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TAMIL AND MUSLIM SOCIETY  
ON THE EAST COAST OF SRI LANKA

*Dennis B. McGilvray*

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*Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka*



Dennis B. McGilvray

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## **CONTENTS**

- ix List of Illustrations
- xiii List of Tables
- xv Acknowledgments
- xvii Note on Transliteration

### **PART 1. FRAMING FIELDWORK IN THE BATTICALOA REGION**

- 3 Introduction
- 21 Chapter 1. The Research Setting

### **PART 2. PROBLEMS OF HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY**

- 55 Chapter 2. Past and Present
- 97 Chapter 3. Issues in Comparative Ethnography

### **PART 3. TAMIL AND MUSLIM SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

- 151 Chapter 4. Views of the Tamil Caste Hierarchy
- 167 Chapter 5. The Tamil High Caste Alliance
- 189 Chapter 6. The Kudi in Action
- 210 Chapter 7. A Profile of the Tamil Specialist Castes
- 266 Chapter 8. The Moors: Matrilineal Muslims
- 292 Chapter 9. Muslim Elites and Specialists

**PART 4. ETHNICITY, CONFLICT, AND THE WAR IN THE EAST**

313	Chapter 10. Ethnic Identities and Communal Violence
331	Epilogue: Fieldnotes from the War Zone
365	Appendix 1. Tamil Kinship Terms in Akkaraipattu
367	Appendix 2. Moorish Kinship Terms in Akkaraipattu
369	Notes
389	Glossary
395	Bibliography
417	Index

Chapter Title: List of Illustrations

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

### FIGURES

1. View of Panankadu (1970) 31
2. The main street of Akkaraipattu (1993) 35
3. Tamil grandparents in Akkaraipattu Division 7 with their matrilocally married daughters and grandchildren (1978) 40
4. The seven daughters of the Muslim Qazi of Akkaraipattu (1975) 41
5. Ethnic portraits of Akkaraipattu 50
6. Nallatamby Kurukkal reading from a palm-leaf manuscript (1971) 90
7. Silver lingam case worn by Nallatamby Kurukkal (1971) 91
8. Doorway of a High Caste house in Akkaraipattu decorated for a Tamil girl's puberty ritual (1975) 107
9. Property categories in the Mukkuvar law 122
10. Devolution of inheritance shares in the Mukkuvar law 123
11. Lifting the icon of the deity onto the temple car at the Kokkadichcholai Siva temple (1971) 140
12. Core structure of Tamil kinship terminology in Akkaraipattu 171
13. Ideal matrilineal and affinal qualifications of the Urpodiyar of Akkaraipattu 177
14. Structure of Dravidian cousin categories 181
15. Tamil caste and matriclan marriage patterns in Akkaraipattu 187
16. Decorated palanquin of Lord Pillaiyar (1975) 208
17. Cattle brand of the Tattar Smith caste 217
18. Two Tattar Smith priests prepare to sacrifice a rooster (1970) 221

19. Cattle brand of the Vannar Washerman caste 230
20. Local Tamil Washermen beating laundry at a riverbank (1975) 231
21. Cattle brand of the Navitar Barber caste 243
22. Headman of the Barber Caste decorating a Hindu funeral palanquin (1975) 245
23. Drummer from Kolavil playing the *tampaṭṭam* (1975) 248
24. Cattle brand of the Paraiyar Drummer caste 256
25. The royal drum (*rācā mēlam*) of the Tivukkudi Paraiyars (1971) 262
26. Drum for the call to prayer at Akkaraipattu Town Mosque (1971) 272
27. The trustee board of matrilineal-kudi maraikars assembled on the steps of the Akkaraipattu Grand Mosque (Periyapalli) (1971) 276
28. Muslim marriage negotiations in progress (1975) 287
29. The late Cader Mohideen Bawa, former head Kalifa of the Bawa Jamaat in Sri Lanka (1970) 298
30. Distinctive “centipede flags” (*pūrāṇ koṭi*) at the Beach Mosque shrine in Kalmunaikkudy (1970) 300
31. Mohideenbawa Meerasahib, a well-known Muslim circumciser in Akkaraipattu (1971) 306
32. Sri Lankan police in Akkaraipattu checking bus passengers (1993) 333
33. Clock tower erected at Akkaraipattu junction by the late President Premadasa (1993) 334
34. Signs of the private computer classes and English tutorials that have sprung up in Akkaraipattu (2001) 335
35. Vannakkars pose beside the newly refurbished and reconsecrated Pillaiyar temple (1993) 339
36. A Moorish schoolgirl wearing a purdah uniform reads her lesson (1993) 340
37. New Mariyamman temple in Kolavil North (2007) 347
38. Saktirani, a popular Tamil Hindu trance-possession oracle, provides guidance to an anxious Muslim policeman (1993) 349
39. Boys performing vows at a Pecciyamman temple near Batticaloa (1992) 350
40. A Sufi sheikh recently designated as a Kalifa (2001) 351
41. Ancestral Maulana family mausoleum in Kattankudy, recently razed by a Muslim fundamentalist group (2005) 352
42. List of 103 Muslim martyrs massacred by the LTTE in the Miran Mosque in Kattankudy (1993) 354
43. Roadside shrine to local LTTE martyrs (2005) 355
44. Ruins of a Bhadrakali temple (1993) 356
45. Tamil orphans of the Eelam conflict, Akkaraipattu (1993) 361

## MAPS

1. Sri Lanka and South India 4
2. Sri Lanka 5
3. Provinces of proposed Tamil Eelam 6
4. Tsunami deaths in Sri Lanka by district 8
5. The eastern coast of the island showing areas with matrilineal clan organization 12
6. The Batticaloa region 22
7. Akkaraipattu vicinity 29
8. Divisions and settlement areas of Akkaraipattu 34
9. Akkaraipattu town 36
10. Tamil caste neighborhoods in Akkaraipattu 42
11. Legendary Kurukkal connection to the Virasaiva center at Sri Sailam, Andhra Pradesh 89
12. LTTE-controlled areas of the Batticaloa region (ca. 2005) 315



Chapter Title: List of Tables

Book Title: Crucible of Conflict

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Book Author(s): Dennis B. McGilvray

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## TABLES

1. Population of Akkaraipattu, 2001 33
2. Tamil classification of castes and communities in Akkaraipattu 43
3. Tamil opinions regarding the principle governing the spread of death pollution (*tutakku*) among kinspeople 115
4. Tamil caste hierarchy in Akkaraipattu 150
5. Tamil opinion ranking of the eight shareholding castes 155
6. Moorish opinion ranking of the eight shareholding Tamil castes 159
7. High Caste Tamil population of Akkaraipattu, 1970 169
8. Occupations of Tamil High Caste adult men in Akkaraipattu, 1970 170
9. Matriclan membership in a survey of 130 High Caste Tamil households in Division 7, Akkaraipattu, 1970 174
10. Relationships between spouses in a combined sample of 410 High Caste marriages in Akkaraipattu, Kolavil South, Makiladittivu, Ambilanturai, and Kokkadichcholai, 1970–1978 197
11. Order of annual festival sponsorship shares at the High Caste Pillaiyar temple in Akkaraipattu as described by informants in 1971 and as listed on the 1993 printed festival schedule 207
12. Carpenters and masons in Akkaraipattu, 1970 212
13. Occupations of Tattar Smith caste men, 1970 213
14. Matriclan membership of married adults in twenty-one Tattar Smith caste households in Divisions 7 and 8, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971 216
15. Relationships between spouses in a sample of twenty Tattar Smith caste marriages in Divisions 7 and 8, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971 218

16. Occupations of Sandar Caste men, 1970 223
17. Matriclan membership of married adults in eighteen Sandar Climber caste households in Division 8, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971 225
18. Relationships between spouses in nineteen Sandar Climber caste marriages in Division 8, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971 227
19. Occupations of adult Vannar Washerman caste men in Akkaraipattu, 1970 232
20. Matriclan membership of married adults in twenty Vannar Washerman caste households in Division 7, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971 236
21. Relationships between spouses in twenty-one Vannar Washerman caste marriages in Division 7, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971 239
22. Occupations of adult Navitar Barber caste men in Akkaraipattu, 1970 241
23. Matriclan membership of married adults in twenty Navitar Barber caste households in Divisions 7 and 8, Akkaraipattu, 1971 246
24. Relationships between spouses in nineteen Navitar Barber marriages in Divisions 7 and 8, Akkaraipattu, 1971 247
25. Occupations of adult Paraiyar Drummer caste men in Kolavil North, Akkaraipattu, 1970 251
26. Matriclan membership of married adults in twenty Paraiyar Drummer caste households in Kolavil North, Akkaraipattu, 1971 255
27. Relationships between spouses in a sample of twenty-one Paraiyar Drummer caste marriages in Kolavil North, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971 258
28. Occupations of Moorish adult men, 1970 269
29. Matriclan membership in 169 Moorish households in Division 3, Akkaraipattu, 1971 281
30. Relationships between spouses in 174 Moorish marriages in Division 3, Akkaraipattu, 1971 286

Chapter Title: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Book Title: Crucible of Conflict

Book Subtitle: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka

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Diacritical marking of Tamil words follows the system found in the University of Madras *Tamil Lexicon* (1982). In the interest of readability, most Tamil words are initially rendered in italics with full diacritics, then subsequently shown in regular font with conventional English spellings that are easier to read and to pronounce. Place names and proper nouns are written as they usually appear in Sri Lankan English print media.





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**PART 1.**

FRAMING FIELDWORK IN THE BATTICALOA REGION



## INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has been a remarkably fertile site for research in social and cultural anthropology, starting with C. G. and Brenda Z. Seligmann's colonial monograph on the Veddas (1911) and continuing to this day with important ethnographic studies by Edmund R. Leach (1961), Nur Yalman (1967), Stanley J. Tambiah (1958), Gananath Obeyesekere (1967, 1981, 1984), James Brow (1978), Michael Roberts (1982), Bruce Kapferer (1983), Jonathan Spencer (1990a), R. L. Stirrat (1992), E. Valentine Daniel (1996), Rohan Bastin (2002), and many others. Despite "postcolonial and postempiricist" objections to anthropology in Sri Lanka (Ismail 2005), my intention was always to produce a book in the same scholarly tradition, a study that would extend understanding of the island's remarkable sociological complexity through long-term, community-based fieldwork, as well as through critical engagement with anthropological writing on South Asia more generally. Now, however, given the brutal ethnic conflict which has consumed Sri Lankan society since the 1980s, this study also helps to illuminate what has become the most critical and divided conflict zone of the Eelam War—the island's



MAP 1. Sri Lanka and South India

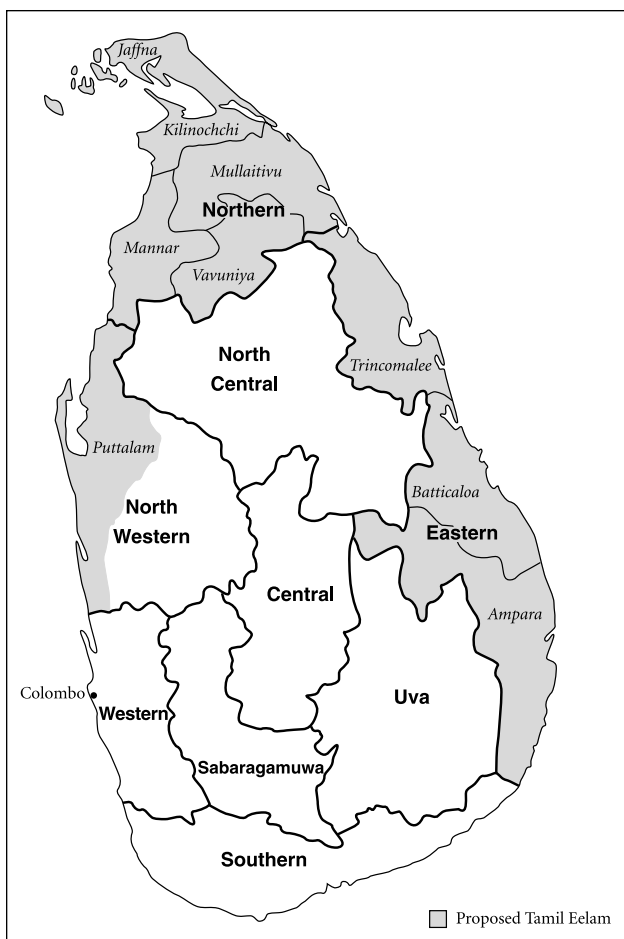
eastern coastal region—and the two Tamil-speaking minority communities who have lived there side by side for centuries—the Tamils and the Muslims (or Sri Lankan Moors).

The strife between Sri Lanka’s Sinhala-speaking, mainly Buddhist ethnic majority and its Tamil-speaking, mainly Hindu minority was simmering long before the island (formerly known as Ceylon) achieved independence from the British Empire in 1948. Some argue that the antipathy dates back to Tamil invasions from South India one or two millennia ago, while others see it as a modern postcolonial rivalry resulting from British colonial divide-and-rule policies that set up invidious communal distinctions and a system of inequitable rewards between the Tamils and the Sinhalese (Spencer 1990b; Stanley J. Tambiah 1992: chap. 13; Gunawardana 1995; Dharmadasa 1996; Sabaratnam 2001). Efforts to legislate Sinhala as the national language after 1956 caused the Tamils to riot, and subsequent ethnic quotas for university seats and civil-service jobs engendered deep resentments and insecurities among members of the educated urban Tamil middle class. For the rural, rice-cultivating Tamils and Muslims on the east coast of the island, however, it was above all else the



MAP 2. Sri Lanka

massive post-independence resettlement of Sinhala farmers on internationally funded irrigation projects adjacent to older Tamil-speaking districts that steadily deepened their sense of marginalization and political disempowerment. The Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme, a massive hydroelectric and peasant-resettlement project, launched in 1977, that invoked nationalist visions of the ancient Sinhala Buddhist hydraulic civilization, further exacerbated Tamil anxieties on a national scale (Kemper 1991; Herring 2001). Although such projects of development-oriented demographic engineering have undeniably enhanced Sri Lanka's rice production, they have profoundly altered the political map on the northern and eastern sides of the island, a region that is now identified by militant separatists of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as Tamil Eelam, the historic homeland of Sri Lanka's



MAP 3.  
Provinces  
of proposed  
Tamil Eelam

Tamil-speaking peoples (Peebles 1990; Shastri 1990; Manogaran 1994; DeVotta 2004).<sup>1</sup>

However, it is much easier to grasp Tamil Eelam as a nationalist abstraction than as a concrete geographical reality, stretched as it is around a relatively thin arc of Sri Lanka's northern and eastern coastline (map 3). While the densely populated Jaffna Peninsula and the adjacent districts of the Vanni, the northernmost part of the island's Dry Zone, remain overwhelmingly Tamil in population and culture, and thus the cynosure of any future Tamil homeland, the culturally Balkanized eastern coastal regions south of Trincomalee, including the fertile, lagoon-laced agricultural districts of Batticaloa and Ampara, are up for grabs in Sri Lanka's ethnic tug-of-war. Jaffna will always remain a monocultural Tamil bastion, but the east coast is a site of complex multicultural contestation and deep ethnic division. One of the reasons is that Sinhala resettlement

and irrigation schemes here have steadily impinged on older, Tamil-speaking Hindu and Muslim villages, sometimes exercising an upstream advantage in irrigation and often radically altering electoral demographics at the district level. The other reason is that the eastern coastal belt itself is interspersed with two distinct, rivalrous, but historically interlinked ethnic communities, both of them Tamil-speaking minorities within the larger Sri Lankan polity.

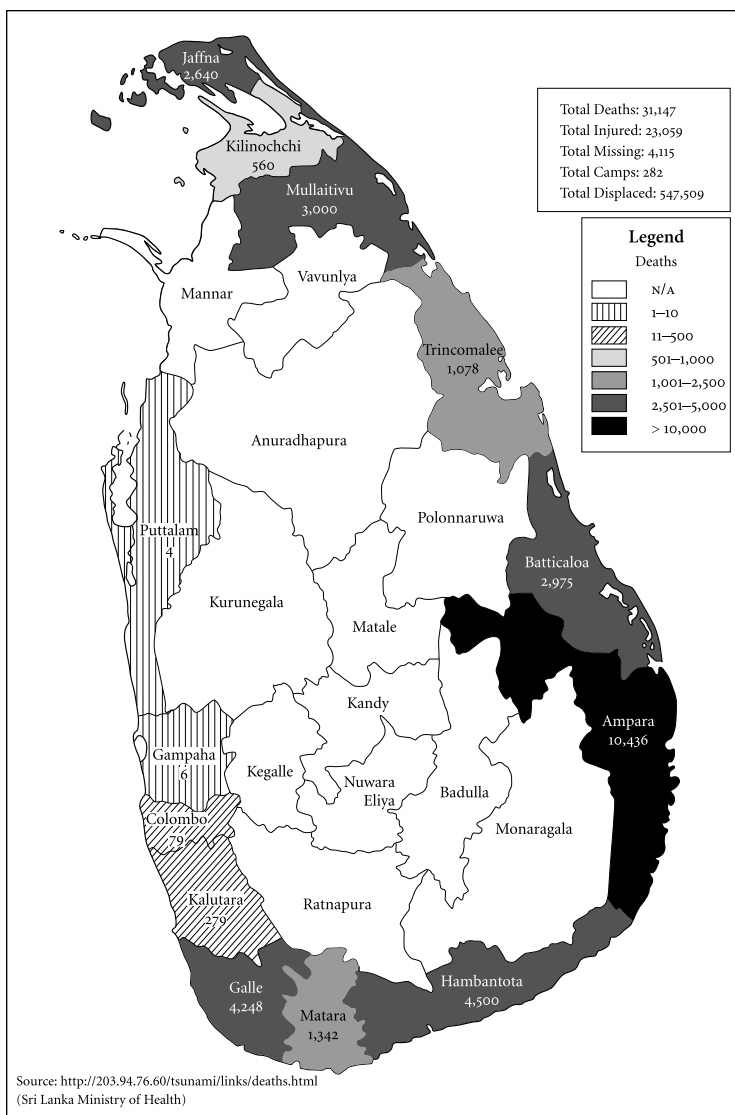
On top of all this, the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami struck the east coast of the island with unsurpassed ferocity, resulting in massive destruction and the loss of over 13,000 Tamil and Muslim lives—43 percent of Sri Lanka's tsunami death toll—in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts alone (map 4). In many beachfront towns and villages the destruction was complete, leaving intact only deeply embedded concrete well-casings and resilient coconut trees, while settlements located only a short distance inland from the beach survived unscathed. Research being undertaken as this book goes to press may reveal whether the distinctive features of regional culture on the east coast, such as matrilineal dowry and matrilineal household structure, have helped or hindered the post-tsunami recovery process (McGilvray 2006).<sup>2</sup> However, there can be little doubt that the grassroots competition between Tamil and Muslim communities for post-tsunami relief resources and political favors will further exacerbate their preexisting ethnic tensions and rivalries. It is these prior sources of history and cultural identity, and the shared patterns of caste and matrilineal social structure, that I seek to explore.

#### THE EAST: SRI LANKA'S ETHNIC CRUCIBLE

A brief review of Sri Lanka's majority and minority communities will help to place the Tamils and Muslims of the east coast in political perspective. Three-quarters (74 percent) of the island's population—those who live in the lushly tropical central and southwestern regions—identify themselves as Sinhals (people of the lion, *sinha*), speak Sinhala (an Indo-European language with north Indian roots), and are predominantly Theravada Buddhist in religion. Since independence, the two major political parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—have represented this Sinhalese majority voting bloc, although some minority candidates (especially Muslims) have also been elected on a mainstream party ticket.

The largest ethnic minority in Sri Lanka are the Tamils (18 percent), whose language belongs to the Dravidian family of South India, and who are themselves divided along several historical and geographical lines. The historically oldest group is designated as Sri Lankan Tamils (12 percent), who have full





MAP 4. Tsunami deaths in Sri Lanka by district

citizenship and live mainly in the northern and eastern regions, as well as residing as professionals (and, more recently, as civil-war refugees and tsunami victims) in major urban centers in the south, such as Colombo and Kandy. Members of a smaller Tamil group, variously known as Indian Tamils, Estate Tamils, or Upcountry Tamils, account for 6 percent of the island's population. They are the descendants of Tamil laborers imported from Tamilnadu by British planters in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth to work on

tea estates in the central Kandyan Hills, and until recent decades they were deprived of Sri Lankan citizenship (Hollup 1994; Bass 2001; Peebles 2001). The Muslims, or Sri Lankan Moors, who constitute 7 percent of the population, are the third-largest minority group in Sri Lanka. Although they speak Tamil (and in some cases are bilingual in Sinhala), they do not accept the designation “Muslim Tamil,” which is the common term for Muslims in Tamilnadu.

The acknowledged center of Sri Lankan Tamil literary culture and education has always been the arid but densely populated Jaffna Peninsula in the far north of the island, seat of a late medieval Tamil kingdom that was conquered by the Portuguese in 1619. Under Portuguese, Dutch, and finally British colonial rule, Jaffna developed some of the earliest western educational institutions on the island, and by the twentieth century there was a significant stream of Tamil graduates who found professional careers under the British Raj, whether in Colombo or overseas in colonies such as Malaya and Trinidad. The easternmost region of the island, however, was never closely integrated with Jaffna, politically or economically. In early modern historical parlance both Trincomalee and Batticaloa are considered to have been part of the Vanni, an unstable Dry Zone buffer region between the centers of Sinhala royal power in the south (Kandy, Kotte, Sitawaka) and the Tamil Kingdom of Jaffna in the north. The Vanni was a loose term for a region of shifting local chiefdoms, some of them more Sinhala and some more Tamil in cultural inflection, that pledged only tenuous and opportunistic fealty to the kings of Kandy or Jaffna.

When the Portuguese and Dutch empires encircled Sri Lanka in the 1500s and 1600s, the easternmost region of the island, centered on the present-day town of Batticaloa, was part of the feudal territories of the Kingdom of Kandy, although local-level politics was firmly in the hands of subregional chiefs of the dominant Tamil landowning caste, the Mukkuvars. The inhabitants of the region were largely Tamil-speaking, except for some Sinhala and Veddah villages to the west and south, and an ancient Buddhist dagoba and pilgrimage shrine at Dighavapi. However, the Tamil-speaking population was—and remains—religiously divided between interspersed Hindu and Muslim villages. In this environment the ethnic designation “Tamil” refers to Tamil-speaking Saivite Hindus as well as to Tamil Catholics and Methodists. Their linguistic identification with Tamil, a Dravidian language with an impressive early literature and a passionate twentieth-century nationalist following, serves to anchor their modern-day ethnic and political identity, just as it does for Tamils in South India (Ramaswamy 1997).

Likewise, the sixteenth-century Muslims of the Batticaloa region spoke Tamil, but their modern identity, like that of Muslims elsewhere in the island, was forged on the anvil of Portuguese religious persecution of them as “Moors” (Port. *mouro*) and later by divisive colonial and postindependence electoral politics which created sharply drawn communal boundaries. The terms *Moor* and *Muslim* may be used interchangeably to identify these mainstream Sunni Muslims of the Shafi’i legal school, although nowadays *Muslim* is the predominant term both in conversational English and in Tamil. In this book, however, I sometimes prefer to use the older—and admittedly colonial—term *Moor*, because it highlights their special identity as a culturally and historically unique Sri Lankan community. In this sense, the English term *Moor* corresponds to the Tamil term *cōṇakar* (Sonahar), an ethnic label popularly used by Muslims themselves until the mid-twentieth century (Nuhman 2007: 44–46). Island-wide, the Moorish minority is widely dispersed, with two-thirds of them settled in the major cities or scattered across rural Sinhalese districts. It is only on the east coast that they constitute a geographically concentrated ethnic group that controls a significant bloc of parliamentary constituencies and local governing councils. For Muslim leaders, who have benefited from playing both ends against the middle in Sri Lankan politics, the prospect of being submerged within a larger Tamil nationalist homeland, especially one demographically dominated by (as they would see it) patronizing and chauvinistic Jaffna Tamils, is not particularly inviting.

Thus, the coastal region of the east, and especially the Batticaloa and Ampara Districts which are the geographical focus of this book, became an unexpected crucible of ethnic tensions and geopolitical uncertainties when the Eelam War turned “hot” in 1983. Because of its geographically juxtaposed and demographically unstable combination of Tamil, Moorish, and Sinhala populations, it is in the eastern coastal region, not in Jaffna, that the separatists’ hopes for a greater Tamil Eelam—or even the moderates’ vision of a unified federal Tamil province in the northeast—will ultimately be decided. And when one gets down to ethnographic details, the local picture in the eastern region becomes even more complex, the local politics even more ambivalent.

