might upset some of the children or their parents or teachers -- both in the Chennai schools, and on the Philadelphia side of the videoconference. Certainly it might remind listeners of the social-economic-class difference between themselves and the Vellambi Kani people. Thus, I suggested that *iiRaaLi* (which is a Malayalam word) be translated into the Tamil word, *sippu*, which means, comb. The Kani adults and children agreed with this idea, and made the change in for the 2005 visit to Chennai -- both in Chennai schools, and in the videoconference. Sometimes such changes need to be made to enable people to feel comfortable with each other and to give bonds a chance to develop. Moreover, I explained to the Kani people involved that in this videoconference, their role was to present and teach play activities of rural Tamil children. There would be other times for exhibition and discussion of Kani Pasai, their particular dialect. In fact, I helped to organize one such event -- a discussion of Kani proverbs related to nature, which was held at the Tamil Language Dept of the University of Madras, in 2006, with Rajammal, her son Velmurugan, and myself as the primary speakers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The proverbs discussed at this talk can be found in (Miller and Kani 2004), available at <http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/22.pdf> .

#### D) Interacting with Neighbors in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Following my fieldwork in Kanyakumari district, I returned to Chennai. Although I have since visited the USA a number of times, it has become clear that I tend to feel comfortable and happy in Tamil Nadu, and I have re-settled in Chennai.

When I would visit Nocchikuppam, the sea-fishing neighborhood just south of Chennai's Marina Beach (one of the world's largest beaches adjacent to a city), I noticed and was attracted to the kuttumarams (known in English as catamarans). Kuttumarams look like boats, but they are actually elongated rafts, basically composed of four or five processed tree trunks strapped together (kuttumaram literally means, tied trees).

One of my tasks as Roger Abrahams' research assistant had been to digitize the recordings of rowing songs that he had made in the West Indies -- so my consciousness about rowing songs had been raised. I guessed that the men here on India's southeast coast would have rowing chants and songs for use in kuttumarams. I enquired, and this indeed turned out to be the case. Before long, I was assisting people in the community to perform a forty-five minute drama -- featuring four different types of folksongs (a lullabye, a lament, a rowing chant, and a celebration song) -- about the traditional fishing life. This drama could be

performed daily as a component of the Living Museum about the local heritage of sea-fishing that some of us are seeking to develop in or near Nocchikuppam.

Therefore, when Bob Dixon, the founder and lead organizer of the annual Megaconference videoconference, kindly invited me to organize a segment relating to children's songs/chants/dances/games in the Dec. 2005 Megaconference, I knew exactly where to look for some local children who might participate (it seemed to be an unnecessary effort to once again bring Kani children from the mountains to Chennai for this event). So I recruited a number of children from Nocchikuppam and nearby Ayodhyakuppam for the Megaconference program. These same children some months later again took part with me in the Megaconference Jr., in May 2006. (The Megaconference is an international 12-hour marathon event, based at Ohio State University, that involves approximately 24 25-minute videoconference segments. The Megaconference Jr. videoconference is a similar annual event that especially involves children.)

The children of these sea-fishing communities may have a special measure of public performance sense, as the fish markets in their communities are prominent facts of life. Once again following Roger Abrahams' lead, I paid special attention to these markets in terms of the folklore activity, especially the verbal arts, that might be found in them (Abrahams 2003). In these markets,

women are the sellers of fish. Men catch and deliver the fish, and auction the fish off to the lady sellers. Men also clean and cut the fish after members of the public buy it. There is a good deal of yelling in relation to these open-air markets: usually in good spirits, but also at times heated. The paradigm of outsiders coming to the neighborhood to get something is well ingrained in these children, and my sense is that this made it less of a big deal for them to take part in an international videoconference.

I did pick up one splendid word-game chant from these Chennai children: “What Biscuit?” (on pp. 266-81 of the current work; similar to Activity 5, “What Kind Of?,” which I had collected from the Kani children). However, these Chennai children seem to know far fewer songs/chants/dances/games than their counterparts in Vellambi. This is not surprising, as the Chennai children have so many more entertainment options, including watching cable TV, and playing video games.