

Chapter VIII: Epilogue

In February 2006, I made a brief visit to Vellambi to gather some feedback about my fieldwork from members of the community. I asked some Vellambi people to tell some good and bad things about my fieldwork with them. Instead of receiving evaluations of how I had conducted the fieldwork, what I received was statements about the fieldwork project itself:

Velmurugan: “If nobody is asking about traditions, then there is no future for these traditions. Eric came, saw, asked, and understood. Now, the children have more interest in the songs and games. Mothers are helping with the teaching. Eight of us have been hired as part-time forest watchers. And we have a video camera in the community, so we can record our songs for ourselves.”

Mama: “Eric took interest in the forest. Now, our young people are also more interested in the forest, and they are learning the teachings about the forest.”

Rajammal: “Outside people and inside people are meeting. The history of Kani people, and Kani songs and other culture, should be studied. It would be good if there were more Government support for such study.”

Banu: “Eric wrote down some of the old Kani language. He saw the Kani people, old level. He gave an opportunity for Kani people to see an outside person. The old kalacharam [drama, dance, and music] was ending. Eric came, and the kalacharam started again. For a long future, it is important that the old culture be recorded and be put on computers.”

Marthandan: “Before Eric’s visit, there no recording of the old ways. Today, there is recording, and the children are following. When the old song men and women are gone, the recordings will still be there.”

Surendiren: “With Eric, we went to the river, caught fish, and cooked the fish and kilangu, and ate it. He asked about the way we played.”

Saju: “Eric halted in the village for many months. He asked about the eru madam (tree houses) that we make to avoid elephant danger. About bamboo making. Eating kilangu. Making fire. Bark cloth. Hunting. Agriculture. Stone cooking. Singing, dancing, drumming, and nanthini [musical instruments made from bamboo].”

My vision of cultural tourism began to be achieved at DakshinChitra (a cultural center just south of Chennai), during the Kani group’s first visit to Chennai, in

October 2004. The children performed their play activities, and then Rajammal did some storytelling, telling the story of the Younger Brother.

In this session, the Vellambi children sat on the ground in front of Rajammal. A number of the Vellambi women sat on either side of Rajammal, and helped her with the telling -- joining in at times, with both the speaking and the singing. These other women were, to my sense, also at this time being trained in telling by Rajammal, as the performance was occurring.

As these two processes were occurring, a third process was also taking place: Visitors to DakshinChitra -- Tamils, non-Tamil Indians, and foreigners -- were watching the first two processes. What were missing were: 1) translation during the performance; and 2) discussion, conversation afterwards.

In 2005, for a presentation about "Nature and Language" -- mostly proverbs relating to nature -- at the Dept. of Tamil Studies, at the University of Madras, I invited Velmurugan and his mother, Rajammal, to come as co-presenters.

It was during this event that I really came up against a difficulty of facilitating conversation between a tribal person, and scholars and other urban Tamil people. During the event, it seemed that Rajammal, who was sitting on a raised stage, resisted looking people in the eye and talking with them. She felt more

comfortable singing songs and making an invocation; and looking downward.

Later I realized that she might have been afraid to act 'big,' which is how looking people in the eye and speaking to them directly from a raised stage might have been interpreted. Facilitating relaxed conversation between such parties will not be easy, as both parties will need to develop trust and respect for each other, to break out of the social roles that keep people from different groups apart, and prevent them from being humans together.

Generally speaking, the Kani people of Vellambi seem to be well. I am hoping that I have had a mostly positive effect. Rajammal continues to live on the side of a mountain, in the midst of a supportive and loving community. The Government of India seems to be doing an excellent job of helping the Kani people of Kanyakumari district.

My doctoral research assistant-partner Velmurugan has begun a college course of study (B.A. in History), via postal correspondence. He is a talented and enthusiastic inter-cultural communicator: communicating with people outside one's of group to share aspects of one's group's traditions is not for everyone. I am hoping that he might be a teacher, museum worker, or tour guide. These are all jobs that he performed excellently in relation to me. The video camera that I gave to Velmurugan still works: he uses it especially to videotape weddings.

My work feels to me to have just barely begun: I have settled in Chennai, where I am working with various types of traditional storytellers from various communities. Here in Chennai I have co-founded the World Storytelling Institute, am teaching at a local college, and am helping to develop a videoconferencing center for teaching and learning, performance, and discussion. I am helping to develop *living museums* especially with members of sea-fishing communities on Tamil Nadu's east coast, and with tribal communities such as the Kani people in the state's western mountains.

A main thing that can hold humanity back at this point is non-deployment of technology that we already have, or are on the verge of having. Let us use well that which we have. Reality is being re-shaped each instant by each new decision we make. Let us videoconference -- in many ways, and for many purposes! If you would ever like to converse with me regarding ways in which this can be done in the present moment, please contact me. I can most likely be found through the Internet at <http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com> .

I have stayed in touch with the people of Vellambi. Members of the community have put on some performances of their traditional culture for visitors, in events arranged by forest officers. Velmurugan has visited me in Chennai a number of times.

I have also stayed in touch with the people of Nochhikuppam and Ayodhyakuppam in Chennai (some of whose members participated with me in the 2005 and 2006 Megaconferences). We have stayed in contact in part because I live close by, and also because I am seeking to help members of these and adjacent communities to develop a *living museum* cultural tourism venue (with a videoconference facility) relating to sea-fishing. This project has involved helping members of the community put on performances that have included men's rowing songs, and women's lament chants (for a man who was lost at sea, in the drama). Recently some people in Ayodhyakuppam have asked me if I might be able to help arrange for Tamil language reading-and-writing instruction to be given in the evenings.

Thus, my relationships with people in both the sea-fishing communities and the tribal communities seem to involve me helping them to learn and use reading-and-writing, and electronic technologies. This is ironic, for that what drew me to these communities in the first place was their oral-centricity, their living oral verbal arts. I can only hope that as these communities develop, their members use the new technologies in part to develop aspects of their traditional cultures.