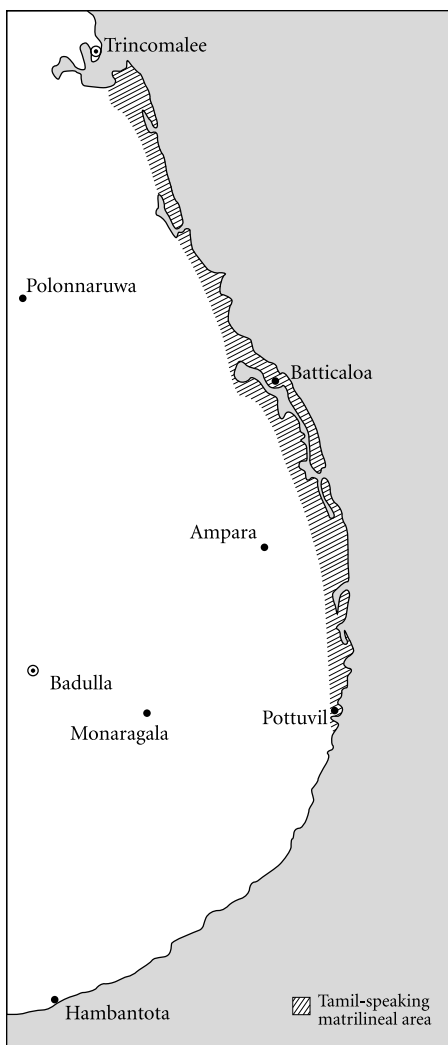
#### THE VIEW FROM AKKARAIPATTU

The Tamils and Moors of Akkaraipattu, the coastal agricultural town in Ampara District where my fieldwork has been centered, share a distinctive Batticaloa regional dialect of Tamil and a matrilineal social structure that is unique to the eastern part of the island. I found that one frequent complaint

among the east-coast Tamils in the 1970s, prior to the outbreak of the Eelam conflict, was not just against the Sinhala majority establishment, but against what they perceived to be the hegemony of Jaffna Tamils in politics, business, and the professions. They knew that in the eyes of many high-caste “Jaffnese,” Batticaloa was viewed as an uncivilized region and its inhabitants regarded as dangerous lower-caste sorcerers. I found, too, that the east-coast Moors had a long history of tense relations with their local Tamil neighbors, rooted in their political subordination to Tamil chiefs in the precolonial period and the patronizing attitudes of high-caste Tamils in the modern era. While armed Tamil guerrilla groups were initially able to recruit some youthful Muslim fighters in the 1980s based on the appeal of a “Tamil-speaking homeland” in the east, the Muslims abruptly rejected the LTTE and other Tamil militants after a series of ghastly massacres of Moorish policemen and of Muslims praying in east-coast mosques, as well as the LTTE’s harsh expulsion of the entire Muslim population from Jaffna in 1990.

I explore in this study a number of close comparisons and contrasts between the Tamils and the Moors in Akkaraipattu, a multiethnic agricultural settlement whose culture and social organization reflect key features of the larger Batticaloa region. For readers concerned with current events, this book provides a frame of reference for village-level politics and interethnic relations in eastern Sri Lanka, a part of the island that has now become a strategically vital zone of communal tension. As a contribution to the larger South Asian anthropological literature, my analysis refines and extends scholarly understanding of Sri Lanka’s distinctive forms of non-Brahmin caste organization and popular religious practice while also exploring the status politics of matrilineal descent and marriage. The presence of a “matrilineal zone” on the east coast of the island, extending from a cluster of Tamil villages on the shore of Koddigar Bay (Trincomalee)—possibly also including Tamil settlements to the west such as Tambalagamam—south to Pottuvil, has made this region anthropologically interesting and more resistant to harsh forms of female domestic subordination (map 5). These are embedded cultural patterns, ignored in most journalistic accounts of the Eelam conflict, that will affect the prospects for interethnic peace and economic development throughout the eastern region. To contribute to the deeper understanding of Sri Lanka’s national dilemma, I highlight the relationships between the east-coast Tamils and Moors at the village level, pointing to signs of cultural symbiosis in the past and to symptoms of political rupture in the present.

To support these arguments, I first venture an interpretation of the precolo-



**MAP 5.** The eastern coast of the island showing areas with matrilineal clan organization

nial and postcolonial history of the Batticaloa region, utilizing some previously unpublished archival sources from the Dutch and early British records. From the very beginning of my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu, I was regaled with fragmentary historical legends and repetitive snippets of oral tradition, and I soon discovered, as others have observed for the Sinhalas (Spencer 1990b; Kemper 1991), that controlling and shaping historical discourses is what modern Sri Lankan communal identities are all about. While there is always a risk of offending or reinforcing competing village or caste factions—and one scholar has advocated self-censorship for this reason (Whitaker 1999: 272–74)—my

research begins to unravel the early sources of the politically inflected temple rituals, the matrilineal property laws, and the non-Brahmin caste traditions of the Batticaloa region. At the same time, South Asian postcolonial scholarship has clearly shown how purported “ancient traditions” have been invented or redefined through the confluence of colonial policies, the interests of local elites, and the resistance of subaltern groups. One cannot minimize the impact of 400 years of Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial rule on the Tamil and Moorish society of the Batticaloa region.

#### **FIELDWORK BEFORE THE EELAM WARS, AND AFTER**

After four months of intermittently scouting locations for dissertation research along the eastern coastline, I settled in Akkaraipattu in January 1970 and conducted fieldwork there until July 1971, punctuated with trips to Colombo or Kandy every four to eight weeks. The Tamil village of Tambiluvil, six miles to the south, had already been described briefly by Nur Yalman (1967), and the town of Akkaraipattu itself allowed me the opportunity to explore both Tamil and Muslim society in a single convenient location. I rented a vacant dowry-house newly built for the infant daughter of a Muslim merchant, Mr. Abuthahir, and located precisely along the Moorish-Tamil residential interface in Division 2, and I employed a retired Tamil cook, Mr. Palani Appan, to prepare my noon meals. My fluency in Tamil, which I had studied in the classroom for scarcely more than a year, was coached by an enthusiastic cohort of young Tamil and Muslim bachelor friends, with whom I recited naughty Tamil verb conjugations and drank gallons of sweetened milk tea. With eighteen months to spend in the field, I took the opportunity not only to document kinship and caste patterns in the Akkaraipattu area but also to explore other parts of the Batticaloa region, including the western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon near Kokkadichcholai and Mandur. After a serious—and seriously embarrassing—collision with a parked bus south of Colombo early in my fieldwork, I sold my 150 cc motorbike and acquired a Toyota jeep that I and another anthropological couple, Steve and Anne Kemper, eventually drove overland to Europe in the summer of 1971.

I subsequently returned to Akkaraipattu for shorter, three- to five-month, stints of fieldwork in 1975 and 1978, the first time with my wife, Beth, and the second time with our eighteen-month-old son, Cameron. On these occasions we stayed with the extended family of Mr. Ratnam, a retired Hindu postman on the Tamil side of town. Taking my family to the field was not particularly

easy, but it enhanced my social identity as a husband and father, and the endless spectacle of the *vellaikkāraṇ* (whiteman) with his wife and toddler gave me license to ask questions about marriage and sex, health and the body, which had not been possible earlier. When matrilocal-household survey questionnaires were distributed, or when inscrutable ethnomedical songs were sung by toothless, elderly folk doctors, I would employ local male research assistants from the Tamil or Moorish communities to help me collect these data and interpret them. I seldom used a tape recorder, finding it more effective to clarify statements conversationally right on the spot rather than to puzzle over murky transcriptions of Tamil dialogue weeks or months later. I tried to record my day's findings every night, based on shorthand mnemonic scribbles in a disposable breast-pocket notebook, consolidating fragmented information into longer prose summaries. As a result, my fieldnotes (typed on a Hermes manual typewriter in foolscap carbon copy!) were more distilled than conversational, consisting of synthetic summaries of what I had pieced together rather than "live" transcriptions of actual dialogs, even though I was being pulled into highly interactive conversations and local ceremonies all the time. Apart from my portable typewriter, the one other tool I relied on was a 35 mm Pentax camera. Akkaraipattans were so fond of photographs that my camera made me a sought-after guest at puberty rites and weddings, as well as at Hindu and Muslim religious celebrations. I think many secretly hoped to see their picture in the next morning's newspaper.

Then, in the mid-1980s, the Eelam War descended on Akkaraipattu and the rest of the Batticaloa region like a deadly plague, a catastrophe for which my fieldwork had provided no premonitions, no early clues. The last place in the island I had expected to erupt in an armed insurgency became, as the decade descended into destruction, first a site of Tamil guerrilla skirmishes followed by Sri Lankan Army occupation and massacres, then a site of grisly secret Police Commando (STF) tortures and executions followed by ruthless LTTE reprisals and extortions, and finally a site of chronic communal violence and deep fear between ordinary members of the local Tamil and Moorish communities. On top of it all, the Indian Army (IPKF) occupied the region from 1987 to 1989 in an unsuccessful bid to suppress the militant groups and to establish an autonomous Northeastern Province for the Tamils and Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, a continuation of fieldwork did not seem wise under these circumstances, and besides, I assumed the conflict was going to end quickly. Instead, the war deepened, and more blood flowed as one decade gave way to the next.

Finally, in 1993, I hearkened to the example of one of my graduate students at the time, Patricia Lawrence, who was bravely conducting her own fieldwork among the widowed and dispossessed Tamil women of the Batticaloa District as the Eelam War raged around her. I resumed fieldwork, visiting Akkaraipattu and other sites in the Batticaloa region in July and August of 1993, in June 1995, and again during the summers of 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2007. Although these were relatively quiet intervals in the conflict, I was nevertheless roused from my sleeping mat on two occasions by pre-dawn house-to-house “round-ups” conducted by the Sri Lankan security forces searching, with semiautomatic weapons cocked, for members of the guerrilla forces. I witnessed economic misery and heard about the “disappearance” of loved ones and the drastic curtailment of matrilocal marriage prospects due to the absence of eligible young men. At the same time, I learned of the growing popularity of ecstatic trance mediums and Hindu firewalking vows, and I saw both the wanton destruction of religious shrines and the lavish reconsecration of temples and places of worship. I sensed the palpable culture of fear and silence in the face of terror and masked betrayal, and I discovered the source of the massive diasporic emigrations of younger-generation Sri Lankan Tamils to Colombo, to neighboring Asian countries, and to Europe and North America. I detail these and other observations and impressions in the epilogue.

The foundation for this book, however, is the fieldwork I carried out between 1970 and 1978, before the Eelam Wars had commenced, augmented and updated with information I gathered during my later visits, when there were lulls in the fighting. No one knows whether or how the Eelam conflict will ultimately transform the east-coast society of the Tamils and Moors, but whatever emerges will have to be built, in some way, on what came before. This book thus seeks to place the Batticaloa region and its dual ethnic social structure in broader anthropological perspective, to reveal some of the underlying cultural and historical factors which will ultimately influence the outcome of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict in the eastern zone, and to fulfill my pledge to my friends and acquaintances in Akkaraipattu that their distinctive matrilineal culture and social traditions would be recorded and acknowledged as part of the island’s rich sociological and historical heritage.

#### **PLAN OF THE BOOK**

In the remainder of part 1 I supply local background information necessary to frame the larger questions that have guided my research. Chapter 1 offers a



general introduction to the Batticaloa region of eastern Sri Lanka and an overview of the town of Akkaraipattu with its constituent social groups. To facilitate later comparisons, I introduce several other fieldwork locations, including Tirukkovil (not far from the LTTE's base in the jungles of Kanjikudichcharu) and Kokkadichchola (a village west of the Batticaloa Lagoon that served as an LTTE administrative center). I address in chapter 2 the history of the Batticaloa region, with special emphasis on the precolonial political institutions and the postcolonial fate of the dominant Tamil caste group, the Mukkuvars, and their historically related neighbors, the Moors. The impacts of the twelfth-century South Indian invader Kalinga Magha, both real and legendary, emerge as a central issue as the probable source of Kerala-derived Mukkuvar matrilineal politics. I also trace the origins and cultural traditions of two other high-status Tamil castes—the Velalars (a prestigious farming caste throughout the Tamil world) and the Virasaiva Kurukkals (non-Brahmin priests of the twelfth-century Lingayat sect)—and compare them with those of similar groups in Jaffna and South India.

In chapter 3 I identify, and seek to resolve, some of the classic anthropological questions posed by the matrilineal social structure of the Tamils and Muslims: what counts as a “caste,” and what is a *kudi* (matriclan)? To what extent are matrilineal descent and caste identities conceived in Akkaraipattu in terms of distinctive bodily substances or biomoral codes of conduct? Interpretations of South Asian caste and kinship—including some of the key points made by Louis Dumont, McKim Marriott, and Nur Yalman—must be revised in light of the data from Akkaraipattu, which points to indigenous Tamil concepts of law and temple politics as the source of Hindu social rankings. South Indian anthropology is also interrogated, because the matrilineal kinship patterns in the Batticaloa region are historically linked and sociologically similar, in some ways, to those of the famous matrilineal Nayers and Mappilas of Kerala. The matrilineal “Mukkuva Law,” legally voided by colonial legislation in the mid-nineteenth century, has been seamlessly transformed into today's all-encompassing matrilineal residence and dowry system, giving Tamil and Moorish women more domestic influence and economic security than in most traditional South Asian family systems. Echoing the findings of Arjun Appadurai, Carol Breckenridge, Nicholas Dirks, and others working in South India, I show that a strong emphasis on political rights expressed in the idiom of Hindu temple ritual “shares” has obsessed the dominant Tamil landed castes from the earliest colonial times up to the present. Recently, these

conservative, ritually validated temple hierarchies have been threatened by armed Tamil guerrilla factions in places like Mandur and Palugamam.

The chapters in part 3 document and analyze the major social formations of the Tamils and the Moors in Akkaraipattu, including the Tamil caste hierarchy, matrilineal clans and sublineages, Dravidian kinship and marriage patterns, the administrative organization of temples and mosques, and the local array of hereditary specialists and religious elites, both Hindu and Muslim. I show in chapter 4 how the Tamil castes are ranked by both Tamils and Muslims, and offer evidence of the role that caste continues to play in everyday life. I describe in chapter 5 the high-ranking Tamil elites of Akkaraipattu, focusing on their distinctively duopolistic pattern of marriage alliance between two prestigious matrilineal clans that underwrites a shared Mukkuvar and Velalar caste identity at the very apex of the Hindu social system. In other parts of the east coast, however, the caste rivalry between Mukkuvars and Velalars remains strong, just as Karaiyar versus Velalar caste tensions are present in Jaffna. Caste and regional loyalties have recently become important schismatic factors undermining the internal solidarity of the Tamil guerrilla movement in the Batticaloa region, as demonstrated by the breakaway Karuna faction of the LTTE in 2004. I explore in chapter 6 how the local matrilineal clans (*kudis*) operate “in action” to regulate marriage choices, to represent feuding factions, and to organize Hindu temple rituals. I detail in chapter 7 the internal organization and marriage patterns of each of the local Tamil specialist castes: Goldsmiths, Climbers, Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers. Most of these lower castes “replicate” the matrilineal organization of the high-caste Tamils to a surprising degree, suggesting a sociological template historically enforced by Mukkuvar chiefly dominance in the Batticaloa region. I explore factors promoting upward social mobility among the lowest-ranking caste, the Paraiyar Drummers, through a close comparison of two contrasting Paraiyar villages, one of which enjoys greater economic and political freedom, while the other is still strongly subjected to feudal Mukkuvar caste hegemony.

Turning to the Muslims in Akkaraipattu, I delineate in chapter 8 the role of mosques and Sufi saints in local Moorish life, including a description of rural Muslim saintly tomb-shrines that are believed to protect against marauding elephants (and nowadays also LTTE and Sri Lankan Army incursions). I also explore the role of traditional Muslim matrilineal trustees in an older system of mosque-based politics. My 2001–2005 fieldwork has confirmed that the customary matrilineal trustee boards for administering Muslim mosques and

Hindu temples are still largely functioning, having survived the intergenerational challenge of the Eelam Wars. Finally, I analyze how the Dravidian-type marriage system actually operates among the Muslims of Akkaraipattu, unexpectedly revealing evidence of greater matrilineal (or female-centered) kinship reckoning among the Muslims than among the Hindu Tamils.

In chapter 9 I document three categories of Muslim religious elites and ritual specialists: Maulana descendants of the Prophet, Bawa Sufi mystics, and Osta circumciser-barbers. Because they are endogamous and socially ranked hereditary groups, the Maulanas and the Ostras raise the “question of caste” among Akkaraipattu’s otherwise egalitarian-minded Muslims. However, the absence of an overarching Muslim caste system in Sri Lanka deprives these specialist groups of authentic caste identity in conventional (or Dumontian) anthropological terms. The Bawas, or Muslim faqirs, who induct members through an arcane ritual of entombment and rebirth, follow the ecstatic devotional traditions of the Rifa’i order of Sufism, including devotional displays of stabbing and laceration of the body with steel spikes and needles. Their self-mortifying *zikr* performances continue to attract crowds at Muslim saints’ festivals, but nowadays a number of calmer, middle-class lay Sufi orders have also been growing in popularity, seemingly in reaction to the polarization of Islamic fundamentalism.

In part 4 I direct attention back to the contemporary issues of ethnic war and communal violence in Sri Lanka. Both historically and ethnographically, the evidence I present points to a long-term pattern of shared regional culture between the Tamils and the Muslims in the eastern coastal region. With the exception of the Hindu caste system of the Tamils, both communities have quite similar traditions of agricultural subsistence, dowry-centered property relations, matrilocal marriage and households, matrilineal clan organization, and temple- or mosque-based politics. Their ideas of gender, of the body, and of the local supernatural realm are broadly similar in most respects. But like ethnically related neighbors in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and Bosnia who are also bitter but intimate enemies, the Tamils and Moors of Akkaraipattu have become locked in a narrow-minded spiral of escalating suspicion and violence that cares little for ethnographic similarities or unifying cultural traditions.

I discuss in chapter 10 the stereotypes that members of these two communities have of each other, including some of their most private, unvoiced apprehensions about diet, hygiene, and sexuality. I also address the twentieth-century record of local Tamil-Moorish riots (*kulappam*, mix-up), revealing

that, unlike the communal violence frequently reported in northern India, Hindu-Muslim religious hatred by itself has never been a significant triggering factor. Instead, the flashpoints have been incidents involving political honor and group reputation, aggravated by underlying economic motives, such as a shortage of residential property. Since the outbreak of the Eelam Wars in the 1980s, a quantum increase in the killing has occurred, and it remains to be seen whether the political schism between the Tamils and the Moors, a division aggravated at the national level by Tamil cultural chauvinism and by Muslim political opportunism, can ever be healed.

Drawing on firsthand impressions from recent fieldwork visits to the Batticaloa region, I conclude the book with an epilogue to this ethnographic project, which has spanned three decades. The experience of trying to conduct anthropological fieldwork under conditions of military curfew and communal terror has been, to say the least, radically different from my earlier research in the 1970s. The physical damage inflicted by two decades of the Eelam conflict and the coastal devastation wrought by the 2004 tsunami varies enormously from location to location, but at least it is visible to the eye. In contrast, the hidden damage inscribed on the wounded psyches and tortured bodies of many Tamils and Muslims during the ethnic and military violence is in many cases impossible to know or to comprehend. Throughout the 1990s, police checkpoints and pre-dawn military roundups were a way of life for the people of Akkaraipattu. When the subject of the LTTE or the STF was raised, people spoke with fear and extreme caution, lest their words be overheard by members of a militant faction or by the dreaded Sri Lankan security forces. Starting in 2002, the government's ceasefire agreement with the LTTE vastly improved public security and the everyday quality of life, but recent assassinations and abductions, and mounting tensions between the Sri Lankan armed forces, the LTTE, and the Karuna faction make the future of the ceasefire quite uncertain.

And yet Tamil and Moorish life goes on, in some ways more vibrantly than I would ever have dared to expect. The distinctive matrilineal patterns and ritual institutions I document in this book have not disappeared, although economic privation, displacement, and war have sometimes drastically curtailed or truncated their observance. By the turn of the millennium, however, an entire generation of Tamil and Moorish youth had grown to adulthood knowing only the grim realities of military repression and guerrilla violence. Many others are tragically dead, incarcerated in prison camps, serving in the guerrilla move-

ment, or prematurely widowed. Some of them may never be married because of a shortage of eligible partners. The more fortunate have escaped to Colombo and Chennai, to Oslo, Zurich, London, and Toronto. However, on the national level, and for the Tamils and Moors who are still potentially caught in the crossfire, the future of the entire eastern zone remains fundamentally undecided. At some point, the region's two minority communities must confront the fact that they share a common geographical territory, a regional cultural tradition, and an intertwined historical destiny that places them squarely at the center of Sri Lanka's crucible of conflict. Whether the east-coast Tamils and Muslims will ever restore their sense of regional solidarity or whether they will instead deepen their current ethnic polarization and enmity will strongly influence the chances for long-term peace throughout the entire island.

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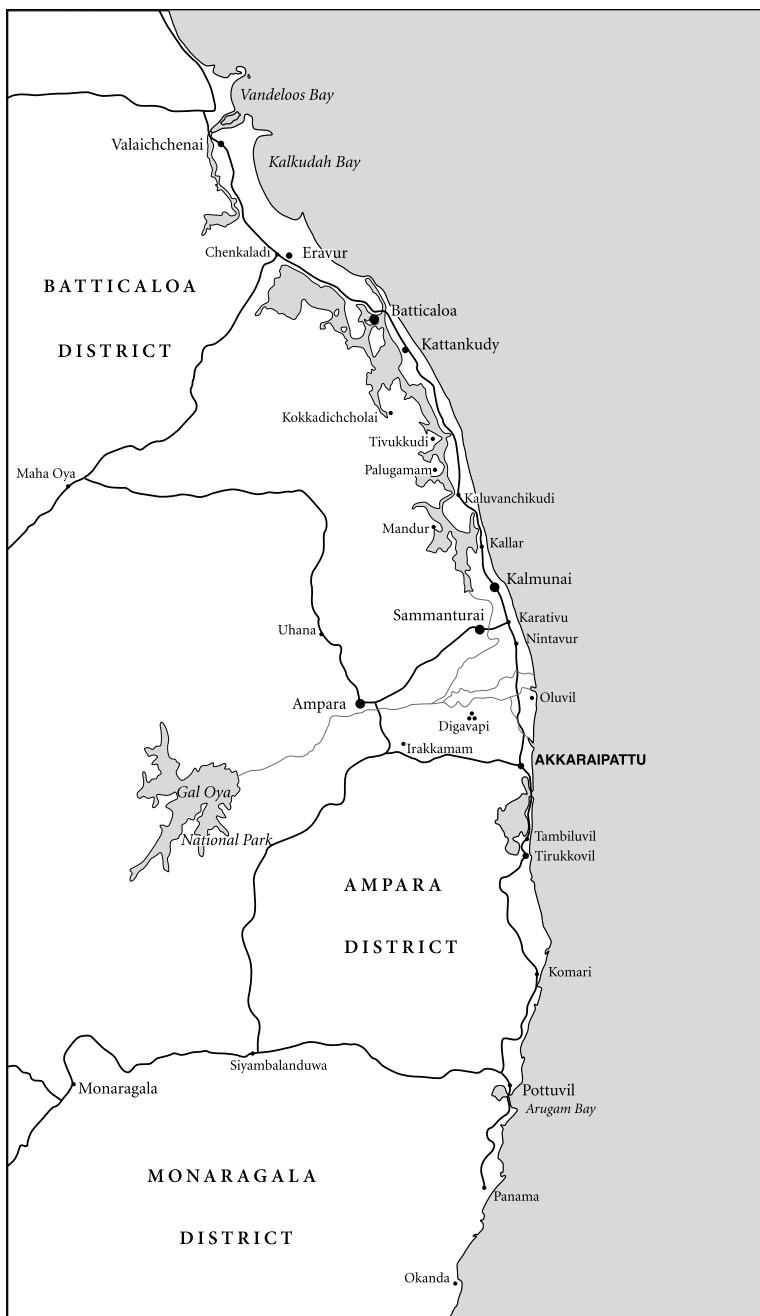
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## **THE RESEARCH SETTING**

### **THE BATTICALOA REGION**

The eastern coastal plain of Sri Lanka, extending nearly 100 miles from Valaichchenai in the north to Pottuvil in the south, is a region of broad, irrigated paddy fields, coconut plantations, and large semi-saline lagoons, interspersed in some places by rocky stretches of Dry Zone forest. The two Tamil-speaking communities in this coastal zone are Tamil (Saivite) Hindus, members of a cluster of matrilineal castes whose historical origins may date to the thirteenth century C.E. or earlier, and Sunni (Shafi'i) Muslims, known since the Portuguese era as Moors, who apparently settled and intermarried with local Tamils over many centuries. The low and well-settled parts of the coastal plain are flat and fertile, extending ten or twenty miles inland to the foot of the Bintenne hills, which until the twentieth century was a sparsely populated forest region of Sinhala swidden (*chena*) cultivators and Vedda hunters (map 6).

Since the 1950s, however, a significant Sinhala population, by now nearly one-third of the total population of the region, has been resettled on land at the foot of these hills under the Gal Oya peasant-



MAP 6. The Batticaloa region



colonization scheme, the first major postindependence hydroelectric, irrigation, and resettlement project in the island (Farmer 1957). Implementation of the Gal Oya scheme also resulted in the creation in 1960 of a new district, administered by a government agent with headquarters in the old settlement of Amparai (hereafter “Ampara,” to accord with the official Sinhalized spelling, although it will always remain Amparai in Tamil) and carved from territory which had previously formed the southern half of a much larger Batticaloa District. As a result of the Gal Oya Project and other large, internationally funded irrigation and peasant-resettlement programs, significant shifts have occurred in the proportions of Tamils, Moors, and Sinhals living throughout the Eastern Province.

Although the Tamils and Moors live in a checkerboard pattern of discontinuous villages and interspersed enclaves, the ethnic distribution of Tamil speakers throughout the Batticaloa region as a whole is nevertheless fairly balanced: 57 percent Tamils, 43 percent Moors (Manogaran 1987: 142). However, when the influx of government-sponsored Sinhala settlers is included, the ethnic picture becomes much more complex. In 1911 the area encompassed by today’s Ampara District, where Akkaraipattu is located, was populated by 7 percent Sinhals, 37 percent Tamils, and 55 percent Moors. By 1981 the proportions had been significantly altered to 38 percent Sinhals, 20 percent Tamils, and 41.5 percent Moors (Manogaran 1994: 112). Unless otherwise noted, “the Batticaloa region” should therefore be understood to refer to the Tamil-speaking coastal zones of the present-day Batticaloa and Ampara districts, and not to the recently colonized Sinhala-speaking settlements farther inland, which have been identified as part of a long-term government effort to entrench a large Sinhala Buddhist population in the northern and eastern Dry Zone, including Trincomalee District (Manogaran 1987, 1994; Peebles 1990; Kemper 1991). While many poor Tamils and Moors in Akkaraipattu have benefited enormously from irrigation technology and land redistribution under the Gal Oya Project, the larger political implications and ethnic agendas of such internationally funded resettlement schemes have prompted one author to label them quite candidly as “foreign aid for conflict development” (Mallick 1998: chap. 6).

### **Ecology, Culture, and Settlement Patterns**

In most places along the east coast, particularly at sunset, one can discern the irregular outline of the Bintenne hills, as well as the smoother profiles of scat-

tered dome-shaped monoliths that rise unexpectedly from the coastal plain. This region has a distinct geographical and cultural identity in the minds of its Tamil-speaking inhabitants. They refer to it as *Maṭṭakkaḷappu* (“smooth lagoon,” or according to some etymologists, “muddy lagoon”) which was rendered as “Batticaloa” by Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial writers whose linguistic blunders were eventually codified as standard usage. Part of the self-conscious identity of the region is its distinctive Tamil dialect, in which colloquial pronunciation corresponds with the written form of the language to a greater extent than in Jaffna or in Tamilnadu, and in which a number of lexical fossils have been preserved. The Batticaloa form of speech is considered one of the most marginal dialects of the language, but it has also developed a few striking innovations (Zvelebil 1966: 125). (Because of this, I find that my Batticaloa pronunciation and vocabulary makes me stand out from Tamil speakers elsewhere, especially in South India, where my accent sounds quaintly literary.)

A system of semisalinal lagoons, interspersed with fertile paddy fields, is basic to the ecology of the region. As the natural drainage from the Bintenne hills flows eastward toward the Bay of Bengal, it is impounded both by small-scale irrigation works as well as by the modern Gal Oya reservoir (Senanayake Samudra) near Ampara and the newer Maduru Oya reservoir farther north. Shallow, rain-fed tanks have also been integral to the local irrigation system in many areas. Eventually, most of the water flows into one of the major lagoons, where it is trapped by sandbars thrown up by natural wave action at one or more natural outlets to the sea. At some point during the northeast monsoon (November–February), the level of the fresh water in the lagoons rises and cuts through a sandbar to the sea, allowing the water levels to equalize. With the sandbar open, seawater enters the estuary before the action of the waves eventually closes the bar. In this semisalinal environment, several varieties of small fish as well as prawns flourish. The lagoons are a rather dependable source of food in hard times, as well as a means of bulk transport by *vallam* sailboats within the region.<sup>1</sup>

The environment appeared idyllic in the accounts of the earliest British visitors to the east coast. Rev. James Cordiner’s remarks about Batticaloa in the early 1800s offer a specimen of this naïve pastoral genre: “The native inhabitants of this place are uncommonly obliging. . . . They fish to so much advantage in the smooth frith that they never think of venturing into the open sea. Tranquillity, plenty, and contentment reign among them; and they feel no desire to leave the spot where they were born” (Cordiner 1807, 2:260). Cordiner

also noted the huge size of men's earrings and recorded the claim (still heard today) that Tamils on the east coast of Sri Lanka spoke the language better than it was spoken in South India. More realistic, however, was the severity of the smallpox epidemics of that period, which seem to have had devastating effects on the local population (Toussaint 1933: 3). In fact, a quick glance at S. O. Canagaratnam's *Monograph of the Batticaloa District* (1921) reveals the dates of numerous floods, cyclones, famines, and epidemics that devastated the region in the nineteenth century and early twentieth. In 1878 there was a flood that "rolled away elephants," and in 1907 "the village of Karungkodditivu Akkaraipattu [was] utterly wrecked" (Canagaratnam 1921: 43–47). I started fieldwork in Akkaraipattu in January 1970 during a seasonal inundation that people assured me was nothing in comparison to the flood of 1957. In November 1978 a further disaster struck the region: a tropical cyclone of epochal severity that leveled vast stretches of coconut trees and destroyed innumerable houses (Vitharana 1990). However, the scope and impact of the tsunami disaster of 26 December 2004 far exceeded any catastrophe in the region's recorded history. At least 13,000 people died in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts, accounting for 43 percent of Sri Lanka's entire death toll from the tsunami.

As a final note on (pre-tsunami) ecology, I cannot ignore the attraction for which Batticaloa is popularly known throughout Sri Lanka: the legendary "singing fish" (or perhaps molluscs) said to be the source of a mysterious humming noise, likened to that of a jews'-harp or a cello string, which emanates from the depths of the Batticaloa Lagoon on still nights (Kadramer 1934: 22). The English politician and traveler James Emerson Tennent in 1848 compared it to the "the gentle thrills of a musical chord . . . the sweetest treble mingling with the lowest bass" (Tennent 1859, 2:469), but an English boat operator later testified that "the weirdness of it almost placed sleep out of the question" (Lewis 1923a: 345). More ominously, Tennent also noted "the numbers and prodigious size" of the crocodiles that infested the local waters (Tennent 1859, 2:466). Regardless, this ichthyological curiosity has moved local poets to eulogize Batticaloa as *mīṇ pāṭum tēṇ nāṭu*, or "honey land of singing fish." In fact, the singing fish, with its tail fins curved to form a lyre or harp, has now become a popular logotype for Batticaloa that appears in media graphics and in civic architecture.

The largest lagoon in the region empties into the Bay of Bengal only a mile from Batticaloa town, site of a seventeenth-century Dutch fort. This town is still viewed as the regional capital, not only because of its schools, hospitals, and other public institutions, but because of the historical role it played, prior

to the rise of Ampara, as the center of administration for the entire region. In the 1970s the *kachcheri*, or administrative headquarters, of the Batticaloa District was still housed within the stone walls of the Dutch fort. Nowadays, however, the towns of Kalmunai and Ampara, with their strong Muslim and Sinhala ethnic identities, increasingly rival Batticaloa as centers of population, commerce, and political influence. The population of the region is concentrated in a string of dense semiurban coastal villages and towns, many of which are located along the sandy isthmus separating the lagoons from the Bay of Bengal. Farther inland, on the western or “sun-setting shore” (*paṭuvāṇ karai*) of the Batticaloa Lagoon, are found historic but more isolated agricultural villages. The denser coastal settlements are inhabited by both Tamils and Moors, while the smaller inland hamlets are predominately Tamil. Farther inland still, Tamil rice fields give way to newer Sinhala rice fields along an insecure ethnic frontier delineated by the Gal Oya resettlement project.

The cardinal factor to keep in mind is that the Tamils and the Moors, although living in close proximity to each other, are invariably segregated into ethnically homogeneous villages and residential neighborhoods. Driving along the main coastal road south from Batticaloa, one will first pass through a dense Tamil settlement, then a Muslim one, followed by another Tamil one, sometimes separated by no more than a sandy lane. In some areas, as from Manmunai to Kallar, Tamil villages predominate, while farther south, between Kalmunai and Akkaraipattu, Muslim communities are more common. In a few number of cases, of which the town of Akkaraipattu itself is an example, village identity and local governmental authority have, until recently, been shared by the Tamils and the Moors, and the principle of residential segregation is expressed in ethnically homogeneous headman’s divisions that bisect the town itself.

In certain locations gill-net fishing from boats and shore-based beach-seine fishing are major activities for Muslims and for Karaiyar caste Tamils, as well as for seasonally migrant Sinhalas and Tamils from the west coast near Chilaw (Stirrat 1988). In a few settlements, such as the Moorish enclave of Kattankudy, there is some specialization in handloom textiles, wholesale trading, and, it is alleged, smuggling. However, the fundamental economic activity for most people throughout the Batticaloa region is irrigated rice cultivation. Hybrid rice varieties requiring chemical fertilizers and pesticides are widely utilized, and two crops per year are possible on the best land. In the large-level paddy fields characteristic of the region, draft animals (bullocks and water buffaloes) have largely been displaced in the cultivation cycle by tractors. In fact, the

wheel bearings on tractors often fail because they are driven all night in a tight circle, just as water buffaloes were formerly, to thresh the rice. The crop is seeded by hand, not transplanted, with men performing most of the agricultural tasks, except for weeding, which is done by contract brigades of poor women, and postharvest winnowing and gleaning, which may employ both women and children. Men generally harvest the rice by hand, but the use of new Indian-made harvesting combines is spreading rapidly. It is common for those engaged in rice cultivation to commute daily up to five to ten miles by bicycle, bullock cart, or bus from their semiurban neighborhoods along the coast to their rice fields located inland. As Bryce Ryan correctly observed a half century ago, the typical Batticaloa coastal settlement is in reality a “peasant town . . . a city of farmers” (1950: 10–12).

The population of these “peasant towns” is quite substantial when contrasted with the smaller villages studied by anthropologists in the northern Dry Zone (Leach 1961), the Kandyan highlands (Yalman 1967; Robinson 1975), or the southern Sabaragamuva foothills (Obeyesekere 1967). Organized settlements along the east coast frequently have populations of 15,000 to 35,000 people, often closely packed. Kattankudy, just south of Batticaloa town, is said to have one of the highest population densities of any settlement in the island. Whether the inhabitants are primarily Tamil or Moorish, these coastal towns tend to be laid out in a similar grid pattern of sandy lanes, walled-in by formidable barbed-wire, cadjan thatch, corrugated metal fences, or masonry walls erected for the privacy of each household compound. In the inland settlements to the west of the lagoons, Tamil villages are much smaller and less “urban,” but fenced compounds are still the norm, distinguishing them from the typically more open compounds in Sinhala villages. Ethnic communities in both areas are identifiable by neighborhood Hindu temples or Muslim mosques, and also in some places, Christian churches.

#### AKKARAI Pattu TOWN

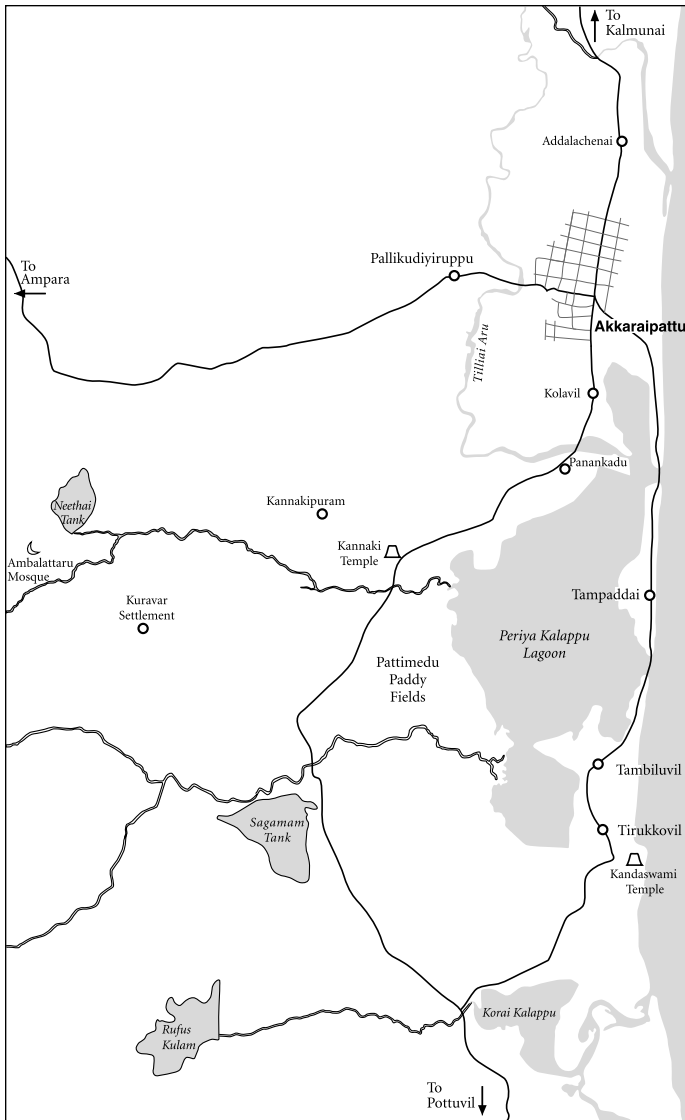
The presence of both Tamils and Muslims governed under a single village council, although no longer the case today, was one of the original attractions of Akkaraipattu as a fieldwork site. In this respect the town was not typical of most settlements in the Batticaloa region, but it offered the possibility of convenient interactions with Tamils and Moors, as well as the opportunity to study interethnic relations within a shared political arena. The name Akkaraipattu means literally “the district on the other shore,” referring to the south bank of the Kaliyodai Aru River, which forms the boundary of the adminis-

trative subdistrict, about five miles north of town. While Akkaraipattu is the major center of population in the subdistrict, there are also significant Moorish populations just to the north in Addalachchenai and solid Tamil populations to the south in Kolavil, Panankadu, Tampaddai, Tambiluvil, and Tirukkovil (map 7). The term *pattu* (*parru*) identifies the area as one of the pre-modern political chieftaincies of the Batticaloa region (along with Manmunai Pattu, Eruvil Pattu, Karavaku Pattu, and others), although in this century the name Akkaraipattu has come to be applied specifically to the major town in the subdistrict as well.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reports and censuses, the village of Akkaraipattu is referred to by its original name, Karunkodittivu, or “black vine island,” although the identity and significance of the “black vine” is no longer known to residents.<sup>2</sup> It is generally assumed that the settlement has been inhabited by both Tamils and Moors for the greater part of its existence, and there is some evidence for this dating back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century (Saleem 1990). The earliest reference that resembles in any way a census of the settlement is that of a British traveler from Tangalle to Batticaloa, William Orr, who made the following terse notation on the 15th day of September 1800: “At five P.M. we reached Karickkoddeedeevu, a large village containing upwards of one hundred houses, and three hundred inhabitants, the one half of them Lubbies, the other Hindoos” (quoted in Cordiner 1807, 2:125).<sup>3</sup>

Traveling in the opposite direction a year later, a military surgeon named Thomas Anthony Reeder was surprisingly effusive. On 12 July 1801, he wrote,

At six o'clock in the morning, the sun just beginning to appear, I left Wammimoodo, the country between which and Karengkottotivu is charming beyond description. It reminded me of the Capino at Florence, only that in place of pheasants, which are very numerous there, we have here peacocks. . . . The villages are neat and clean and the people seem comfortable and happy: they mentioned never having seen a white man pass this road before. . . . The head man of the place came out to meet me with tom toms, &c. &c., and white calico was spread for me to walk upon for about fifty yards to the rest house, which was completely lined with cloth of a similar nature. Good fowls, milk, fruit, &c. were furnished me, and I enjoyed a pleasant repast. I was treated in the same hospitable manner through the whole of the Batticaloe district, and I shall ever hold these innocent people in the most friendly remembrance. (quoted in Cordiner 1807, 2:147)



MAP 7. Akkaraipattu vicinity

The lagoon nearest to Akkaraipattu is the Periya Kalappu (big lagoon) located only a half mile south of town. It does not connect, however, to the enormous Batticaloa Lagoon system farther north, and this may have had some historical consequences in terms of less frequent communication with the towns and villages north of Kalmunai. However, all the major coastal settlements in the region, including Akkaraipattu, lie astride one of the major north-south pilgrimage routes to Kataragama, the popular Hindu-Buddhist

shrine in the extreme southernmost part of Sri Lanka that has received so much anthropological attention (Wirtz 1966; Yalman 1966; Pfaffenberger 1979; Obeyesekere 1977, 1978, 1981; Harrigan 1998). Until relatively recently, when improved rail and bus linkages, not to mention LTTE guerrilla and Sri Lankan Army ambushes, rendered the traditional pedestrian approaches to Katarama less appealing, Tamil pilgrims from as far north as Jaffna would walk south along the east coast road, stopping overnight at temples and towns, including Akkaraipattu.<sup>4</sup> The coast road is certainly the major trade and communication channel today; aside from fishermen and members of the LTTE's naval wing, the Sea Tigers, few people in Akkaraipattu would dream of traveling on the open sea out of less than dire necessity.

Such attitudes would be different if Akkaraipattu were a fishing center. Some major fishing and beach-seine operations are conducted not far away, notably at Kallar, Sainthamaruthu, and Kalmunaikudy, but according to residents, Akkaraipattu has never had a fishing industry of much size. While I was there, I observed no more than five or six seagoing, sail-powered outriggers operating from the beaches south of town at Tampaddai and Sinnamuhattuvaram, all of them owned by, and with few exceptions manned by, Muslims from Akkaraipattu.

Apart from such small-scale fishing, the ocean seems surprisingly marginal to the economic and recreational activities of people in Akkaraipattu. In the main residential parts of Akkaraipattu itself, the high fences and thick stands of coconut trees block out any awareness that the Bay of Bengal is only a half mile away. Coconut plantations border the sea in some places, but other parts of the beach, particularly near the Tamil cemetery, are regarded as wilderness (*kāṭu*, jungle), a zone of pollution and danger. Although the beaches would strike a Western eye as exceptionally beautiful, virtually no one swims or bathes there except during a Hindu *tīrtam* (icon immersion) ceremony. I was once jokingly told by an Australian visitor in nearby Tambiluvil that when she prepared for her afternoon swim, a crowd would regularly gather to watch her drown. In the 1970s a small colony of Tamil Limeburners (Kadaiyar) had settled along the seashore at the fortieth milepost, just south of town, and were utilizing seashells and coral to produce quicklime. Both they and a colony of Portuguese Burgher families who had settled near the Kadaiyars at the fortieth milepost were very badly hit by the tsunami. Other parts of Akkaraipattu were largely spared from the wave damage, unlike settlements to the north and to the south that were built closer to the shore. The 26 December 2004 disaster





**FIGURE 1.** View of Panankadu, looking south from Akkaraipattu, showing the Tillai Aru River as it joins the Periyakalappu Lagoon (1970).

has only recently made people aware that Aceh, at the northern tip of Sumatra, is the nearest landfall, one thousand miles due east.

Instead of a focus on the sea, there is a focus on the inland paddy fields that spread to the north, west, and south of town. Traffic in these directions is heavy and constant, as Tamil and Moorish cultivators commute between their homes in town and their fields five to ten miles away. I did not gather a detailed census of landholdings, but my household surveys in selected Moorish and Tamil headmans' divisions, as well as the informal comments of local acquaintances, tended to confirm my impression that all but the very poorest residents possess some amount of land, either as titleholders, government land permit-holders (from the Gal Oya Development Authority), or as regular tenants. Agricultural land is a prime constituent of dowry payments here, so even men in urban or professional occupations are likely to acquire some interest in land when they marry local women. This, together with the prestige value of possessing land, meant that even schoolteachers, civil servants, and other professionals were eager to mention their (often modest) paddy lands to me.

While there are certainly some wealthy landowners in Akkaraipattu, they do not dominate the agricultural system in the neo-zamindari style alleged by my friends to exist in Muslim towns such as Nintavur and Sammanturai. The

Gal Oya irrigation project, begun in the early 1950s and still under construction when I first visited Akkaraipattu twenty years later, has been significant in reducing aggregate landlessness in Akkaraipattu, according to local residents. However, the project has been a mixed blessing, for while it has transformed great areas of former Dry Zone jungle into irrigated paddy land for immigrant Sinhala peasants and for some landless Tamil and Moorish cultivators as well, chronic flooding from excess run-off water has permanently removed some of the oldest and most fertile paddy lands near Akkaraipattu from cultivation altogether. The established Tamil and Moorish farmers in these formerly productive low-lying areas have paid a price for the implementation of the new peasant-colonization projects further upstream.

### Layout of the Town

From the village of three hundred inhabitants, “the one half of them Lubbies and the other Hindoos,” as described by William Orr in 1800, the settlement of Akkaraipattu had developed into a major town with a population of 57,415 by 2001, the date of the most recent census (table 1). During the nineteenth century the town’s population doubled every fifty years, but in the twentieth century it tripled over the same interval.<sup>5</sup> The census of 1911, whose compiler, E. B. Denham, averred it was more reliable for religious affiliation than for “race” (Denham 1912: 224), provides the earliest enumeration of Akkaraipattu residents by ethnic group: 63 percent Muslims (i.e., Moors), 35 percent Hindus (i.e., Tamils), 1.7 percent Christians (i.e., Tamils and Sinhalese), and .3 percent Buddhists (i.e., Sinhalese). The census of 1963 shows a slight widening of the ethnic margins a half century later: of the total population of the town, 66 percent were Muslims, 30 percent Hindus, 2.7 percent Christians, and 1.3 percent Buddhists.

Akkaraipattu is divided into nine wards or headman’s divisions (*kuricci*), each designated by a number (e.g., Division 7) and each under the jurisdiction of a resident headman called a Grama Sevaka (recently changed to Grama Niladhari), who acts as the lowest-level representative of the central government. During the period of my earlier research, these headmen reported to the Local Divisional Revenue Officer (now termed an Assistant Government Agent, and who under the colonial regime would have been called the Vanniah) in charge of the Akkaraipattu subdistrict. In the 1970s the town as a whole was also organized under a unified village council, with Tamil and Moorish representatives elected from each of their respective divisions, but

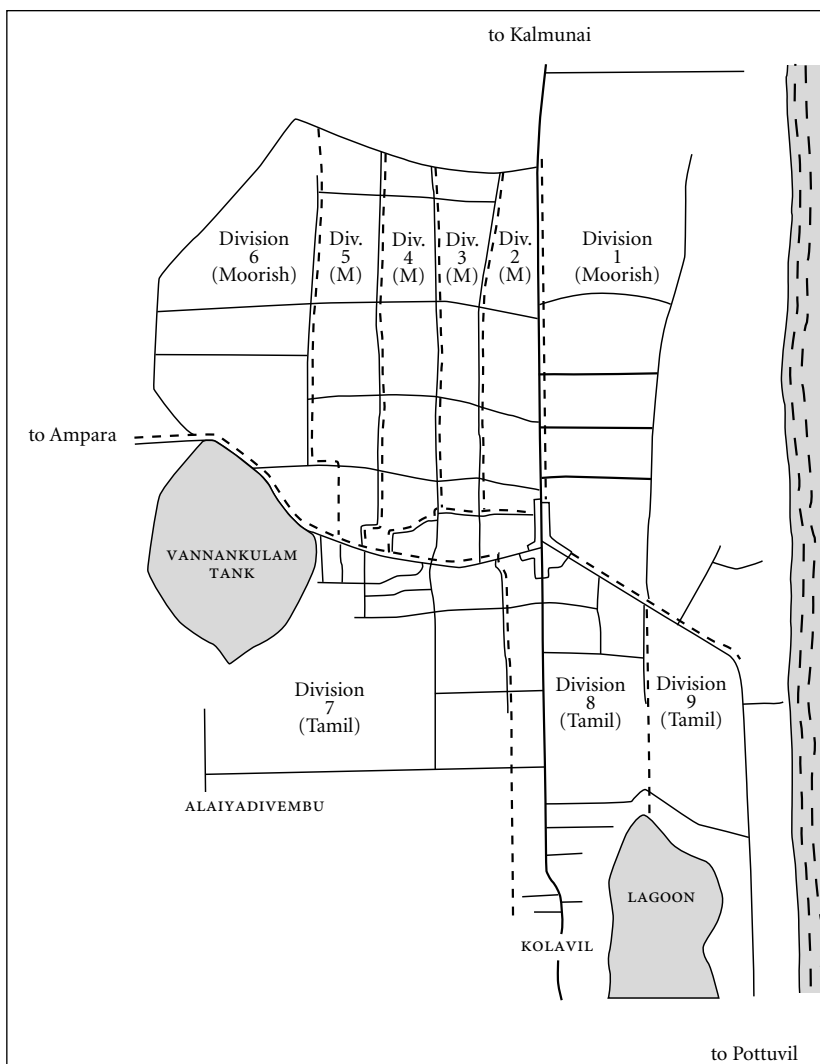
TABLE 1. Population of Akkaraipattu, 2001

<b>Total Population</b>	57,415		
<b>By Ethnicity</b>		<b>By Religion</b>	
Moors	33,790	Muslims	33,788
Sri Lankan Tamils	22,834	Hindus	20,968
Estate Tamils	12	Buddhists	577
Sinhalese	590	Catholics	1,613
Burghers	184	Other Christians	469
Other	5	Other	0
<b>By Gender</b>		<b>By Age</b>	
Males	29,469	Under 18	21,707
Females	27,946	18 and over	35,708

Source: *Census of Population and Housing, Sri Lanka, 2001: Population and Housing Data, Ampara District: Results from Sample Tabulations* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, May 2003), p. 6, table 1.

this unitary set-up no longer operates, a casualty of increased Tamil vs. Muslim ethnic hostility.<sup>6</sup> The divisional or ward organization is not just a bureaucratic structure; it serves also as a basic cognitive map of the town, a system of spatial reference by which the residents of Akkaraipattu give directions and describe locations (e.g., “He lives in 3d Division, just off Fiscal Road”). Tamils and Moors inhabit totally separate divisions, with the Tamils concentrated in three divisions on the south side of town and the Moors in six divisions on the north side (map 8). Because different castes are found within each of the three Tamil headman’s divisions, and the highest castes are represented to varying degrees within all of them, the strict caste-homogeneity of residential wards reported in Jaffna (Banks 1960) is not attained in Akkaraipattu. However, members of the lower Tamil castes do tend to be concentrated in specific divisions (e.g., Vannar Washermen in Division 7, Sandar Climbers in Division 8). The Moors, who have very little caste-like stratification, are much more homogeneously distributed in their divisions.

The boundaries between the headman’s divisions follow the main north-south lanes in most places, while the two major east-west roads bifurcate the entire settlement into a northern Muslim sector and a southern Tamil sector. There is only one neighborhood, in Division 8 near the post office and the Catholic church, where any Tamils live north of the Ampara Road; everywhere else the Moorish occupation of the north side of town is complete. The north-south boundary lines between the headman’s divisions having been decided long ago, the outward expansion of the town over the years has resulted in in-



MAP 8. Divisions and settlement areas of Akkaraipattu

creasingly elongated divisions, especially on the Moorish side. With residential pressure now verging on prime paddy land to the north, Moorish neighborhoods are expanding to the east and the west, in Divisions 1 and 6 respectively, which are now the most heavily populated of all the Moorish divisions.

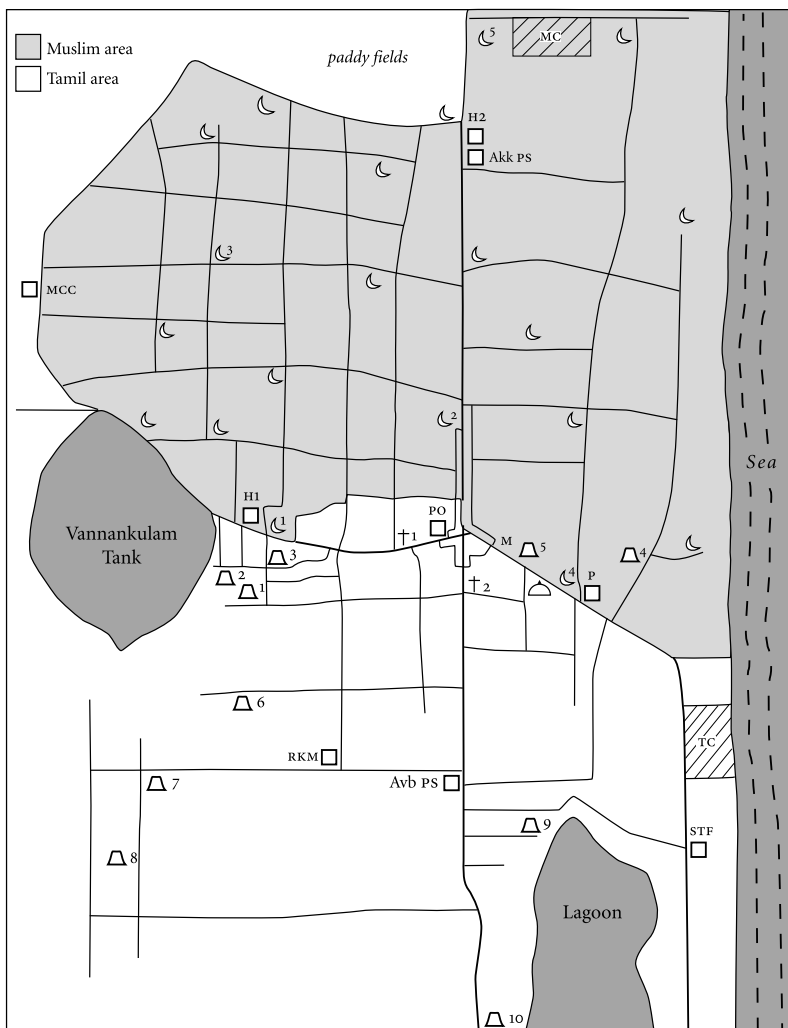
Four major roads intersect at the center of town, where—until bomb explosions in the late 1980s abruptly altered the urban map—one would have found the bus stand, the public market, and some of the larger textile and



**FIGURE 2.** The main street of Akkaraipattu, leading north toward Kalmunai, lined with prosperous Muslim shops (1993).

dry-goods merchants (map 9). There is no single administrative or civic center: the local government offices and the post office are widely separated, and the former government hospital on the Pottuvil Road—commandeered as an STF commando base in the 1980s—has been replaced by Tamil and Muslim hospitals that are on opposite sides of town. Beyond the central junction, the remaining shops and businesses are spread out along the four major roads, especially the road north toward Kalmunai on the Muslim side of town, which has become the main commercial strip. On this noisy thoroughfare, Muslim tractor dealerships, tea shops, medical practitioners' offices and dispensaries, textile and tailoring shops, video-rental stores, and the like are scattered unpredictably. Tamil establishments are found only bordering Tamil residential neighborhoods south of the central junction on the Sagamam Road. In the 1970s a few Low-Country Sinhalese businesses were located near the central junction and east of the Buddhist *vihara* (temple) on the Pottuvil Road, but most are gone now, displaced by the Eelam Wars.

The social as well as commercial function of the four main roads is demonstrated each day in the late afternoon (*piṇ nēram*, the afterward time), when throngs of male strollers and cyclists gravitate toward this area to meet friends, relax in the tea shops, and patronize the businesses that have reopened after the daily afternoon siesta. These roads, together with the bus stand and the



**KEY**

**△ Hindu Kovils**

1. Original High Caste Pillaiyar temple
2. Washerman Caste Periyatambiran temple
3. Smith Caste Bhadrakali temple (new location)
3. Smith Caste Bhadrakali temple (destroyed in 1990)
5. Sandar Caste Pillaiyar temple
6. High Caste Kali temple (new)
7. High Caste Pillaiyar temple (new)
8. High Caste Murugan temple (new)
9. Drummer Caste Mariyamman and Pillaiyar temples
10. High Caste Pillaiyar temple (Kolavil South)

**† Churches**

1. Roman Catholic
2. Methodist

**△ Buddhist Vihara**

**☾ Muslim Mosques**

1. Jumma Grand Mosque (*Periyappalli*)
  2. Jumma Town Mosque (*Sinnappalli*)
  3. Jumma New Mosque (*Putuppalli*)
  4. Hallaj Mosque and Ziyaram
  5. Takkiyanagar Ziyaram
- ☾ Neighborhood mosques and taikkiyas

**□ Other Sites**

- Akk PS Akkaraipattu Pradeshiya Sabha (Muslim)
- Avb PS Alaiyadivembu Pradeshiya Sabha (Tamil)
- H1 Government Hospital (Tamil)
- H2 Government Hospital (Muslim)
- M Public Market
- MC Muslim Cemetery
- MCC Muslim Central College
- P Police Station
- PO Post Office
- RKM Ramakrishna Mission High School
- STF Special Task Force (Police commando headquarters)
- TC Tamil Cemetery (Hindu and Christian)

**MAP 9. Akkaraipattu town**

marketplace, are seen as the most “public” places in Akkaraipattu. Here is where people are most pleased (or most worried) about being seen; where women observe the greatest modesty (or even better, total avoidance); and where the dangers and temptations of the material world are believed to be closest at hand. It took some effort for me to grasp this emic “urban” view of the market and the main road, for, as a Western city-dweller, I found all parts of Akkaraipattu to be agrarian and village-like in character.

In contrast to the glaring sun and dusty atmosphere of the market and main roads, the shady lanes and cross-streets in the residential areas of town seem garden-like and secluded. The oldest and most densely built-up neighborhoods resemble a green, humid labyrinth, with coconut and areca palms, mango trees, bananas, and flowering red hibiscus surmounting the fences on both sides of the lane. With the horizon blocked in two directions, the eye is drawn to the intersections, where children and the idle loiter to talk and to closely observe the movement of people, bicycles, bullock carts, and tractors. Some of these intersections have informal names, especially where tailoring shops or tiny “small change” convenience boutiques (*cilarai kaṭai*) have opened.

In all residential neighborhoods of Akkaraipattu the conceptual unit of land is the compound (*vaḷavu*), which is, technically, a lot corresponding to traditional dimensions, but which loosely refers to any rectangular piece of land on which a house is constructed. With the increasing scarcity of residential building sites, many houses now occupy “half-” or even “quarter-” sized compounds. Every compound is demarcated by a stout fence or wall at its periphery, the more impenetrable and opaque the better. Houses are constructed of plastered brick with prestigious (but noticeably hotter) tile roofs among all but the poorest families, who must settle for a couple of rooms of wattle and daub with cooler palm-frond (*cadjan*) thatch roofs and perhaps an open verandah.

There are few municipal services in Akkaraipattu aside from electrical connections and some street lamps, the maintenance of roads and lanes, and the duties rendered by a few Indian Tamil sweepers of the Cakkiliyan caste who remove garbage from public places and empty a small number of private bucket latrines in the market area. Households are otherwise self-sufficient, most of them having a private well, and a great many also having a private water-seal latrine and septic tank in the compound. Potable ground water is found at shallow depths in the sandy soil, so the digging of a private well is the first investment a householder will make.

## CASTES AND ETHNIC COMMUNITIES: AN OVERVIEW

The Tamils and the Moors together constitute over 97 percent of the population of Akkaraipattu. The relationship between these two major ethnic groups has been historically close but unequal, and their intermittent conflict, both in the arena of electoral politics and in episodic communal rioting, is testimony to the deep distrust and fear which separates them today. Demographically, politically, and economically the Moors now have the strongest position in Akkaraipattu, but the Tamils, whose political and cultural world also encompasses Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil and several other smaller Tamil settlements to the south of town, seem once to have exerted a much stronger influence in local affairs. It is unlikely that anthropologists will ever recover much of the history of the early Tamil-Moorish encounter, but the circumstantial evidence today strongly suggests that Moors and Tamils have intermarried in the past, resulting in a bundle of shared kinship and family patterns including Dravidian kinship terminology, bilateral cross-cousin marriage, exogamous matrilineal clans and clan-based political offices, matri-uxorilocal residence, and pre-mortem transfer of most wealth and real property to daughters via dowry. While some of these kinship patterns vary locally, there is a common matrilineal household and dowry system that is shared by virtually *all* the ethnic groups and castes in Akkaraipattu and throughout the Batticaloa region.

### The Shared Pattern: Matrilocal Households and Dowry

The culturally preferred marriage pattern for everyone—Tamils and Moors, high castes and low—is for the daughters to stay put, the sons to marry out, and the parents and unmarried children to periodically shift domicile. Typically, it is the mother's dowry-house that becomes her eldest daughter's dowry-house, unless there is a demand by the prospective groom for something newer or fancier. It is typical for a daughter's dowry to include a house and paddy lands as well as household furnishings, vehicles, clothing, jewelry, and cash. In other words, virtually every form of wealth and property, including fixed assets, is transferred as dowry, which functions, in effect, as a type of pre-mortem matrilineal inheritance—but transferred to daughters only. To avoid any implication that dowry payments are part of Islamic marriage, Muslims in Akkaraipattu often register houses and land as a direct gift to their daughters well in advance of the wedding. Tamils generally prefer to file an official dowry deed transferring joint undivided ownership to the daughter and son-in-law



at the time of the marriage, although it is not unusual for parents to postpone legal transfer of the dowry assets until after the son-in-law has fully proven his character and reliability. Dowry, of course, has become a widespread and inflationary practice throughout all of South Asia, and one with quite deadly repercussions for some undercapitalized modern brides (Srinivas 1989; Oldenburg 2002), but typically dowry does not infringe on the rights of sons to inherit land and immovable property. In Batticaloa, however, practically all of the family property—including paddy lands—is transferred to daughters in the form of dowry (*cītaṇam*) at the time of marriage, leaving very little wealth for sons or daughters to inherit when their parents die.

Inheritance, when it occurs among the Tamils, conforms to Sri Lanka's modified Roman-Dutch legal system, and inheritance among the Moors follows a combination of Sri Lankan statute law and Islamic personal law in the Shafi'i legal tradition. Normally, however, sons acquire access to property through their wives and wives' parents, with whom they live matrilocally during the early years of their marriage. As grandchildren are born and a steady income is earned from the wife's paddy fields, the daughter and son-in-law gradually establish their own independent household in the wife's dowry-house. When the wife's younger sister is ready for marriage, her parents construct a new dowry-house nearby—immediately next door if possible—into which they move along with all their remaining unmarried children, and the entire matrilineal marriage and dowry-house process is repeated.<sup>7</sup> In the end, every daughter must be given her own dowry-house, although in old age the parents will typically share a house with one of their younger married daughters.

In the larger context of female property and inheritance systems in South Asia, this Batticaloa regional dowry system appears fairly radical and profeminist (cf., Agarwal 1994)—although it does require women to get married in order to receive their parents' property.<sup>8</sup> Both Tamil and Moorish families seem to favor the de facto clustering of sisters' houses within a reasonably small neighborhood radius if possible, and the entire domestic set-up is compatible with, although not dictated by, the formal system of matrilineal clans (*kudis*) that is found among most of the people of Akkaraipattu.

## Tamils

There are twelve major Tamil castes in the Batticaloa region, and at least eleven others fragmentarily represented there.<sup>9</sup> Unlike in British India, where castes were enumerated and ethnographically reified in the official census (Dirks



FIGURE 3. Tamil grandparents in Akkaraipattu Division 7 with their matrilocally married daughters and grandchildren who live nearby (1978).

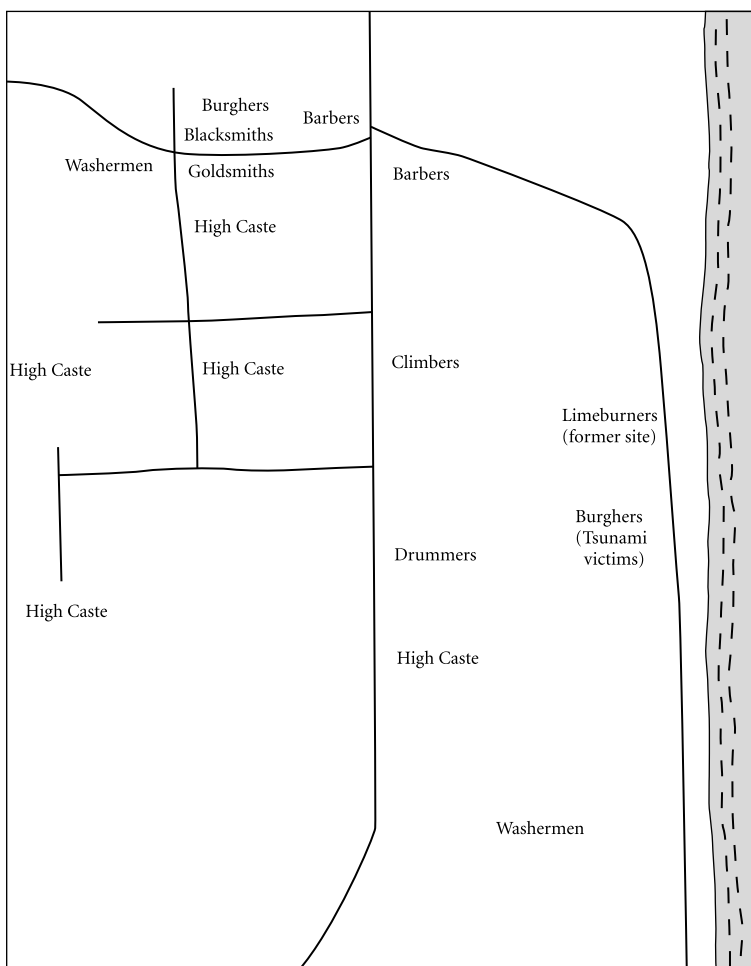
2001), the British regime in Ceylon considered “race” rather than caste to be the intrinsic foundation of the colonial society (Rogers 1993, 1995). As a result, scholars do not have quantitative data on the demographic strength of these Tamil castes now or in the past, although it is obvious that the major cultivating castes (Mukkuvar and Velalar) are numerically predominant.<sup>10</sup> The Mukkuvars and Velalars, together with a small priestly group of Virasaiva Kurukkals, constitute the highest stratum of Akkaraipattu Tamil society. All of the Hindu castes are divided into a set of named exogamous matrilineal clans, or kudis (*kuṭi*), to which, in many instances, are attached distinctive political or religious offices, status privileges, and honorific titles. The office of the headman of each caste is usually linked to a leading matrilineal clan within the local caste population. Hindu temples are owned and managed by trustees (*vannakkar* or *vannakku*) representing influential matrilineal clans from particular castes in each locality. In some instances, the temple Vannakkars exclusively represent a single caste that controls the shrine, but in other temples the board of Vannakkars may include members of several different castes who jointly manage the temple as a shared community institution.

In Akkaraipattu there are eight principal castes that possess a customary “share” (*paṅku*) of rights and duties in the local caste system dramatized in temple ritual: *Mukkuvar* (or *Murkukar*) Cultivators, *Vēḷāḷar* Cultivators,



**FIGURE 4.** The seven daughters of the Muslim Qazi of Akkaraipattu, each of whom eventually received a dowry-house, assisted in some cases by the earnings of their two brothers (1975).

*Vīracaiya Kurukkaḷ* Priests, *Tattār* Smiths, *Sāndār* (*Cāṅṅār*) Climbers, *Vaṅṅār* Washermen, *Nāvitar* Barbers, and *Paraiyar* Drummers. The castes are residentially segregated into hamlets and neighborhoods that have become increasingly contiguous as population and residential housing have steadily grown over the past quarter century (map 10). The only three regionally important castes with no corporate identity or numerical strength in the town's Tamil population are *Cīrpātar* (or *Cīrpātam*, "Seerpadam") Cultivators, *Karaiyār* Fishermen, and *Kōvilār* Temple Servants, three groups that have been documented in a recent study of the Mandur Kandaswamy temple (Whitaker 1999; see also Raghavan 1953). Today members of the lower-ranking artisan and service castes may or may not earn their principal livelihood from their hereditary occupation. For example, most of the Washermen still do laundry, but in 2005 practically none of the Drummers still performed drumming services. As throughout South Asia, agricultural work and modern salaried jobs offer alternatives to Tamils seeking to abandon unprofitable or stigmatizing caste occupations. The artisan and service castes fill out the lower ranks of a political and religious hierarchy whose order, until recently, was ritually dramatized as "shares" of participation in annual festivals at the main Pillaiyar (Ganesha)



MAP 10. Tamil caste neighborhoods in Akkaraipattu

temple, an institution managed by matrilineal trustees from the high-caste stratum of Mukkuvars, Velalars, and Virasaiva Kurukkals under the overall, but nowadays moribund, authority of a matrilineal Mukkuvar district chief, the *Urpodiyar* (*Ūrppōṭiyār*).

In Akkaraipattu there are five small remaining groups — Theravada Buddhist and Roman Catholic Low-Country Sinhallas, Roman Catholic *Paṛaṅkiyar* Portuguese Burghers, Methodist *Kaṭaiyar* Limeburners, Telugu-speaking *Kuṛavar* Gypsies, and Indian-derived *Cakkiliyar* Sweepers — who are viewed as ethnic minorities or as groups which, for reasons of religion, language, livelihood, or historical origin, are seen by the higher castes as being outside the organic

TABLE 2. Tamil classification of castes and communities in Akkaraipattu

Viewed as Local Hindus	Viewed as Non-local Hindus	Viewed as Not Hindus	Viewed as Immigrant or Foreign	Viewed as a Different Race ( <i>iṅam</i> )
		Moor Sinhala	Moor Sinhala	Moor Sinhala
Velalar Kurukkal Mukkuvar	Kovilar Karaiyar			
Tattar		Burgher	Burgher	Burgher
Sandar Vannar Navitar Paraiyar		Kadaiyar Kuravar Cakkiliyar	Kadaiyar Kuravar	Kuravar

model of temple-based shares in the local hierarchy. Table 2 summarizes the way Tamil informants categorized all of the groups I have discussed so far, and explains why only a core of eight Tamil castes were regarded as fully participating in the local caste system.

The basic shape of the Hindu Tamil caste hierarchy, like the caste divisions of the Buddhist Sinhalese elsewhere in the island, reveals a numerically dominant high-status cultivator stratum, whose members are in turn served by a descending hierarchy of smaller specialist, service, and client castes. There are practically no indigenous Brahmin priests, and their local priestly counterparts, the Virasaiva Kurukkals, are generally permitted to claim no higher rank than that of their dominant caste patrons, the Mukkuvars and Velalars. For Tamils in Akkaraipattu, Saivism (*caiva camayam*) is synonymous with Hinduism; there is very little awareness of the Saivite-Vaishnavite sectarian cleavages found in contemporary South Indian society. The only non-Hindu Tamil caste is the Kadaiyar Limeburners, who in the 1970s constituted practically the entire congregation of the tiny Methodist church;<sup>11</sup> virtually all other Christian Tamils are Catholics who worship alongside Sinhalas and Burghers

in the parish church, built in the 1950s or 1960s by an American Jesuit priest, Fr. Koch (“Father Cook”), from the Diocese of New Orleans.<sup>12</sup>

The kinship and marriage pattern for each of the Tamil castes is characterized by a preference for isogamous (equal rank) marriages between bilateral first cross-cousins (children of the mother’s brother or the father’s sister), or more distantly related “classificatory” cross-cousins, all of whom should—and almost always do—belong to separate, exogamous (out-marrying) kudis. Some of these kudis, especially those of the highest rank, have sustained traditions of reciprocal marriage alliance over many generations, while members of smaller or less authenticated kudis might be satisfied with any decent marriage within the caste that conforms to the Dravidian bilateral kinship paradigm (Yalman 1967; Trautmann 1981).

### Moors

From the beginning of the colonial period in the early sixteenth century, members of the predominant Tamil-speaking Muslim community in Sri Lanka were designated by the Portuguese-derived term *Moor* (*Mouro*, Moroccan) which the Portuguese applied to Muslims throughout their African and Asian empire, as well as by such familiar European terms as *Mohammedan* or *Mussalman*. Under the British, the label “Ceylon Moor” became standard in journalism and the census, and it was also championed in certain Muslim political circles for many years (Wagner 1990; McGilvray 1998a). From the early 1970s, when I began my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu, I found *Muslim* to be the most common term applied by the Moors when speaking in their own native Tamil, although as a strictly religious category, “Muslim” should encompass the ethnically distinct Malays and the small Gujarati-speaking trading groups as well.<sup>13</sup> The term *Cōṇakar* (Sonahar, Jonagar), an older Tamil and Malayalam word which originally denoted West Asians, especially Arabs or Greeks, seems to have fallen out of fashion with the Moors, although some Tamils still use it.<sup>14</sup> In common English parlance, both *Moor* and *Muslim* are used interchangeably today to refer to indigenous Tamil-speaking Muslim Sri Lankans, who constitute 93 percent of all followers of Islam on the island, most of whom are orthodox Sunni members of the Shāfi’i school of Muslim jurisprudence.

Unlike the more urbanized and commercially engaged Muslims on the west coast of the island, the majority of Moors in Akkaraipattu are rice farmers, with a secondary involvement in retail trade, as well as some minor specializations in carpentry and handloom weaving. In comparison with the Tamils,

whose caste hierarchy they freely criticize, the Moors of Akkaraipattu are a more socially homogeneous group. I quickly learned that it was inappropriate to invoke the local term for a Hindu caste (*cāti*) when I discussed Muslim social subgroups with my Muslim friends, so I eventually came to adopt the more neutral terms for the Moors as a “community” (*camutāyam*) or as a “race,” that is, a biologically and culturally constituted group (*inam*). The Muslim religious identity of the Moors in Akkaraipattu is strong, and it is getting even stronger in response to external pan-Islamic currents and the struggle for communal influence in Sri Lankan politics (Wagner 1991). Like the Tamils, the Moors are divided among a set of matrilineal kudis or matriclans, each of which is represented by a trustee (*maraikkār*) on the governing board of their *jummā* mosque, the gathering place for Friday prayers.

Although the existence of subgroups within the Muslim community is much less marked than within the Tamil caste hierarchy, there are several small groups whose special status is nevertheless acknowledged. At the apex of ascriptive rank are those Moors who claim patrilineal descent from the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali or from one of his closest relations or associates. More commonly known as Sayyids in the larger Indo-Muslim world (Sharif 1921), they are accorded the title *Maulānā* in Sri Lanka, where they unabashedly favor endogamy to preserve their inherited saintliness and social rank. Another group of Moors who are not strictly endogamous but whose position in society is defined by their somewhat anti-nomian ecstatic religious role are the Bawas, semiprofessional members of local Sufi brotherhoods who spend part of their time on circuit as Muslim mendicants. Finally, at the lowest end of the Moorish social system is a tiny hereditary group of professional Muslim barbers, called *Ostā*, who perform circumcisions for the children of Moorish households.

### Sinhalas

The Sinhalas were 2.5 percent of the inhabitants of the town in 1963, but they had dropped to only 1 percent of the population in 2001, no doubt an exodus caused by the Eelam Wars. Many Sinhalas have origins in the western and southwestern Low-Country districts, particularly the Galle and Matara areas, where Karava Fishermen, Durava Climbers, and Salagama Cinnamon Peelers are the dominant Sinhala castes. A majority of the Sinhalas in Akkaraipattu are Theravada Buddhists, but a substantial minority are Roman Catholics who attend the local parish church along with the Catholic Tamils and Burghers. A

Buddhist temple and monastery, as well as a separate Sinhala-medium school, were erected sometime after World War II, largely through the pressure and philanthropy of local Sinhala businessmen, whose commercial influence increased with the growth of a substantial Sinhala population in the district administrative town of Ampara, less than twenty miles to the west. Other Sinhalas in Akkaraipattu are professionals and civil servants (bank officers, irrigation engineers, health and postal workers), as well as the predominant constituents of the Sri Lankan armed forces and the STF.

Many of the Sinhalas I knew in Akkaraipattu in the 1970s had married Tamils and had settled into a bicultural pattern similar in some ways to that reported by Yalman (1967: chap. 14) and Obeyesekere (1984: pt. 4) for the village of Panama, fifty miles to the south. There were a number of interesting Tamil-Sinhala families whose religious affiliations varied from Buddhist to Catholic to Hindu, depending on the circumstances of the marriage. While Sinhala ethnic loyalty prevailed in some of these marriages, members of other mixed Tamil-Sinhala families seemed to feel they could honor both cultural heritages simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> Residentially, most of the Catholic Sinhala households in Akkaraipattu are located interstitially between the Moorish and Tamil neighborhoods along the Ampara Road near the Catholic church and the post office. The Buddhist Sinhala families are clustered primarily in Division 8, which also is also where the Akkaraipattu Buddhist vihara is situated.

### Burghers

The Burghers are a mere .3 percent of the population of Akkaraipattu, the outstation remnants of a metropolitan Eurasian population who once enjoyed influence and patronage under the European colonialists who were their forebears. The mestizo population which arose in the Portuguese port settlements of Sri Lanka in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries formed the core of a Eurasian racial and ethnic group to which elements of Dutch and British ancestry and identity were later added. Called “Burghers” or “Mechanics” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the better educated of them were hired into the British colonial regime as clerks and translators while others were employed in the railways and other manual trades. In the competitive milieu of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ethnic politics, the urban Burgher elites organized to promote their northern European identity as “Dutch Burghers,” although Roman Catholicism and Portuguese Creole dialect and music continued to be among the most pervasive Burgher cul-



tural traits (Smith 1978; McGilvray 1982a; Roberts, Raheem, and Colin-Thomé 1989; Jackson 1990). In the era of postindependence Sri Lankan nationalism, many of the more affluent Burghers, sensing their vulnerability as Eurasians, have emigrated to Australia. In the 1970s there were no more than ten Burgher families living in Akkaraipattu, where the Tamil-speaking inhabitants referred to them as *Parañkiyar* (cognate with Anglo-Indian “Feringhee”). With their sixteenth-century Portuguese Creole dialect and their Luso-Dutch surnames, the local Burghers in Akkaraipattu are members of an intriguing Sri Lankan minority whose history and traditions are quite distinct from those of the Tamils, the Moors, and the Sinhallas (McGilvray 1982a). Their homes, along with those of most Catholics in town, were originally clustered along the Ampara Road near the Catholic church in Division 8, but in the 1980s most of these Burghers shifted to a new beachfront housing colony at the fortieth milepost on the Pottuvil Road. Tragically, these transplanted Burghers of Akkaraipattu were the community most injured by the 2004 tsunami, with nearly forty families losing their homes and sixteen lives lost. The Burgher community in Batticaloa was similarly devastated by the tsunami, with widespread destruction and the loss of 157 lives in the beachfront neighborhood of Dutch Bar (McGilvray 2006).

### Kuravars

Often referred to as “Gypsies” in English, the Kuravars (*kuravar*) are a small, formerly nomadic community of Telugu speakers whose population was approximately 450 in the mid-1970s. There is no indication when the first Kuravars migrated to Sri Lanka from South India, where they are well known; it certainly was not within living memory, nor is the event commemorated in oral tradition. Their earlier mode of subsistence was based on hunting and gathering in the Dry Zone forests, itinerant snake-charming demonstrations, and alms gathered at major Hindu temple festivals, including Kataragama. Other bands of Kuravars are now located near Trincomalee, but they are said to have roamed widely in the northern and eastern forest districts of the island, apparently sharing parts of this forest range with the indigenous Veddas (Seligmann and Seligmann 1911; Brow 1978; Dart 1985; Thangarajah 1995). Recent scholarship by Peter Schalk (2004) questions the conventional distinction between Kuravars and Veddas, but the massive silver jewelry and beads worn by the Kuravars in Akkaraipattu appear quite different from the Seligmanns’ photos of the “classic” Vedda. In the early 1960s the American Jesuit

missionary Fr. Koch, who also built the Akkaraipattu Catholic Church, converted many Kuravars to Catholicism and arranged for all of them to be settled permanently on government land at Alikambai and Kanchurankuda, twelve miles southwest of town. According to S. Thananjayarajasingham (1973), who has published the only report on these settlements, the Kuravar livelihood is based on hunting, fishing, domestic livestock, snake charming, and begging, but is increasingly augmented by agricultural wage-labor for Moorish farmers whose paddy fields are located nearby. Kuravars occasionally sell surplus wild game at local village markets, but their freedom to hunt is increasingly restricted by government forestry regulations. Although Kuravars were formerly nonliterate, their children now learn Tamil in government schools. In other words, the Kuravars have undergone a classic program of government- and church-sponsored sedentarization and “civilization” which sees little value in their traditional Telugu language, “tribal” culture, and nomadic mode of subsistence.

I drove out to the Alikambai Kuravar resettlement one day for a quick look, but conducted no systematic fieldwork there. My data on the Kuravars are therefore extremely thin, consisting of one rather contrived interview in 1975 with Mr. Jedal, an affable and entrepreneurial snake charmer who suddenly showed up at my house one day with his cobra basket and gourd flute. He was accompanied by his wife, Tumpakka, who was laden with colorful, multi-stranded bead necklaces and an absolutely amazing array of silver jewelry. Having learned of me through the grapevine, Jedal had a solid hunch that I would be willing to pay to watch his cobra act, at least once. Afterward, with the assistance of some friends who could follow his mixed Telugu-Tamil, I explored some scattered topics with him, including Kuravar social organization, marriage, inheritance, diet, and, of course, the art of snake charming. From the combination of this slender interview material and Thananjayarajasingham’s contemporaneous fieldwork data, several features of Kuravar life seem to emerge.

First of all, an effective system of internal dispute settlement appears to exist among the Kuravars, consisting of a tribunal of designated elders who have the authority to impose fines, or even excommunication from the group, on guilty offenders. In addition to a headman whose role is described as that of “judge” (*vitānai*, *nītipati*) and a sort of constable or “fiscal” (*cēvakan*), the tribunal includes the Kuravar hunting-group leader, or *vēṭṭaiykkāraṇ*. The use of ordeals, such as dipping a defendant’s hand in boiling oil, is popularly alleged.

Some elements of Hindu tradition, such as the taboo on consuming beef, are observed even by Catholic Kuravars, although jungle game such as wild boar and wild iguana (*uṭumpu*) are hunted and freely consumed. The Hindu Kuravars celebrate an annual festival for the goddess (*ammāl cāṭaṅku*) where fowl and goats are sacrificed and Skanda (Murugan) is also worshiped, but Thananjayarajasingham observed their dwellings to contain no conspicuous Hindu iconography. Marriage requires the groom to provide a small *tāli* (which I never saw), or a black bead necklace, for the bride. The bride's family, in turn, is said to provide the groom with a dowry that includes a "rattan-basket to house a cobra, hunting spear, and country mongrel" (Thananjayarajasingham 1973: 126). Like Muslims and Christians, as well as most Hindu Tamils in the Batticaloa region, the Kuravars bury their dead. It is an interesting fact that the Kuravars, like the Virasaiva Kurukkal priests in this region, observe only twelve days of ritual pollution, as opposed to thirty-one days for most castes, following a death in the family.

From the standpoint of mainstream society in Akkaraipattu, the mundane and impoverished features of Kuravar life are much less significant than the vivid symbolic role played by Kuravars in the local Tamil and Moorish imagination. People think of them as they would the Veddas, as wild and primitive forest dwellers, exotic hunters, and nomads on the geographical margins of settled society, who embody the simple and naïve antithesis of urban, literate civilization (see Trawick 1996 for a similar group in South India). Because they are so obviously "outside" the local social hierarchy, their lifestyle, although disapproved, is not judged by quite the same standards. Unlike the mixed-race Burghers or the Christian Kadaiyar Limeburners, who represent truly anomalous social categories, the Kuravar Gypsies do not pose a conundrum. Instead, they slot nicely into the Tamil cultural paradigm of the geographically marginal, civilizationally deprived Other.

#### ADDITIONAL FIELDWORK SITES

##### Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil

Among the first published accounts of ritual and social organization in eastern Sri Lanka was a chapter by Nur Yalman in his book *Under the Bo Tree* (1967: chap.15) describing the matrilineal clan system in Tambiluvil, a Tamil settlement located six miles south of Akkaraipattu on the coast road. The matriclan system as well as the Hindu *Kaṇṇaki* (Pattini) goddess cult in this village have



**FIGURE 5.** Ethnic portraits of Akkaraipattu: (a) Moorish mother and child (1970); (b) Moorish proprietor (2005); (c) Tamil Hindu devotee at Tirukkovil Temple (1970); (d) Tamil schoolteacher (1971); (e) Kuravar Gypsy woman from Alikambai (1975); (f) Portuguese Burgher man (2005).

also been discussed by two other anthropologists, Lester R. Hiatt of the University of Sydney (1973) and Ganananath Obeyesekere (1984: chap. 15). Early in my own fieldwork I learned that Tambiluvil and its sister village, Tirukkovil, were important landmarks on the social horizon for Tamils living in Akkaraipattu. Tambiluvil is strongly identified, both by its residents and by outsiders, as a high-caste Velalar village, although there are small numbers of Smiths, Washermen, and Barbers living there as well (Hiatt 1973: 9). The caste composition of the neighboring village of Tirukkovil, half a mile farther south, is more diverse, including a small community of Kovilar Temple Servants and musicians who have ties to the regionally famous *Cittiravēlayutacuvāmi* (Kandaswamy) temple located there. More recently, in the era of the Eelam conflict, both of these historic Tamil settlements have been significantly affected by the presence of a major LTTE guerrilla sanctuary in the nearby Kanjikudichcharu forest preserve. The 2004 tsunami brutally demolished Tamil schools and homes along the entire beachfront, but the historic stone Kandaswamy temple escaped major structural damage.

In the course of my fieldwork, I visited both Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil on a number of occasions to interview individuals and administer a matriclan-marriage survey, to attend a high-caste female puberty ceremony and an annual *puja* (ritual worship) for a household tutelary goddess, and to witness major festivals at both the Tirukkovil Kandaswamy temple and the Tambiluvil Kannaki temple. In relation to one of the central concerns of my research, the strong Velalar identity I encountered in Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil came to exemplify one pole of a dominant “high-caste” continuum, an example of exclusive Velalar caste hegemony. In Akkaraipattu town the highest castes expressed a hybrid or mixed Velalar-Mukkuvar identity, while in some Tamil villages closer to Batticaloa I found the highest caste status to be associated with the Mukkuvars alone.

### **Kokkadichcholai**

The cluster of Tamil villages which for me best illustrates the opposite pole of this high-caste continuum, a locality strongly identified with the dominant Mukkuvar caste, is the vicinity of Kokkadichcholai (*kokkaṭṭiccōlai*), the site of the regionally famous Siva temple whose annual rituals in the 1970s vividly dramatized the regional caste and matriclan hierarchy in ways which were no longer observed at Tirukkovil and other so-called regional temples (*tēcattukōvil*). Kokkadichcholai is located in Manmunai Pattu, on the western

shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon, which is generally regarded as one of the most “traditional” and culturally conservative Tamil districts in the region. It was the site of a notorious civilian massacre by the Sri Lankan Army in 1991.<sup>16</sup> The historic village and the territory surrounding it have been a stronghold of the LTTE and have served as the site of one of the few ethnographic portraits of rank-and-file LTTE cadres (Trawick 1997, 2007). One of my Tamil research assistants, Mr. K. Mahesvaralingam, was born and raised in Makiladittivu, a village near Kokkadichcholai. Through him, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with a range of knowledgeable individuals, including the Mūppan (caste headman) of the local Paraiyar Drummers. I also observed some local domestic rites and obtained Mahesvaralingam’s detailed accounts of other customary practices I was not able to observe directly. In 1969, long before the Eelam conflict erupted, I first attended the annual festival at the Kokkadichcholai Siva temple, and with Mahesvaralingam’s help I attended several more times to deepen my understanding of the kingly Mukkuvar caste ideology which this event serves to dramatize.

### Other Locations

While I based most of my research in Akkaraipattu, I was eventually able to visit many other villages and sacred sites in the Batticaloa region for short periods of time. Because I had my own vehicle, I was able to travel to such out-of-the-way places as Panama and the wildly beautiful Murugan temple site of Okanda, south of Pottuvil. I also had easy access to locations closer to Akkaraipattu, such as Sangamankandi, Sagamam, Tambilivil, Tirukkovil, Irakkamam, Panankadu, Pattimedu, and Addalachchenai. I was able to witness the Kandaswamy temple festival at Mandur, the Draupadi firewalking festival in Pandiruppu, and the Beach Mosque kandoori celebrations at Kalmunaikudy, as well as a number of other religious and life-crisis celebrations in places such as Nintavur and Karativu. My ethnographic forays were much less frequent in Batticaloa town, and quite minimal in the region of Eravur and Valaichchenai, although I did once drive my jeep all the way north to Sampur, Mutur, and Trincomalee along the rough coastal road in 1971, stopping in several Tamil and Moorish settlements to enquire about local castes and matrilineal clans. The only scholars to study this part of the east coast have been Jon Dart, who did fieldwork in 1982–1983 among Coast Veddas in Vakara (1985), Yuvaraj Thangarajah (1995), and Timmo Gaasbeek (fieldwork in progress 2005–2006). Since the mid-1980s, this stretch of remote coastline has been largely under the control of the Tamil Tigers.

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**PART 2.**

PROBLEMS OF HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY





Chapter Two

**PAST AND PRESENT**

It has been argued that the Sri Lankan historical imagination cherishes two contrasting visions of the past, corresponding to the divergent civilizational worldviews of the Sinhalas and the Tamils (Hellman-Rajanayagam 1994; Daniel 1996: chaps. 1–2). The Sinhala past, as exemplified and validated in the Pali chronicles (*Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa*), preserves detailed inscriptions of specific wars, individual dynastic rulers, and sectarian monastic politics, while the Tamil past as it is popularly understood is not so much a record of personalities and events as a collective sense of a timeless and eternally valid Dravidian heritage. On the east coast of the island, where Sinhala and Tamil settlements and polities have been in long-term contact, traces of both kinds of historical consciousness can be detected in textual and oral traditions. And as in other parts of Sri Lanka and South Asia, the deep past here is treated as a legitimizing political resource, edited and appropriated by competing groups to justify their present-day social hierarchies and to validate their claims to power and ritual office.

This impulse to seize the past and claim it as a

charter for the present tends to make history not just a matter of scholarly debate at the national level but also a highly charged field of political rhetoric for rival castes, clans, and ethnic communities at the local level. Mark Whitaker (1990, 1999) notes that local-level ethnographic and historical projects on the east coast, such as his own temple-focused study in Mandur and my kinship-based research in Akkaraipattu, are susceptible to being appropriated and “re-ideologized” to promote the partisan political agendas of particular villages, castes, matrilineal clans, and status-conscious individuals. At the national level, too, it is virtually certain that any reexamination of local history, whether in ancient Anuradhapura or postcolonial Batticaloa, will be subjected to multiple readings in light of the historically contested claims used to justify Sri Lanka’s ethnic war. For example, Qadri Ismail’s (2005) comparison of a Sinhala and a Tamil version of Sri Lankan history reveals utterly different sets of assumptions. Unlike Whitaker, however, I think it is still possible to make some historical inferences from the available sources, even though, as he notes, local discourses about the past constitute at once the “false consciousness” as well as the actual political rhetoric of the system (1999: 198). There is a scholarly historical vacuum on the east coast of Sri Lanka, as compared with the Jaffna Peninsula (Arasaratnam 1994; Hellman-Rajanayagam 1994), and the field really needs to develop both a larger corpus of sources and a more reliable set of historiographic benchmarks. In this chapter, with the hope of stimulating new research and debate about the history of the region, I attempt to synthesize what is known about the historical origins of the Tamil castes and Muslim communities that European colonialists encountered in the Batticaloa region starting in the fifteenth century.

My thesis is that the Mukkuvars, a maritime Hindu caste originally from the matrilineal Malabar Coast of Kerala, became politically and economically dominant in the Batticaloa region in the wake of the thirteenth-century invasion of the island by Kalinga Magha, and that they molded the social structure of the other Tamil castes to conform to their model of matrilineal descent and matrilineal political office. By the time of the first European contacts in the sixteenth century, a distinctive Moorish community had also formed on the east coast as a result of Arab and Indo-Muslim intermarriage with the Mukkuvars, from whom they acquired the local matrilineal social structure and with whom they shared an uneasy but enduring heritage of cooperation and political alliance. The pre-modern caste system of Batticaloa as it was politically administered by the Mukkuvar caste chiefs sought to restrict the

status of the Velalars, a high-ranking caste in other parts of the Tamil world, to the sphere of Hindu ritual and temple service. While a system of “regional temples” served to celebrate and legitimize their kingly model of caste rank, the Mukkuvars were also assisted by a local non-Brahmin Virasaiva (Lingayat) priesthood whose religious doctrines and ritual traditions emphasized less Brahmanical, or purity-centered, forms of worship.

#### MUKKUVARS AND THE LEGACY OF MAGHA

Apart from the excavation of some Vedda caves in the Bintenne hills, very few prehistoric archaeological sites have been located in the Batticaloa region, and only a few ancient and medieval sites have been documented in print (Deraniyagala 1992). It seems certain, however, from several burial-urn sites, that this region participated in the megalithic Black-and-Red ware culture that was the immediate precursor to urban civilization in both South India and Sri Lanka (Sitrapalam 1987; Kennedy 1990: 31), which was itself a legacy of the southward, seaborne spread of civilization along the coastlines of the Subcontinent (Maloney 1970; Stanley J. Tambiah 1986: chap. 6). Once the ancient Dry Zone Buddhist civilization had become well established, ca. 300–200 B.C.E., the Batticaloa region fell within the boundaries of Ruhunu (Rohana), a kingdom or province identified in the Pali chronicles with the southeastern quarter of the island and the center, in fact, of a great deal of early dynastic turmoil and rebellion (Chandra R. de Silva 1997: 18–32). The ancient Buddhist dagoba at *Nākkai* or Dighavapi (ca. 150 B.C.E., equidistant between Ampara, Akkaraipattu, and Nintavur) suggests a significant degree of early settlement and dynastic control in the region, an impression further supported by cursory reports of cave inscriptions, ruined temples, dagobas, and bodhisattva images scattered widely in the region (Neville 1887a: 141–44; Canagaratnam 1921: 29–34; Pathmanathan 1978: 32). As a coastal zone, it would also have been accessible to immigrant traders and settlers from South India, many of whom would have been Buddhists as well, since both Tamilnadu and Andhra were major centers of Theravada and Mahayana teaching from the third to seventh centuries C.E., and to a lesser degree much later (Liyanagamage 1978; Schalk and Veluppillai 2002a, 2002b). Indeed, Tamil Buddhist monasteries existed in Kanchipuram, Tamilnadu, as late as the fifteenth century C.E. (Indrapala 1981).

For a brief but momentous period in the tenth century (993–1070 C.E.), the entire north-central region of Sri Lanka fell under the control of invading

Chola rulers from the Tamil mainland, who seized the capitals of Sinhala royal power in the Dry Zone, patronized Hindu art and architecture, and supported colonies of South Indian Brahmins as well as Buddhist monasteries (Veluppillai 2002). However, while material evidence of the Chola occupation is plentiful in the regions of Polonnaruwa and Trincomalee, the only specific evidence of their presence in the Batticaloa region is a reference in the *Culavamsa* (Geiger 1929–1930: 207 line 46) to a Chola military stronghold just south of Akkaraipattu at “Chagāma,” presumably the vicinity of the modern-day Sagamam Tank (see map 7). In the absence of a comprehensive and detailed archaeological analysis, and with only a few historical documents available to him, the nineteenth-century antiquarian Hugh Neville made the dubious and anachronistic claim that the entire Batticaloa region was “left a blank, whether by ruins or traditions, from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries A.D., and then it seems to have been reclaimed by Sinhalese of Sitawaka, by Tamils, and Moors” (1887a: 144). Neville was exaggerating, but it is true that relatively little is known about early medieval society in Batticaloa, apart from a sequence of undated early dynasties published in a collection of eighteenth-century Tamil texts, the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam*, which has been the main historical source (Nadarajah 1962; Kamalanathan and Kamalanathan 2005). Painstaking studies by Karthigesu Indrapala (1965, 2005) and S. Pathmanathan (1978) offer the only modern syntheses of the highly fragmented historical evidence, although some new scholarship is currently under way.

From the standpoint of later Tamil society, the axial event for the region seems to have been the victorious invasion of a fierce Indian adventurer named Kalinga Magha, whose army of Tamil and Kerala mercenaries destroyed the last Sri Lankan capital at Polonnaruwa in 1215 C.E., signaling the end of the great hydraulic civilization of the Dry Zone. Magha conducted a fanatically pro-Saiva, anti-Vaishnava, and anti-Buddhist campaign everywhere he went (Liyanagamage 1968: chap. 4), and in the Batticaloa region he also bestowed land and political hegemony on his loyal troops, many of them Mukkuvars recruited from the matrilineal fishing caste of that name still found today in Kerala (Indrapala 1965: chap. 5; Pathmanathan 1978: chap. 4; Liyanagamage 1988).<sup>1</sup> The historical Magha eventually appears in the local palmyra leaf documents as well, under the Tamil name *Mākōṇ* (Great King), who is given credit for ruthlessly extirpating Vaishnava sectarians, apportioning hereditary service duties at Siva temples, and delegating power to local petty kings whose successors are identified as belonging to *kukan kulam*, another name for the Mukkuvar (or Mukkukar) caste (Nadarajah 1962: 51–57, 70–76, 95).

There is little indication as to precisely which castes and communities were already living in the region when Magha arrived in the thirteenth century, although it is known that the eastern region had a long history of prior settlement going back to the second or third century B.C.E. The only ethnohistorical document which offers a chronicle of dynastic succession in the Batticaloa region, an eighteenth-century palm-leaf redaction known as the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Pūrva Carittiram* (included in Nadarajah 1962 and in a separate critical edition as Kamalanathan and Kamalanathan 2005), presents a bewildering list of royal names, events, and social groups which has yet to be systematically corroborated and placed in the larger Sri Lankan historical context.<sup>2</sup> In places the document identifies several politically important castes—or possibly chiefly lineages, since the term used (*kulam*) can be ambiguous—including *Paṭaiyāṭci*, *Kāliṅkan*, and *Kukan*. In other passages the text refers to “people of the three kulams [*mukkulattōr*], namely *Kāliṅkar* (Kalinga), *Vaiṅkar* (Bengali), and *Ciṅkar* (Sinhala). In some versions of the text a ruler with the title of *Malaiyamāṇ* is credited with having reorganized the caste order in Batticaloa, possibly during the period of South Indian (Chola) occupation in the late tenth century C.E., when certain military officers were known to have borne that title (Pathmanathan 1976a: 7; Pathmanathan 1978: 133).<sup>3</sup>

That there had also been an influx of Vanniyar caste warriors from South Arcot into northern and eastern Sri Lanka during the late medieval period seems evident from South Indian epigraphy, from the spread of distinctive ritual traditions of Draupadi worship to the east coast, and from political traditions that clearly link Batticaloa with “the Vanni” as a zone of fractious petty chiefdoms (Indrapala 1965: 306–97; Pathmanathan 1978: 122–44; Stein 1980: 187; Hildebeitel 1988: chap. 3). There is evidence that the Vanniyar caste (or at least a ruling elite bearing the title of *Paṭaiyāṭci*, often associated with the *Palli* or Vanniyar caste in Tamilnadu) was eventually displaced from regional authority in the wake of Magha’s conquest and the consolidation of Mukkuvar dominance, a power shift that might have been leveraged in some way by Portuguese and Dutch colonial machinations (Pathmanathan 1978: 132–35; D. Sivaram, personal communication).<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, according to the abbreviated account of Batticaloa history presented in Jacob Burnand’s Dutch *Memorial* of 1794, the Mukkuvars obtained caste reinforcements from Jaffna—who arrived in seven boats—and eventually seized control of the entire region by means of a violent and successful rebellion that overthrew the preexisting Vanniyar chiefs (1794: 10–12). The *Paṭaiyāṅṭa kudi* (a close variant of *Paṭaiyāṭci*) is strongly identified as a matrilineal clan of the Mukkuvar caste today,

so perhaps the original Vanniyar rulers were absorbed through intermarriage and reclassification. Despite the ascendance of the Mukkuvars, the Vanniyar political legacy was preserved in the chiefly title of *Vaṇṇiyā* (or *Vaṇṇiyār*) which became Vanniah, or district headman, in the colonial era. It is also reflected in the Tamil regional term for precolonial political domination and control of the land, *vaṇṇimai*.

Kukan (Skt. *Guha*) is a literary reference to the devoted boatman who ferried Lord Rama across the Ganges from Ayodhya at the beginning of his exile in the *Ramayana*, and this has become the basis for an etymological ennoblement of the Mukkuvar caste name itself (*muṛkukar* or *muṛkukan*, foremost or earliest Kukans). Not only is this claim to North Indian epic ancestry encoded in the legitimizing verses of the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam* that are recited at major regional Hindu festivals such as the Kokkadichcholai Siva temple, but it is also recorded in the older ethnographic literature (Casie Chitty 1834: 275; Raghavan 1962: 218). However, this romantic caste charter is by no means unique: a similar connection to Guha and to Ayodhya is claimed by the Valan fishing caste of Kerala, and by both the Sembadavan fishing caste and the Maravar warrior caste of Tamilnadu (Anantha Krishna Iyer 1909: 232; Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 5:24, 6:352). Using equally inventive sources, the colonial antiquarian Hugh Neville deduced that the Mukkuvars were originally the “Modarites” of ancient Arabia, whom he believed also colonized Java and the lower Indus valley (1887b: 69–70).<sup>5</sup>

All such mythic claims aside, the historical origins of the Mukkuvars appear to lie in southwestern India in the Kanya Kumari District of Tamilnadu and in the coastal districts of Kerala, where a fishing caste of that name is still found today (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 5:106; Anantha Krishna Iyer 1909: 1:266; Velu Pillai 1940, 1:369, 1:855; Ram 1991; Busby 2000). The standard derivation of *Mukkuvar* is from the Dravidian root *muḷuku*, to immerse or dive (Burrow and Emeneau 1961: 337–38; Indrapala 1965: 369–70), which may also suggest some early connections with the pearl and conch fisheries of the Palk Strait.<sup>6</sup> In any event, both their peaceful mobility as mariners and their recruitment into invading mercenary South Indian armies can account for the presence of Mukkuvars in Sri Lanka by the end of the medieval period.<sup>7</sup> The *Mahavamsa* refers to an invading army of “Tamils and Keralas” led by Magha who ruthlessly smashed the Polonnaruwa kingdom, and then, not long afterward, the *Dambadeni Asna* mentions Mukkuvar warriors serving in the army of Parakramabahu II, whose dates are 1236–1270 C.E. (Indrapala 1965: 371).

In Jaffna the Mukkuvars are still traditionally recognized as lagoon-fishers, and the ethnohistorical traditions of the northern peninsula (*Yālp̄paṇa Vaipavamālai*) recount the exile of some Mukkuvars from Jaffna to Batticaloa for allegedly defiling a temple with the aroma of drying fish (Sabanathan 1953: 9–10; Raghavan 1971: 152–61). In Puttalam, on the northwest coast of the island, the Mukkuvars established a local polity which was eventually defeated by an expeditionary force of South Indian Karaiyar fishing-caste mercenaries sponsored by the Kingdom of Kotte in the late fifteenth century, an episode celebrated in a seventeenth-century Sinhala document, the *Mukkara Hatana* (Raghavan 1961: 14–30; Pathmanathan 1978: 268–71). In Batticaloa in the centuries following Magha the Mukkuvars seem to have organized the region into a cluster of subdistrict chieftaincies (*parru*, *pattu*), idealized as seven in number, each governed by a matrilineal chief Vanniyar and an oligarchy of matrilineal landlords with the title of Podiyar (*pōṭiyār*). Over the three centuries prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, and for at least a century or two afterwards, this type of rivalrous political system flourished throughout the entire north-central and eastern Dry Zone, a region called “the Vanni” by colonial administrators because of the defiant Vanniyar chiefs who held sway there. In words that are also applicable to the drier, more peripheral “warrior zone” of Kallar and Maravar chieftaincies and petty kingdoms in Tamilnadu (Dirks 1987), the historian P. A. T. Gunasinghe has characterized the decentralized political situation throughout the Dry Zone from the thirteenth century onward as follows: “The resulting lack of a central power, and the breakdown of the economic structure of the Rajarata, probably led to the local military chieftains setting up centres of authority on their own, forming a network of petty kingdoms whose rulers received the generic name of Vanniar, and who acknowledged the suzerainty of whatever ruler was the most powerful at the time” (1980: 68).

Malaria has also been cited as a factor in the decline of the Dry Zone civilization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the malarial belt may also have been an obstacle to close ties between Batticaloa and the new centers of Sinhala royal power that emerged in the southwest (Peebles 1990: 33). Even so, one can assume the east coast was always an important route of access to the interior of the island for South and Southeast Asian sea traders seeking access to the Kandyan market. Portuguese accounts of the Batticaloa and Yala regions suggest that east coast chieftains were governing independently in the mid-1500s, and that several of them eagerly embraced Christianity to secure



an alliance with the Portuguese monarch (Perniola 1989: 68, 154, 219–20, 229). The *kadaim-pot*, official boundary books maintained by the Sinhala kings of Gampola and Kandy from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth, identify three easternmost jurisdictions within Ruhunu Rata, corresponding to the sites of Dighavapi, Malvattai, and Eravur, while other settled parts of the Batticaloa coastal zone remain blank or undesignated (Abeyawardana 1999). It appears, in fact, that local chiefdoms in Batticaloa and Trincomalee paid tribute directly to the Portuguese commander at Mannar from 1582 until their districts were conceded to the Kandyan kingdom by treaty in 1617 (Chandra R. de Silva 1995: xix). After the Sinhala kingdoms of Kotte, Sitawaka, and Rayigama were subjugated by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and the Kandyan state emerged as the last independent bastion of Sri Lankan power in the seventeenth century, the kings of Kandy asserted feudal sovereignty over the Batticaloa region through two nonresident governors, the Dissāve of Wellassa and the Dissāve of Bintenne, who received tribute from the Tamil chiefs of the district every year or two, and likewise, later on, from the Dutch.

Given the relative isolation of the eastern littoral in modern times, it is surprising to realize that in the earliest years of colonial contact, European—especially Dutch—access to the remote Kandyan kingdom was typically overland from ports on the Tamil-speaking Batticaloa coast rather than via the more heavily populated Sinhala-speaking southwestern districts of the island (Spilbergen 1933; Arasaratnam 1978; Rajpal K. de Silva and Beumer 1988: chap.1). The Portuguese, too, valued the Batticaloa connection when the western approaches to Kandy were blocked by the hostile Sitawaka kingdom. When their Dutch rivals secretly sent emissaries to Kandy using this route in 1602, the Portuguese realized that their naval quarantine of the east coast was ineffective, so they eventually erected a fort on Puliyantivu Island, the site of modern Batticaloa town, in 1627 (Chandra R. de Silva 1972). Only a decade later, in 1638, the Portuguese surrendered the fort in the face of a joint Dutch-Kandyan siege, and the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) eventually re fortified Batticaloa, making it a permanent outpost under the jurisdiction of the Commandement of Jaffna in the 1660s.

During the entire Portuguese, and much of the Dutch, era, the writ of the colonial government seems not to have extended far beyond the Batticaloa fort, as the uncooperative Mukkuvar chiefs were bent on resisting colonial domination and taxation. Not until 1766, when the Dutch finally concluded a treaty with Kandy ceding rights over the entire coastal region and the Muk-

kuvar chiefs of the district pledged their loyalty to the Dutch East India Company by signing a collective “Deed of Submission,” did the company effectively control much territory beyond the precincts of the fort (Canagaratnam 1921; Toussaint 1931). Until that time, the Dutch had reported only a modest trade in elephants, areca nuts, beeswax, rice, and salt. However, in the final thirty years of Dutch Batticaloa (1766–1796), colonial rule was consolidated throughout the region, company revenues were greatly expanded, and several important canals, causeways, and irrigation works were constructed that remain in use today. During the period 1784–1794 the district was governed by an exceptionally energetic Swiss-born Dutch East India Company chief (*Opperhoofd*) named Jacob Burnand, who promoted the efficiency of agriculture and of taxation with equal zeal, and who left behind a lengthy descriptive account of the region in the form of a detailed memorandum written for his successor, Mr. J. P. Wambeek, who served for only two years before being supplanted by the British (Burnand 1794; Toussaint 1930, 1931; Nadaraja 1966).

When they assumed colonial power in 1796, the British sought to maintain some continuity with the Dutch administrative system, employing in clerical posts and manual trades the locally born “Burghers,” Eurasian descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch, who still form a small but distinctive component of Batticaloa society today (McGilvray 1982a, 2006). Although Burnand, the Dutch East India Company administrator, had wanted to replace the hereditary Mukkuvar head Podiyars with more compliant appointees, he admitted that, for practical reasons, it could not be done (1794: 285–87).<sup>8</sup> However, in the nineteenth century the British introduced major changes in local and district-level administration by instituting the so-called Kachcheri bureaucracy, under which those aristocrats who had proven themselves to be loyal subjects, regardless of caste or hereditary right, were given honors and appointed as Vanniahs, Udaiyars, and local headmen in each pattu or subdistrict, while a British civil servant, the Collector (later called the Government Agent), exercised supervening authority over the entire district (Raby 1985: chap. 2). The traditional authority of a colonial district headman (Vanniah) in the Batticaloa region seems to have been roughly equivalent to that of the Rademahatmaya who served as the head of village tribunals and *variga* courts, which regulated internal caste affairs, as described in Edmund Leach’s *Pul Eliya* (Leach 1961: 67–79; Canagaratnam 1921: 77). In 1935 the British finally eliminated these Vanniahs and Udaiyars, some of whom had gradually again become at least quasi-hereditary, replacing them with career civil-service District Revenue

Officers, a reform which was extended to the grassroots in 1965, when even the village and ward headmen were bureaucratized as Grama Sevakas (Raby 1985: 36).<sup>9</sup> Starting in the nineteenth century, this bureaucratization of local administration began to erode, though it has not yet entirely obliterated, the pre-modern political traditions of caste headmen, Vanniyars and Podiyars, who traditionally embodied and exercised the authority of the dominant Mukkuvar caste. The history and traditions of these pre-modern political roles, particularly their symbology and rhetoric of domination, remain essential to an understanding of caste and matrilineal kinship in Batticaloa today.

#### REGIONAL MUKKUVAR DOMINANCE

In the seventeenth century the Batticaloa region was a tributary region of the Kandyan Kingdom, and it was also subdivided into a number of quarrelsome petty chiefships each under a local Vanniyar or group of head Podiyars who exercised the political authority of the Mukkuvar caste, a regional hegemony recalled today as the period of the *Mukkuvar vannimai* (Mukkuvar chiefship). It is obvious, however, from a contrived note of Mukkuvar triumphalism addressed to the king of Holland in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam*—and from the reference to “English rulers” in the Cirpatam caste origin myth recorded by Raghavan (1953)—that the ethnohistorical Tamil documents available today were given a politically motivated reworking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to reinforce local status hierarchies and to promote upward caste mobility.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam*, like the *Kōṇēcar Kalvetṭu* and the *Yālppaṇa Vaipavamālai* (Veluppillai 1990; Hellman-Rajanayagam 1994), is a representative text from the golden age of colonial caste histories, dynastic chronicles (*vamsāvali*), and temple charters, an era when many of the putatively ancient traditions, laws, and historic customs of the Sri Lankan Tamils were conveniently reinscribed and shrewdly updated to stake out political claims and to preserve (or enhance) prior caste privileges under European hegemony.<sup>11</sup>

It is also likely that in some micro-regions, and in relation to certain shrines such as the Mandur Kandaswamy temple, the hegemony of the Mukkuvars was exercised at a broader level of district chiefship rather than at the grassroots level of local village governance. This would provide a way to reconcile Whitaker’s (1999) insistence on exclusively Cirpatar, Karaiyar, and Velalar caste control over the Mandur temple today with my broader argument about Mukkuvar regional *vannimai* in the past.<sup>12</sup> Whitaker’s suggestion that the Tamil east coast was “a society consisting of a cluster of temple-centered micro-regions,”

each having similar but unique caste ideologies, makes good sense up to a point, but the colonial record clearly shows that it was the Mukkuvars whom the Europeans regarded as their main adversaries throughout the Batticaloa region, both militarily and in their struggle to collect grain taxes.

Describing the Portuguese fort in 1637, Antonio Bocarro states, “The permanent population of Batticaloa are the heathen Pandara Pillai, who are those that serve the kings in war, the Mukkuvars or cultivators who are the noblest here for they have usurped the government forcibly, the Canos [Carias] or fishermen and the Moors who are merchants from outside, but some of whom are also natives” (Abeyasinghe 1995: 50).<sup>13</sup> Fr. Queyroz, writing in the 1680s, uncritically recounts a much bloodier fable of patricide and usurpation of power by the Mukkuvars, two of whose Vanniyar princes were later proudly “killed and exterminated” by General Constantino de Sa de Noronha (1930, 1:18). S. O. Canagaratnam, a British-appointed Tamil headman (Mudaliyar) who compiled the official *Manual of the Batticaloa District* in 1921, asserts that these local chiefships were seven in number, citing as his authority Hugh Neville’s 1887 translation of the *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalveṭṭu*, a Tamil recension of a fifteenth-to-seventeenth-century Sinhala palm-leaf manuscript (Neville 1887c: 127–41; Pathmanathan 1976b).<sup>14</sup> This document recounts the arrival at Irakkamam in the Ampara-Akkaraipattu area (a chiefly domain formerly known as *Nāṭu Kāṭu*) of the family and caste-service entourage of a Sinhala nobleman, Rajapakse Mudaliyar, who came from Sitawaka and “*Talavillu*” but who gave allegiance to the king of Kandy.<sup>15</sup> Although the Dutch report written by Jacob Burnand in the late eighteenth century states that *Nāṭu Kāṭu* was located west of the Mukkuvar-dominated districts, the internal evidence of the *kalveṭṭu* document itself seems to suggest some overlap of political and social jurisdictions between *Nāṭu Kāṭu* and Akkaraipattu.

The political hierarchy as portrayed in the *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalveṭṭu* involves two echelons of Mudaliyars (those with rank, and those without), two levels of Podiyars (those who were chiefs, and those who were simply landlords), a set of seven Vanniya whose territorial jurisdiction coincides to some degree with *Nāṭu Kāṭu*, and a few specific caste and matrilineal headships among the Veddas and the Moors. Although the document was apparently written by a Sinhala author to commemorate Rajapakse Mudaliyar, it points to a complex system of shared—or perhaps competitive—hegemonies between local Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim political jurisdictions in the southernmost part of the Batticaloa region, including Akkaraipattu itself. The seven Vanniya, who bear Tamil titles and who are portrayed as guardians of the Tiruk-

kovil temple, are portrayed as seeking favors from Rajapakse Mudaliyar and as collaborating with him to combat the public threats of banditry and rogue elephants. The only specifically mentioned caste and service-tenancy obligations are to the Buddhist vihara at “*Nākkai*” (Dighavapi), but one can reasonably assume there were similar duties owed to Hindu temples and possibly to Muslim mosques in the region as well.

Generally, the names and titles given in the document suggest considerable local-level interaction, co-residence, land clearing, and possibly even intermarriage between ethnic and religious groups that today, in Sri Lanka’s polarized political environment, seem more distinct than they might have been 400 years ago: Tamil, Sinhala, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim. This is particularly intriguing because the research of Nur Yalman (1967) and Gananath Obeyesekere (1984) has verified the existence, until recently at any rate, of a substantial degree of intermarriage, ritual collaboration, and ethnic merging between Sinhalas and Tamils in the “shatter zone” area of Panama in the southernmost part of the region, and my own fieldwork also turned up some clues to a similar process in Akkaraipattu. Apart from *Kōppi kudi*, which is a Tamil Mukkuvar matriline, the other clans mentioned in the *Nātu Kātu Paravaṇi Kalveṭtu* are all Moorish, some of them still in existence today. An ideal organizational “model of seven” ranked matrilineal kudis, seven titled Podiyars, seven Vanniyars, and even seven Vedda *vāṇam* (forest) tracts, can be clearly discerned throughout the document.

What is not clear is how scrupulously these septempartite paradigms were recognized and honored by the Portuguese or the Dutch in defining the administrative sub-units under their colonial control. In fact, the seventeenth-century Portuguese authors Bocarro (Abeyasinghe 1995) and Queyroz (1930, 1:18) acknowledged the existence of only three or four native Vanniya-ships in the Batticaloa region, all under Mukkuvar hegemony. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Dutch colonial territories comprised eleven separate subchieftaincies or, as the Dutch called them, provinces: the seven Mukkuvar-controlled districts of Eravur, Manmunai, Eruvil, Poraitivu, Karavaku, Sammanturai, and Akkaraipattu, plus Panama in the south, Nadu Kadu (or Nadene) in the west, and Koralai and Kariwitti to the north (Burnand 1794). It seems very likely that the subregional chiefships of the east coast were perennially feuding, fissioning, and coalescing, and it is also known that in the British colonial era there was a good deal of pragmatic shuffling and rearranging of the local administrative jurisdictions over time.<sup>16</sup>

The colonial literature dealing with Batticaloa has consistently pointed to the importance of the Mukkuvar caste as both politically dominant and culturally influential in this region. E. B. Denham, in his ethnographically rich summary of the 1911 census, notes that “Batticaloa is still called *Mukkuvatesam* (. . . country of the Mukkuvars)” (Denham 1912: 226), and this is confirmed in one of the earliest Dutch descriptions of Batticaloa, a report written in 1676 by Pieter de Graeuwe, which notes that “the Mocquaes are the most important” of the various castes in the region (de Graeuwe 1676: 1). The most detailed Dutch colonial document on Batticaloa, the *Memorial* compiled by Jacob Burnand in 1794, describes the pattern of Mukkuvar dominance as he understood it to have existed before European rule.

The Dessaves of Batticaloa (who governed the Wedas also) always resided in Candia and made but one circuit every two years, leaving the management of the Country to a Land Vidane who collected the King’s and his own Income, and decided the differences of the inhabitants in the presence of the Headmen of the Mookoowass called Pedies.<sup>17</sup> These always riotous headmen had long before that time divided the Country among their seven Families into seven Districts or Provinces vizt, commencing from the north, Eravur, Manmoone, Eroeweel, Pooredivo, Karrewauwe, Sjampanture, and Accrepattoe. The Province of Nadekadoe to the West, already inhabited by the Cinglese and Wedass was not comprehended in the division, and that is the reason why to this day the Headmen of that Province is always chosen from Cinglese and Bellala Casts. The said seven Mockowass Families contrived to get a deed of concession, or donation-olas from the King, in which it particularly appears that those Districts were given and ceded to that Family as their property, and that the first or eldest of the male members of the Family should always be Head Pedi of the District. Original concession-olas most probably are no longer in existence, but some of the Families still show their copies of the same authenticated in their manner, and the many other authentic documents together with the general traditions cast no doubts as to the truth of their statement. (Burnand 1794: 13–14)

Under the Dutch East India Company, each of the seven heads of the Mukkuvar “Families,” by which Burnand meant matrilineal clans, was charged with the responsibility of remitting to the company one-tenth of the annual paddy crop from lands within their separate territorial jurisdictions. Burnand ex-

pounds at great length about the difficulty of keeping the Mukkuvar headmen compliant and honest in these taxations, which of course the Podiyars saw as personal extortions. Because of the vital interest of the company in the paddy harvest of the district, Burnand's estimate of the ownership of land is probably based on reliable information.

The greater half of the Batticaloa fields still belong to the seven Mockuvas families as stated in the first paragraph and the remainder to their temples to the Bellales or to other Casts as Accomodessans [service tenures] and to the maurmen [Muslims]. (Burnand 1794: 57)

But as the headmen and inferior Mockawas pedies [Podiyars] possess almost half of the Fields, this Cast (which consists of about 500 families) is the wealthiest, that is to say 40 or 50 of them, for all the rest being greatly indebted are in a state of insolvency. (Burnand 1794: 138)

An example of how jealously the Mukkuvar Podiyars clung to their agrarian land monopoly is recounted by Burnand, who documents the plucky efforts of the Tamil Barber caste of Akkaraipattu to acquire some paddy land in order to pay the taxes recently imposed by the Dutch.

The Barbers are found scattered everywhere among the Inhabitants; their number is however greater at Karrenkadeetivoe in the Province of Accrepattoe. Until the Year 1792 this cast did neither pay anything nor did they perform any Ooleam service whatsoever, even when any of them served as Labourers in the fields of the Pedies. Pursuant to the direction of Govt., a Capitation tax was imposed in '92 on all persons of this cast able to serve, which at their desire was fixed at 25 fanams Per Annum in order not to be equal with the low Casts who are subject to Capitation tax of 24 fanams. They amount at present to 77 able to serve.

It had been a fundamental rule under the Moekawas Government of this country that the low Casts should not possess any fields, and that even the houses and gardens in which their families resided of old should be considered as the property of the Moekawas in whose district they lived. The Barbers of Karrankadeetivoe petitioned in the Year 1792 the Land Council or assembly to be favored with some arable ground in order to maintain themselves in the like manner as the other Inhabitants so that from the proceeds thereof they might be able to pay the Capitation tax imposed on them.

The opportunity being then favorable to grant this cast a few accomodessan fields at such places they wished to have them and it being proposed to Govt., a grant deed was given them by the Governor of 48 ampanams of *Mootowelle Etaale* and 35 ampanams empty ground situated thereabout. But as the Moekawas and particularly those of the Province Accrepattoo were not well pleased with this Innovation, care ought to be taken that the sooner the better the whole of these accomodessan fields be cultivated and sown yearly, for otherwise the system of extending cultivation and affording the low Casts a means of Subsistence will be frustrated by the obstacle which the headmen will constantly lay in the Way. (Burnand 1794: 141–42)

There is clear evidence that in some areas such as Manmunai Pattu this strict, feudal-style monopoly of paddy lands by Mukkuvar chiefs was maintained as late as the mid-nineteenth century (Cordiner 1807, 2:459–60).<sup>18</sup> However, unlike their more cautious Dutch predecessors, who only dreamed wistfully of taking some authority away from the Mukkuvar Podiyars and giving it to the Velalars, the British colonial authorities eventually appointed their own “native chiefs” without regard to caste or hereditary right, as a means to improve the efficiency and honesty of local administration and, in some cases, to flatter and co-opt lower caste entrepreneurs and middle-class nouveau riches with impressive titles and regalia (Peebles 1973, 1995; Roberts 1982).<sup>19</sup> A striking example of how swiftly the British altered the political hierarchy of the Akkaraipattu district is recorded in the circuit diary of the Acting Collector of Batticaloa, S. Sawers, who visited Akkaraipattu (“Karancottetivoe”) on 8 August 1809.

The extensive field called Urayempalem of an area of several square miles and which has every appearance of being capable of cultivation with equal facility as the fields above mentioned, lies almost totally neglected and even in those places where there is any appearance of cultivation it is only in small patches. The headman attributed this to a want of field labourers, but the real cause, I suspect, is its being in possession of the Mokowas, who lay claim to almost all the lands in this part of the Province and who tho’ the most numerous are the least industrious of any caste of people in this district. The malversation of Teera Podie may also account in part for the wretched state of this part of the District.

Left Karancottetivoe about 3 P.M. passed the small villages of Coolavil



[Kolavil] and Tambette [Tampaddai] also the village of Tambleviel [Tambiluvil] which contains about 300 inhabitants of the Vellale Caste whose superior habits of industry and economy over those of the Moekowas are conspicuously displayed in the appearance of their fields. Their husbandry is carried on in the best manner of the Country. But the best proof of this is the report of Gabrielpulle, the acting land vidahn whom I have met here by which report it appears that the whole sowing in the Province this year will amount to about 8550 Parrahs, that is by Vellales, Moekwas and Moors and of this sum, the Vellales with 159 Moelcaras [*mullaiikkāraṇ*, field supervisor] have sown 3420 Parrahs for their share. These people have hitherto been in the practice of supplying their less provident neighbors the Moekwas with seed corn annually to a considerable amount.

They are immediately under a headman of their own Cast called Managepodie who by the by was formerly under Teerapodie, Head of the Moekwas and at the head of the Province. . . . I think it proper here to remark that (Teerapodie being removed from his situation on Authority of His Excellency's letter to the Commissioner of Revenue of the 9th May last) I do not see the expedience of giving the Mockwa Headman any authority whatever over the Headman of the Vellales. On the contrary and I deem it necessary to have this Province of Akkrapattoo under the Headman Managepodie [who] should be the person I should recommend for the situation. (CO416/27 J12, 80–81, National Archives, Kew, UK)<sup>20</sup>

This passage displays the European colonialist's preference for the industrious proprietors of neat and tidy paddy fields, while the hereditary political values embodied in the Mukkuvar land monopoly—coded by Acting Collector Sawers as agricultural laziness and sloth—are clearly unappreciated. As masters of the region who considered themselves heirs to a martial tradition, the Mukkuvar Podiyars would have been content to delegate rice-farming to those subordinate castes such as the Velalars for whom this was a more appropriate dharmic calling. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the British had become the new rajas. Between 1809 and the early part of the twentieth century there were many other abrupt changes in the local political hierarchy that markedly increased access to land under the colonial regime. The last Vanniah of Akkaraipattu appointed by the British before independence was an upwardly mobile coconut planter of the Karaiyar sea-fisher caste, never a regionally dominant landholding group in this part of the island (cf., Roberts 1982).

Documents from the Portuguese and Dutch periods help one to realize what a decline in power this nineteenth- and twentieth-century bureaucratic transformation represented for the Mukkuvar power elite. In the eighteenth century, their supervening caste authority was implied by numerous references to the annual assemblies of the “Native Headmen” (i.e., Mukkuvar chief Podiyars) at the regionally important temples in Kokkadichcholai, Mandur, and Tirukkovil (Burnand 1794: 203, 410), temples that are today still accorded the status of *tēcattukōvil* (temples of the *tēcam*, or political territory, from Skt. *dēsha*) where annual festivals validated the status of the recognized castes and matriclans. No doubt some degree of local autonomy was granted to influential castes such as the Velalars in Palugamam and Tirukkovil, or the Cirpatars in Mandur, or to the Moors and Chetties in Sammanturai or Kattankudy, as shown by the references to separate headmen for such groups in the Dutch records. But in spite of this, what is never in doubt is the perennial difficulty the Dutch encountered at every step in subduing the rebellious Mukkuvar Podiyars and extracting the company’s 10 percent share of their paddy harvest. The twin threats of subversion and tax evasion often preoccupied the Dutch commanders of Batticaloa, and the 1676 report by de Graeuwe makes frequent reference to native “riots” which had seriously disrupted normal affairs in both Batticaloa and Trincomalee. Although de Graeuwe urged his colonial successors to foster friendly compliance with the Dutch East India Company orders by making frequent firsthand circuits of the district, he explicitly warned that “such rounds should not be undertaken without field artillery” (1676: 33).

#### THE MOORISH CONNECTION

If the origins of Tamil Hindu society in the Batticaloa region are only partially known, the history of Muslim communities in the region is even less well documented. Although the earliest evidence is limited to fragmentary travelers’ accounts, a few tombstones, and some lithic inscriptions, the origins of the Muslim community of Sri Lanka are clearly linked to the ancient seaborne trade between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. With the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the first half of the seventh century, and the subsequent conquest of Persia, maritime commerce across the Indian Ocean was increasingly dominated from the eighth century onward by Arab Muslim merchants from ports on the Red Sea and the Gulf. In Sri Lanka, epigraphy, coins, and historical references all testify to a transoceanic Arab and Persian trade of considerable antiquity (Effendi 1965; Kiribamune 1986), and

one historian argues that such West Asian trading groups—identified in the medieval Tamil inscriptions by the title *Añjuvaṇṇam*—would have formed the nuclei of Muslim settlements in Sri Lanka as early as the ninth century C.E. (Indrapala 2005: 241, 272–73, 313). Unlike the later Persian and Turkic invasions of North India that established major centralized states and empires, the early Muslim impact on the coasts of South India and Sri Lanka from the eighth century onward was predominantly Arabic in culture and mercantile in motivation, part of the same historical stream which resulted in the Islamization of insular Southeast Asia (Wink 1990: chap. 3).

The medieval Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of Kerala and Sri Lanka, eager for revenues from overseas commerce, allowed Arab merchants—many of whom acquired local wives by whom they fathered Indo-Muslim progeny—to establish a dominant economic position in port settlements such as Calicut and Colombo (Arasaratnam 1964; Dale 1980; Kiribamune 1986).<sup>21</sup> The Tamil-speaking Coromandel coast of southeastern India, which was then still linguistically unified with Kerala, also attracted Arab Muslim traders who established an enclave at Kayalpattinam at the mouth of the Tambrapani River—as well as at Kilakkarai, Adirampattinam, Nagoor, and other coastal settlements farther north—to which they imported, among other things, Arabian horses for the armies of Tamil Hindu kings and from which they exported Indian textiles (Bayly 1989: 71–103; Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 1992: 264–304).

When in 1498 Vasco da Gama launched his Portuguese naval crusade against the well-established “Moors” of Calicut, most of the remaining foreign traders of Arab origin began to depart from the Malabar Coast, leaving locally intermarried Mappila Muslims to carry on the fight, in one form or another, during 450 years of European colonial domination (Dale 1980: 47). About the same time, in Sri Lanka, the Portuguese encountered “Moors” (*Mouros*, “Moroccans,” the term they applied to all Muslims) who spoke Tamil, who had ongoing links with the Muslims of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts of South India, and who had been given royal permission to collect customs duties and regulate shipping in the major southwestern port settlements under the suzerainty of the local Sinhala kings of Kotte (Ameer Ali 1980; Indrapala 1986; Abeyasinghe 1986).

While the period of Portuguese and Dutch colonial rule was onerous to all Sri Lankans, it was especially harsh for the Muslims, who were subjected to special penalties and restrictions because of their Islamic faith and the threat

they posed to the European monopoly of overseas trade. Ultimately the effect of Portuguese policies was to encourage (and by an official edict of 1626, to require) migration of many coastal Moors inland to the Kandyan Kingdom, where they engaged in *tāvaḷam* bullock transport and a diverse range of other occupations (Chandra R. de Silva 1968; Ameer Ali 1980: 337; Dewaraja 1986). In 1626 King Senerat of Kandy is said to have resettled 4,000 Moors in the Batticaloa region of the east coast, which if true is the only historically documented Moorish mass migration to that area (Queyroz 1930: 745; Chandra R. de Silva 1972: 88). However, none of the available ethnohistorical documents originating in Batticaloa—whether Tamil, Sinhala, or Dutch—mentions this Moorish resettlement, and the slender evidence available suggests that significant numbers of Muslims had begun to settle in the region well before that.<sup>22</sup>

The *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam* provides little historical information on the Moors in the Batticaloa region, except to note that in the sixteenth century some “Turkish” (*tulukkar*) families and traders with names like *Paṭṭāṇi* (Pathan), *Cultāṇ* (Sultan), and *Cīkantar* (Sikandar) arrived, along with some Indian “*Aṇṇāmalai* Chetties,” to trade in *chaya* (Indian madder), a red dye-root (Nadarajah 1962: 59). The *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalveṭṭu*, in contrast, mentions the Moors (*Cōṇakar*) quite prominently, providing a ranked list of the seven Moorish matrilineal clans who settled in the Akkaraipattu region under the protection of the Sinhalese nobleman Rajapakse Mudaliyar, and indicating that the highest rank was given to the Moorish headman of *Poṇṇācci kudi*. This document gives no specific indication of the date of arrival or place of origin of the Moors in the Nadu Kadu–Akkaraipattu region, but the fact that they were already organized into seven ranked matriclans would imply that intermarriage with and conversion of local matrilineal Tamils had taken place earlier.<sup>23</sup>

The patronage received by the Moors both from the local Sinhalese *dissāva*, Rajapakse Mudaliyar, and from the Kandyan king is a striking feature of the *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalveṭṭu*. Not only is the Moorish headman of *Poṇṇācci kudi* given authority over the other six clans, but he is given a royal land grant and accorded the right to receive a share of ritual honors at the Tirukkoviil temple.<sup>24</sup> Disguised as a Muslim mendicant, the Kanyan monarch himself is said to have received alms at a mosque in the region and to have subsequently given a land grant to the mosque at Varipattanchenai, near Irakkamam on the Ampara–Akkaraipattu road. The Moors are characterized as impoverished supplicants who are then rewarded by the Sinhala authorities with both lands

and local honors (Neville 1887c: 139). A British collector's report in 1825 noting the existence of several paddy fields in Nintavur "which originally were the personal property of the Kings of Kandy" (Report by I. N. Mooyaart, 5 March 1825, CO416/27 J12,143, National Archives, Kew, UK), together with the fact that *nintavūr* is a Tamilization of the Sinhala *nindagama* (village and land conditionally granted by the Kandyan king to a local personage) (see D'Oyly 1929: 82), also confirms a Kandyan connection with the Moors here, although one that is not historically dated. This might also help one appreciate an observation by the Dutch official Jacob Burnand that, at the time of the Kandyan Treaty of 1766, the Moors "showed less inclination to submit to the Govt. of the Company and were more attached to the court of Candia" than were the restive Mukkuvar chiefs. However, Burnand also claimed that these political sympathies were entirely reversed after some years of Dutch rule, noting in 1794 that "the Company at present can rely more on the allegiance of the Maurmen than on that of the Moekoewas" (1794: 23).

In de Graeuwe's Dutch memorandum of 1676 the Moors and Chetties are said to be jointly governed by one headman in each subregion. The joint headman for Manmunai and Eravur was a Hindu named "Inandere Neijdue," while the 185 families of Moors and Chetties in Karavaku, Sammanturai, and Akkaraipattu were jointly governed by "the More Carriapeer," possibly a forebear of the politically influential Moorish Kariapper family of Kalmunai (de Graeuwe 1676: 4–5).<sup>25</sup> Like all of the Tamil castes, the Moors were required to perform service (*ūliyam*) and pay annual taxes to the Dutch East India Company, an obligation they discharged through provision of beeswax and forest hardwood. By the seventeenth century, the Moors had clearly become an important part of the Batticaloa social landscape, but their total numbers do not appear great. Yet oddly enough, in Jacob Burnand's detailed *Memorial*, written a century and a quarter later, the Moors are estimated to comprise two-thirds, and the Tamils only one-third, of the total population of the Batticaloa region. Along with the Veddas and Sinhals in the southern and western districts, and the politically dominant "Malabars" (Tamils) of the central coast, the Moors, says Burnand, are "found scattered everywhere among the Inhabitants excepting in the Corlepattoe [Koralai Pattu, the region of Eravur] where they alone form the population" all the way north to Kathiraveli (1794: 121). Nowhere does Burnand provide specific demographic data on the Moors; instead he lumps them together with all "casts subject to capitation or ooliam" (1794: 109–11). Given Burnand's compulsive efforts to count even the number of Veddas roaming

the forests of Bintenne, it is hard to understand why, if the Moors actually comprised two-thirds of the population, they would not have been a central focus of enumeration (and taxation) for the local Dutch overseer. Instead, Burnand gives relatively cursory attention to the Moors throughout his report. Perhaps an examination of Burnand's original Dutch manuscript would reveal a misreading by the British colonial translators. Certainly the census figures for the Eastern Province indicate that the Moorish population was roughly two-thirds the size of the Tamil population throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Burnand's account clearly indicates that the eighteenth century "Maurmen" of Batticaloa were engaged in both trade and agriculture, which is still true today. In several places he refers to the services of Moorish carpenters, shipwrights, and weavers, and to Moorish bullock transport operators ("Boyerous"), as well as to a former company of Moorish troops (1794: 38, 159, 170, 180, 261, 399). In contrast to the Tamils, who are said to remain perennially in debt at the end of each cultivation season, "the Maurmen are sometimes wiser and more economical" (1794: 63). Listing the native officials appointed by the Dutch colonial governor, Burnand starts with his second in command, "the Land Vidahn of the 8 Provinces of Batticaloa, of Panoa, & the Corlepattoe" and concludes with "the Head pedies of the 8 provinces of Batticaloa, now 11 in number," followed by "the Headmen of the Maurs" (1794: 284). The inclusion of the Moorish headmen on this list as appointees of the governor, rather than of the local Dutch commander in Batticaloa, signifies their important status in the colonial hierarchy. At the same time, their position on the list below the "Head pedies of the 8 provinces" — who are "considered as the owners of the Country" according to Burnand (1794: 121) — suggests a degree of subordination to the Mukkuvar ruling elite.

A widespread historical legend of Batticaloa, recounted in several different versions, tells of a caste war between the newly arrived Mukkuvars and the indigenous Timilar, a fishing and farming caste nowadays concentrated in the Koddiyar region on the south shore of Trincomalee Bay.<sup>26</sup> Whether such a war actually occurred, or what its real causes might have been, is not known, but the Muslims are said to have intervened on the side of the Mukkuvars. The legendary battle between the two castes is described in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam* and in oral retellings as a contest for kingly dominance and control of the region. As the story is told, the Mukkuvars treacherously assassinated the Timilar chief during a folk-drama performance, and then, with the aid of

some itinerant Muslim traders (*Paṭṭāṇi*, Pathans; *Tulukkar*, Turks), they routed the Timilars in battle, forcing the survivors to flee northward toward Trincomalee. The victorious Muslims and Mukkuvars erected a boundary stone near Vakarai, and a number of local place names north of Batticaloa town are said to derive from events in that war.<sup>27,28</sup> Some versions of this legend go on to recount that, when asked by the Mukkuvar chiefs whether they would prefer to receive as their reward gold, land in the Batticaloa region, or wives from the Mukkuvar caste, the Muslims shrewdly chose to accept wives and to settle down as local Moors. This way, they eventually acquired both wives *and* land, thanks to the matrilineal inheritance system of the Mukkuvars (Lewis 1923b; Yalman 1967: 283). Some versions of the story also suggest that the Moors were deliberately settled in the vicinity of Eravur as a buffer against future Timilar incursions from the north (Kandiah 1964: 392–93; Fuglerud 2003: 69). In several Tamil tellings of this tale, it was asserted that while the Moors may have *hoped* for Mukkuvar wives, they were actually only given captured Timilar women to wed.

A legend with similarities to the Mukkuvar-Timilar conflict is recorded by Simon Casie Chitty for the Puttalam District on the northwest coast of the island, where the Mukkuvars are said to have once found themselves at sword-points with another rival fishing caste, the Karaiyars, whose chief had demanded the Mukkuvar leader's daughter in marriage. Once again the Mukkuvars killed the rival chief and banished their enemy with the armed assistance of itinerant Muslims, in this case "the crew of an Arab vessel then at anchor at Kudremale," but this time the Muslims were rewarded by the Mukkuvars' mass conversion to Islam (Casie Chitty 1834: 276).<sup>29</sup> Muslims are not mentioned, however, in any of the accounts of the Mukkuvar-Timilar war that appear in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam*. There, it is one or another "Kalinga" ruler (including Magha himself) who is credited with decimating the Timilars—or killing the Yakkas (indigenous demons) with whom the Timilars are at times identified—and installing the *Paṭaiyāṭci* army commanders of Kukan kulam as local rulers (Nadarajah 1962: 22, 72–76).

In comparative perspective, it seems that the caste-war theme and the idea of Moorish intervention on the side of the Mukkuvars are parts of a larger folkloric repertoire shared across the eastern and northern regions of Sri Lanka that is very difficult to assess historiographically (Indrapala 1965). So universal is the myth of a Mukkuvar-Moorish alliance that I even heard it woven into oral accounts of the early history of Akkaraipattu. The story goes

that the Mukkuvar settlers in Akkaraipattu were exposed to the depredations of bandits (sometimes said to be Veddass), whenever they journeyed to the market in Tirukkivil. The familiar band of “Pathans” and “Turks,” passing through on business, helped the Mukkuvars clean up their bandit problem. The local Tamils offered to give the Muslims wives if they would remain in Akkaraipattu to help fend off future attacks, and the first Moorish settlement sprang up around what is today the Grand Mosque.

These various ethnohistorical traditions and early reports, admittedly ambiguous, generic, and woefully incomplete, nevertheless identify the Moors and the Mukkuvars as having shared the Batticaloa region from precolonial times. From what is known ethnographically of the kinship and social organization of the Moors in modern-day Batticaloa, a pattern of Muslim intermarriage with, and conversion of, Hindu Mukkuvars and possibly other Tamil castes seems very likely to have occurred over the centuries. A parallel process, the gradual incorporation of Mukkuvar fisherfolk into the Muslim Mappila community of Kerala, into the Marakkayar Muslim community of Tamilnadu, and into the coastal Catholic communities of both states, is well documented, although conflicts have sometimes erupted as a result (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 5:110–11; D’Souza 1959; Gough 1961: 415; Ram 1991; More 1993: 78). While Hindu-Muslim intermarriage is rare today in the Batticaloa region, at least one early-twentieth-century source asserts that “mixed marriages between Moormen and Mukwa women are common” and that in some cases these Mukkuvar wives do not convert to Islam (Canagaratnam 1921: 38). The existence of a matrilineal clan system among the Moors which closely resembles the matriclan system of the Mukkuvars—and even shares a few Mukkuvar matriclan names—supports this historical hypothesis, which is also quietly acknowledged by many local Tamils and Moors today (Saleem 1990: 29).<sup>30</sup>

#### REMNANTS OF CHIEFSHIP

Informed by some of this ethnohistorical evidence, Tamils in Akkaraipattu have accepted a view of the past—that is, a sort of generalized deep antiquity (*āti kālam*, commonly referenced colloquially as *anta kālattile*, “in that time”)—in which the entire Batticaloa region was once under the Mukkuvar *vannimai*, the political hegemony of Mukkuvar Vanniyars and Podiyars. The only formal vestige of that hegemony still in existence today is the office of the Urpodiya (*Ūrppōṭiyār*, from *ūr*, home village + *pōṭiyār*, landowning feudal



chief), who is the titular leader of the high castes in Akkaraipattu. The extent of the territory over which the Urpodiyaar traditionally exercised his authority is not certain, but it presumably extended beyond the local Tamil settlements to include the Moorish neighborhoods of Akkaraipattu as well. When the British took over from the Dutch at the close of the eighteenth century, there was a Mukkuvar chief Podiyar who claimed authority over all the castes in the pattu, including the Velalars of Tambiluvil. The extent to which the Akkaraipattu Urpodiyaar today is the direct historical successor to the eighteenth-century Mukkuvar chief of the entire district is not known. In any case, the evidence of Mukkuvar regional dominance is sufficiently strong in the Dutch and British records, and in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Mānmiyam*, to conclude that today's Urpodiyaar is at least the heir to a once pervasive political idea, the concept of the *mukkuvar vannimai*.

Within his dwindling domain, which now consists of the Tamil neighborhoods of Akkaraipattu town and the outlying villages of Kolavil and Panankadu, the Urpodiyaar exercises what remains of the Mukkuvar domination of the lower castes. In reality, however, the office of the Urpodiyaar amounts to whatever an energetic incumbent can still make of it, capitalizing on his own personality, informal networks, and a nostalgic feeling among members of the highest castes that the title and office should not become extinct. It is definitely not a full-time job; the Urpodiyaar during my early fieldwork in the 1970s was a notary public and lawyer's agent who exercised the post in his spare time. In the early 1990s the office passed to an energetic schoolmaster who has spearheaded the reconstruction of the high-caste Pillaiyaar temple and the reinvigoration of its board of matrilineal trustees. As titular leader of all the high-caste Tamils, the Urpodiyaar claims—much more in principle, nowadays, than in practice—the authority to regulate the duties of the lower castes, particularly the household service (*kuṭimai*) castes such as the Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers.

The pre-modern relationship of the Urpodiyaar to the Muslim inhabitants of his territory is uncertain, although it seems clear that the local Mukkuvar chiefs would have asserted at least nominal authority over them. The large size of the Moorish population in specific settlements such as Akkaraipattu, Nintavur, Sammanturai, Kalmunai, Kattankudy, and Eravur must have meant that Mukkuvar dominance was exercised primarily through a monopoly of agricultural land and regulation of the domestic and artisanal services provided to the Moors by lower-ranking Tamil castes. In the 1970s the Urpodiyaar took the position shared by most Tamils that the Moors were “outside” the local caste

system, not “share-holding” participants in the domestic and temple-based rituals that served to validate the social hierarchy under his supervision. The Moors, for their part, have sought in modern times to reduce their dependence on Tamil service castes (e.g., elimination of Paraiyar Drummers at mosque festivals), although routine employment by Muslims of Tamil Washermen and Blacksmiths still continues. The tragic political and military polarization of the Tamils and the Moors, particularly since the outbreak of the armed Tamil-Sinhala ethnic conflict in the 1980s, has now pushed this schism entirely beyond the domain of local honorifics and hereditary status-dramas. Also, in the wake of the Eelam conflict, some of the Tamil service castes (Barbers and Drummers) have totally stopped participating in high-caste funeral ceremonies, so the supervisory caste authority of the Urpodiya has dwindled practically to zero. Soon, all that will remain of this Mukkuvar feudal office is the title and a special seat on the high-caste-temple board of trustees.

#### OTHER TAMIL ELITES

##### Velalars: Ritual Overseers and Guardians of the Earth

Along with the Mukkuvars, two other castes are recognized as sharing the highest status level in the Batticaloa caste system, the Velalars and the Virasaiva Kurukkals. It is known from both historical and ethnographic evidence that Velalars in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu have a strong tradition of association and alliance with the Brahmin priestly castes of that region (Stein 1967–1968, 1980; Barnett 1970), while in Jaffna the Velalars enjoy the role of temple patrons to a small Brahmin priesthood (Pfaffenberger 1982). This South Indian pattern of Velalar religious linkage is consistent with the ethnohistorical traditions of Batticaloa, which assert that Velalars were brought from India at some point during the medieval era and installed as Hindu temple overseers and functionaries in perpetuity by local kings. The songs and legends in the *Mattukkalappu Mānmiyam* reiterate the theme that conquering kings such as Magha brought seven clans of *kōvaiciyar*, or “herding Vaishyas,” one of three groups commonly proclaimed as Velalar progenitors (see Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 7:361–66; Rev. Miron Winslow 1862: 967), to perform such essential temple tasks as polishing the vessels, tending the lamps, storing the temple’s grain, and carrying the palanquin of the god. The names of some of these kudis are among the most common Velalar matriclan names in the Batticaloa region today (Nadarajah 1962: 70–71; Canagaratnam 1921: 35; Kandiah 1964: 435–36).

The responsibilities of the Velalars to perform the sorts of menial temple-service tasks mentioned in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam* have, in the course of time, been shunted to a professional temple-servant caste known as the *Kōvilār* (people of the temple, *kōvil*). Kovilars are found today mainly in the vicinity of the major regional temples at Tirukkovil, Mandur, and Kokkadichchola. At the latter temple they assert their historical identity as “*Karaikāl Velalars*,” as opposed to the mainstream agriculturalist Velalars whom they consider to be “*Maruṅkūr Velalars*.”<sup>31</sup> Although Poṇṇācci *vayirṟuvār* (sub-matrilineage), which bears the same name as one of the ancient, textually canonized Velalar matriclans, is found among the modern Kovilars, the agriculturalist Velalars do not recognize this as proof of Velalar status. Instead, they claim to be hereditary supervisors of the Kovilars, whom they treat as a separate and inferior caste. Until a political rupture in the 1960s completely extinguished the role of the Velalars at the Kokkadichchola shrine, they enjoyed the hereditary office of the chief ritual factotum who administered the “inner duties” of the temple on behalf of the Mukkuvar clan trustees. A striking ethnohistorical parallel is found in the work of Nicholas Dirks on the “little kingdom” of Pudukkottai in Tamilnadu, where a hereditary subset of Velalar specialists retained the role of ritual overseers in the lineage temples of the Tondaiman Rajas, an elite branch of the Kallar warrior caste. Despite the fact that Maravar and Kallar warriors seized political control from the original Velalar agriculturalist population between the tenth and fifteenth centuries C.E., these Velalar specialists continued to serve as “guardians of honor” for the Kallar royal lineage into the twentieth century, supervising the distribution of ritual honors and overseeing the annual festivals at the temples as a mark of respect to the Tondaiman Rajas (Dirks 1987: 230–39).

The *Kōṇēcar Kalvetṭu*, a seventeenth-century Trincomalee temple charter which may have served to inspire the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam*, records a very similar tradition of two hierarchically complementary temple-service castes imported from India during the Chola times by King Kulakkottan. The seniormost caste was the *Tāṇattār* from Marunkur (whose members administered the temple and performed dancing and boar-hunting rituals), and the junior caste was the *Varipattār* from Karaikal (whose members carried out the same list of menial temple chores enumerated in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam*) (Veluppillai 1990).<sup>32</sup> The idea that Velalars were appointed by local political elites to supervise the rituals at major temples is further exemplified at Mandur, where legend recounts that local Cirpatam leaders brought

in a Periya Kavuttan kudi Velalar from near Tirukkovil (Korai Kalappu) (see map 7) to serve as the chief trustee, or Vannakkar, of the regionally important Kandaswamy temple (Whitaker 1999). At Tirukkovil and Tambiluvil, where the Velalars are locally predominant in the population, they supply the chief Vannakkar and currently assert hereditary ownership of the temple, although twentieth-century litigation and commissions of inquiry show that the Mukkuvars have strongly contested this claim to exclusive Velalar control.

At each of the three largest “regional temples”—Kokkadichcholai, Mandur, and Tirukkovil—the ethnohistorical and ethnographic evidence points toward a similar model of temple management based on the regional dominance of the Mukkuvar chiefs, who claimed territorial sovereignty as protectors and patrons of these shrines.<sup>33</sup> The Mukkuvars in turn delegated the actual management and day-to-day supervision of these temples to hereditary Velalar trustees and ritual officers drawn from specific Velalar kudis, who in turn oversaw the priests and the Kovilar Temple Servants. In the twentieth century, however, the Velalars at each of these regional temples launched legal and political battles to liberate themselves from their ritual subordination to the Mukkuvars (and to other locally powerful castes such as the Cirpatars in Mandur), and the outcome has been different at each temple. At Kokkadichcholai in the 1960s the Velalars were effectively blocked by the Mukkuvar temple trustees, so they withdrew from the temple entirely, keeping possession of the temple paddy fields that they had cultivated on hereditary service-tenure. At Tirukkovil, a commission of inquiry in 1954 reaffirmed that the offices of temple Talaivar (chief) and Kanakkappillai (accountant) would be filled by Panikkana kudi Mukkuvars from Akkaraipattu and Naypattimunai, while the office of Vannakkar would be filled by a local Kantan kudi Velalar. However, the scheme became moribund, and by the 1970s the Velalars in Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil had gained *de facto* control of the temple. In Mandur a stalemate of sorts continued into the 1980s between the Periya Kavuttan kudi Velalars, who nominate the chief Vannakkar, and the locally powerful Cirpatam and Karaiyar caste trustees from the four “founding” villages who have refused to relinquish their historical precedence despite claims by the Velalars to have established the shrine all by themselves (Whitaker 1999). It is precisely because these three temples are panregional in organizational structure and patronage, and are venues for the highly visible dramatization of caste and matriclan rights and privileges, that they have been the loci of such determined efforts by Velalars to bring their local caste status up to a par with the high standing of Velalars in Jaffna and South India.

The Velalars are said to have been the first group in the Batticaloa region to have brought with them an entourage of hereditarily bound service castes, although the formulaic number of eighteen *ciraikal* (slaves, dependents) far exceeds the number of low castes present today. A number of localized legends recount how the dominant Mukkuvars subsequently seized control of the service castes—represented by the Barbers, the Washermen, and the Drummers—while permitting the Velalars to continue to share their services as well. Although the issue is never addressed formally in any of the accounts I have seen, the implication of these narratives is that the Velalars were not sufficiently well established or dominant in the Batticaloa region to resist the Mukkuvars. Conversely, the Mukkuvars are portrayed as originally lacking the service castes normally associated with a dominant high-status landed elite. Again, there are striking ethnohistorical parallels with Dirks’s research on the kingdom of Pudukkottai in Tamilnadu, where the Velalars are remembered as original settlers who brought in the “18 service castes,” only to be deposed politically and militarily by the Maravar and Kallar warriors they had originally invited to protect them (Dirks 1987: 139–43).

In Mukkuvar accounts, at least, the Velalars are said to have arrived later, with an attitude of exclusivity and superiority they were later forced to relinquish. One widespread tale with many local variations recounts the fate of an arrogant Velalar nicknamed *Ottuvarā* (“quarrelsome”) Kantan who arrived from Jaffna (or Nagapattinam) with his unmarried sisters (or daughters) and an entourage of service castes. In most versions of this gruesome story, Kantan ends up being killed, his service castes appropriated, and his sisters or daughters—that is, those who have not been slain or who have not already committed suicide—married to local Mukkuvars.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of whether Velalar settlements in the Batticaloa region predate or postdate the arrival of the Mukkuvars, it is a striking fact that the Velalars, and virtually all of the lower castes as well, today follow exactly the same matrilineal descent and matrilineal marriage system as the Mukkuvars. This could imply a common regional origin for both castes, or it could indicate, as the aforementioned legend seems to suggest, that the Velalars were compelled to conform to a Mukkuvar matrilineal paradigm of social organization. Thus, for example, the eighteenth-century redaction of the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇmiyam* includes a poetic enumeration of the seven matrilineal clans of the Velalars said to have been installed as temple servants by Kalinga Magha (Nadarajah 1962: 70–71).

As in South India and in Jaffna, the Velalars in Batticaloa like to conceive of themselves as custodians and inheritors of the soil; in fact, the temple tra-

dition at Kokkadichcholaï identifies certain Velalars as descended from the “earth-guarding lineage” (*pūpāla kōttiram*). Jacob Burnand’s *Memorial* of 1794 describes the “Bellalas” as holding a lesser share of the paddy lands of the region as compared with the Mukkuvars, although he suggests with some exasperation that the future appointment of Velalars as local Podiyar headmen would result in better compliance with company orders and bring in more grain tax revenue as well (1794: 57, 287). Overall, the regional historical and ethnographic record is meager with regard to the Batticaloa Velalars, possibly because of the assumed identification of this caste with the sociopolitical hierarchy in Jaffna (Banks 1960; David 1977; Pfaffenburger 1982).

The legal scholar H. W. Tambiah surmised, on the basis of reported adherence to the Thesavalamai law of Jaffna in the villages near the Batticaloa fort in the early nineteenth century, that the Velalars of the entire Batticaloa region—unlike the Mukkuvars and other castes—were governed by the Jaffna legal code (1954: 89). However, I have found no evidence of a distinctive property or personal law among the present-day Velalars on the east coast; in fact, they follow the very same principles of matrilineal social organization, matrilocal marriage, and transfer of dowry property as do the Mukkuvars and all other castes of the Batticaloa region. The puzzle is solved by a passage in Burnand’s *Memorial* (1794: 123) which makes a clear distinction between the “Bellales 1st sort,” who live in several large, well-established Velalar villages in the interior of the Batticaloa district, and the “Bellales 2nd sort,” a separate subcaste who inhabit only Puliyantivu Island and the environs of the Dutch fort. It is only the more recently arrived Velalars of the “2nd sort”—presumably immigrants from Jaffna pursuing career opportunities under colonial patronage—who would have subscribed to the Thesavalamai law.

The absence of literature on the Batticaloa Velalars makes an interpretation of their position in the regional social system a particularly challenging task. Even the author of the 1921 *Manual of the Batticaloa District*, Mudaliyar Canagaratnam, who gives every indication of being a Jaffna Velalar himself, offers practically no information on the internal structure or traditions of this caste beyond an unreliable list of matriclans. Nur Yalman’s fieldwork data from the mid-1950s illustrates the ethnographic problem vividly: he was told in Tambiluvil that the “Vellalar Kudi” encompassed virtually every Tamil group except the Barbers, Washermen, and Smiths (1967: 328).<sup>35</sup> The central phenomenon here and elsewhere in the Tamil-speaking world is the enormous prestige which is associated with the title of Velalar, an absorbent and expansive caste designation which has swelled from 37 percent of the population of the Jaffna

Peninsula in the early nineteenth century to at least 50 percent of the population there today (Bastin 1997: 398). Despite the deep connections between the Mukkuvar caste and the political history of Batticaloa, high-ranking Tamils in the 1970s would speak to me of Velalar affiliations much more readily than they would of Mukkuvar ties or traditions. As I eventually discovered, “Velalar” is routinely invoked as a descriptive term rather than as the name of a formally bounded caste. On occasions, I found people using the word in an honorific or occupational sense to mean “prestigious paddy cultivator,” on the spurious assumption that the Velalar title itself derives etymologically from *vēlāṇmai* (cultivation, especially of paddy). It is this elasticity in popular Tamil usage that accounts for Yalman’s report of so many subspecies of “Vellalas.” Like Hiatt (1973: 236), I never came across “Karaiyar Velalar,” nor anything as inventive as the “Muslim Velalar” lineage recorded by Whitaker (1999: 27), but I did eventually find some people who were willing to accept the hybrid expression “Mukkuva Velalar,” which Yalman earlier reported in Tambiluvil (1967: 328–29).<sup>36</sup>

#### Virasaiva Kurukkals: A Non-Brahmin Priesthood

From a comparative South Asian point of view, a striking aspect of the Hindu caste system in Batticaloa is the relative absence of an indigenous Brahmin priestly caste. Louis Dumont (1970: 216) was quick to note this tendency throughout Sri Lanka as a whole, and he therefore adjusted his appraisal of the island’s entire Hindu–Buddhist social hierarchy to one of “quasi-caste rather than caste proper,” since the Brahmin and the Untouchable define the two essential poles of his structuralist theory of Indian society. Maurice Hocart (1950), who was a firsthand observer of the Sri Lankan scene, saw more accurately the underlying regal and political—rather than Brahmanical purity-focused—symbolism of caste in Sri Lanka among both the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Using fieldwork data from Batticaloa, I have elsewhere offered an extensive critique of Dumont and of McKim Marriott’s biomoral-substance theory of caste (McGilvray 1982b). More recently, a claim of pervasive patriarchal Brahmanical influence (“Sanskritization”) in eastern Sri Lanka has been put forward by Obeyesekere as part of his psychoanalytic interpretation of the Hindu–Buddhist Pattini cult, and this, too, I have challenged by documenting the matrilineal institutions and non-Sanskritic Hindu culture of the Batticaloa region (Obeyesekere 1984; McGilvray 1988).

There are, of course, Brahmin priests and non-Brahmin Saiva Kurukkals originally from Jaffna who have been employed at some of the major temples,

such as at Tirukkovil and Sittandy, or in the urban temples of Batticaloa town, for generations, and the recent Sanskritizing trends at the Karativu Kannaki temple are also undeniable (Obeyesekere 1984: 594–600). Overall, however, the number of Brahmins is very small, and a pervasive Brahmanical ideology is not characteristic of the region. As far as I know, the only groups claiming any Brahmin ancestry are the Cirpatar caste around Mandur, whose origin myth celebrates multicaste hybridity (Whitaker 1999: chap. 5), and the Tattar Smiths.<sup>37</sup> Jacob Burnand said of the Batticaloa Brahmins he knew in 1794, “This Cast which is not Registered is not numerous and will amount to about 20 families throughout the whole Country” (1794: 122). The point I would emphasize is that Brahmins are not a part of village life in most areas of the Batticaloa region, and they are not linked into historically established patterns of intercaste relations and communal ritual. Whitaker was told of itinerant Brahmin astrologers who set up shop at the Mandur temple festival back in the 1940s (1999: 229), but very few Tamils I met in Akkaraipattu could describe the distinctive features of a Brahmin lifestyle, and none could recall any time-honored “shares” allocated to Brahmin priests in the local ritual tradition. This is because Brahmins—even after several generations—are looked on as foreigners from Jaffna or Colombo, ritual specialists whose role is technical and narrow, not a regular part of Tamil society as it is locally conceived.

This dearth of Brahmins may not always have been the case, since archaeological and epigraphical evidence suggests that Brahmin settlements were actively sponsored by Chola royal patronage in the Eastern Province in the tenth century. While this was especially true around Trincomalee (Gunasingham 1973, 1974), one of the documented Chola military outposts in the Batticaloa region was also at Sagamam, just five miles south of Akkaraipattu (Pathmanathan 1978: 46, 50). Even so, the ethnohistorical traditions of Batticaloa are not conspicuously laden with references to Brahmin settlements or Brahmin privileges, and some of the priestly titles, such as Nampi and Tappaṭṭar, that are scattered in regional texts and poems provoke puzzlement today.<sup>38</sup> In addition to such localized priesthoods as the hereditary Cirpatar *kappukan* officiants at the Mandur Kandaswamy temple (Whitaker 1999), the Velalar *kappukans* at the Tambiluvil Kannaki kovil, the Vedda *pūcāri* priests at the Palchenai Periyasami temple near Vakaraï (Dart 1985), and the many ordinary caste priests found in village and neighborhood shrines, the Batticaloa region has nurtured a more distinctive non-Brahmin priesthood with a hereditary role to play in both temple ritual and household rites.

These east-coast priests belong to the so-called *kurukkaḷ vamicam* (Skt.



*vamśa*, “race, lineage, family”), a non-Brahmin Virasaiva (Lingayat) priestly caste first recorded by Yalman during his research in Tambiluvil (1967: 314, 325–31). They claim the role of Hindu priest by descent, having been brought to this region originally from India by invading rulers such as Magha and Kulakkottan who installed them as officiants in temples at Okanda, Tirukkovil, Kovil Poraitivu, Kokkadichcholai, and other sacred places including—some say—the great Konesvaram temple in Trincomalee and the Muttulingaswamy temple at Kataragama.<sup>39</sup> Several historians point to circumstantial evidence that Kalinga Magha was himself a Virasaiva devotee, which would help to explain his ruthless anti-Buddhist, anti-Vaishnava actions and also provide a possible historical origin for the Virasaiva Kurukkals in Batticaloa and in Jaffna (Liyanaimage 1968: 123–28; Pathmanathan 1978: 110, 118–19, 213). The Kurukkals I met generally spoke of their group as a *vamicam* (“*vamsam*”), or line of descent, rather than as a caste (*cāti*, “*jati*”), although their descent rule itself proved to be matrilineal instead of patrilineal.<sup>40</sup>

### Sangamar and Jangama

The Virasaiva Kurukkals in the vicinity of Akkaraipattu are subdivided into three distinct matrilineal clans, referred to by the interchangeable terms *kuṭi* (*kudi*) or *kōttiram* (*gotra*). The two seniormost clans possess the titles of Sangamar (*caṅkamar* or *vīra caṅkamar*) and Tesantara (*tēcāntara* or *ticāmukam*), respectively. A third clan has arisen in this locality in the last four generations, matrilineal descendants of the adopted daughter of a famous Kurukkal, and this group is called Sanniyasi (world-renouncer) *kudi*. Whether they are called *kudis* or *gotras*, such matrilineal descent groups among the Virasaiva Kurukkals are uniformly exogamous. A long-term pattern of bilateral marriage exchange has existed between the two major Kurukkal clans, Sangamar and Tesantara, although evidence for this is much clearer in the genealogical record than it is in current practice. There are many marriages today between Kurukkals and members of the high-ranking Velalar and Mukkuvar castes, even though the offspring are thereby judged to be less genealogically qualified for the priesthood. Most of the evidence suggests that the Sangamars and the Tesantara Kurukkals once guarded a close reciprocal marriage alliance and shared a ritual division of labor in the realm of priestly functions. However, there also seemed to be a rivalry between the two groups that was sometimes revealed in casual comments by Kurukkal informants.

The title Sangamar is cognate with the title Jangama which identifies the

Lingayat priest in Mysore and elsewhere in South India (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 4:236–91; Enthoven 1922, 2:353–73; McCormack 1963: 59; McCormack 1973), but the second Kurukkal matriclan, Tesantara, is more difficult to identify. Both *tēcāntara* (foreign, wandering freely) and *ticāmukam* (facing all directions), seem compatible with the Lingayat concept of an all-pervading sacredness-in-motion, but neither is mentioned in the standard sources on Virasaivism.<sup>41</sup>

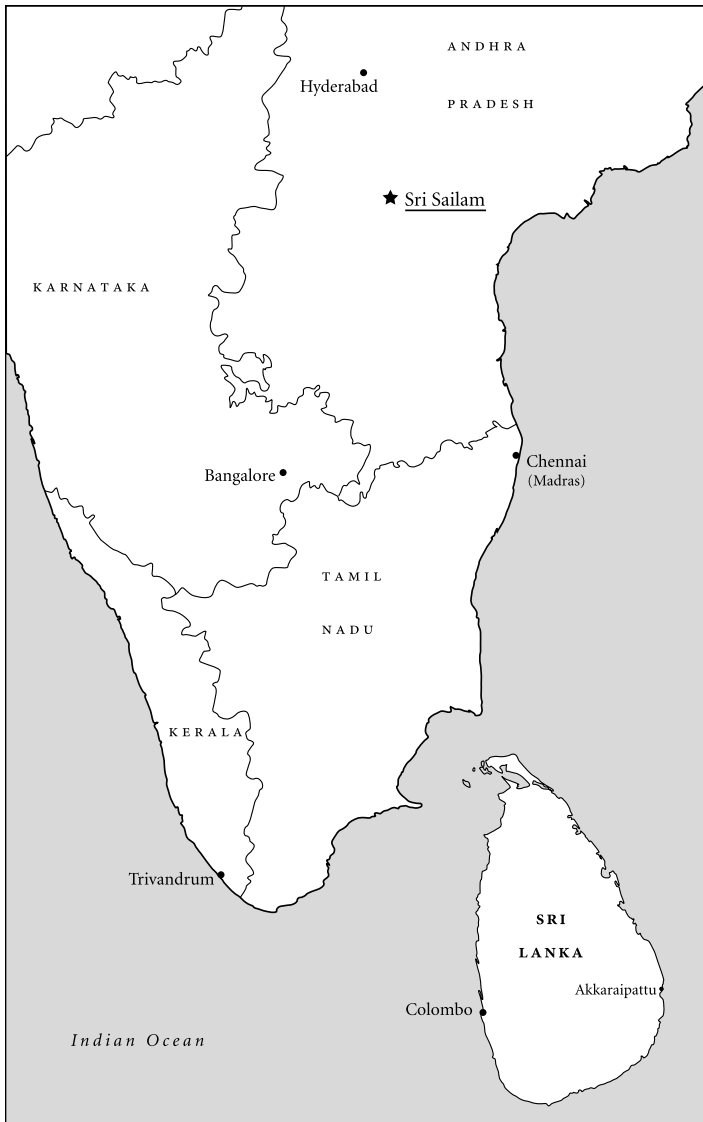
The Virasaiva sect arose in India in the twelfth century C.E. in opposition to the prevailing Brahmin sacerdotal monopoly and the ossification of formalized Hindu ritual (Ramanujan 1973). While it is true that what began as a rebellious egalitarian *bhakti* (devotional) movement became over the centuries a Lingayat caste system with its own priestly elite, the anti-Brahmin, anti-Twice-Born theme still remains an important diacritical marker of Virasaiva identity (Parvathamma 1971: chap. 3; Michael 1992: chap.1). The Virasaiva Kurukkals I met in the Batticaloa region stoutly maintained their superiority to Brahmins and rejected the Brahmanical “varna doctrine” (*varuṇa vētam*), proclaiming their adherence to a rare agamic text called the *Virākamam* that apparently exists, although I have been unable to locate a copy.<sup>42</sup> Their own theory is that a truly desireless (*parrillāta*) person, having received proper initiation (*tīṭcai, liṅkatāraṇam*), having performed the prescribed daily and pre-prandial worship of the personal lingam, which is worn in a silver casket suspended on a chain from the neck, and having realized true spiritual union with Siva, is impervious to all forms of ritual pollution from whatever source. The title of Sangamar (Jangama) is recognized as referring to this ideal; the word derives from *caṅkamam*, which means both “union” (e.g., union with Siva) and “moving” (e.g., the priest as the living abode of Siva) (Rev. Miron Winslow 1862: 387; Enthoven 1922, 2:373; Ramanujan 1973: 20). The conjunction of these ideas is expressed in a longer version of the Kurukkal title that I recorded in Akkaraipattu: *vīra makēcuvara kuruliṅka caṅkamar*. The sonorous phrase “Guru-Linga-Jangama” is a motto which commemorates the three cornerstones of Virasaiva doctrine: the religious preceptor, the iconic lingam stone, and the priest (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 4:272; McCormack 1959: 119). The additional title of Makēsvara (Maheshvar) is sometimes applied to the Jangama priest, according to Enthoven (1922, 2:355; see also Nanjundayya and Anantha Krishna Iyer 1928–1935, 4:88).

Of the five recognized Virasaiva “thrones” (*pīṭam*), or centers of Lingayat priestly authority in India, the Sangamar Kurukkals of Batticaloa claim a his-

torical connection with Mallikārjunappuram, otherwise known as Sri Sailam, a pilgrimage center in the forested hills of Kurnool District in Andhra Pradesh (map 11). At Sri Sailam the worship of the *jyotirlinga* of Siva as Lord Mallikarjuna is performed by Virasaiva Jangama priests, who permit all devotees to enter the sanctuary and physically touch the icon—as I did in 2002—while the shrine of Siva’s consort, Bramarambha, is staffed by more ritually fastidious Brahmins. One of the other major attractions for Lingayat pilgrims at Sri Sailam is the headquarters or “throne” of Jagadguru Paṇṭitārādhyā, a Virasaiva preceptor whose title bears a slight resemblance to the main Sangamar gotra name in Akkaraipattu, *paṇṭitarccuṇa tēvar kōttiram* (Udayalinga Rao 1973; Vijaya Kumar and Suryanarayana 1991; personal visit to Sri Sailam in 2002).

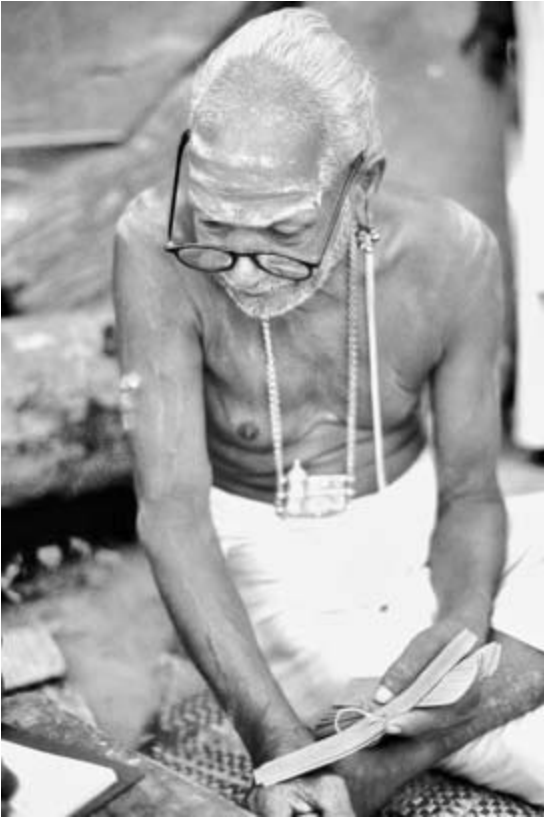
The Virasaiva Kurukkals in Sri Lanka are entitled to wear from their necks a silver casket containing a small personal lingam stone as a mark of their priestly line. Although the ultimate source of these grey slate lingam stones is at Parvatagiri, North Arcot (Zvelebil 1984: 157), I was told that they could be routinely obtained by mail order from a boutique located in the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, Tamilnadu. The type of lingam casket I saw worn by members of the Sangamar matriclan is termed a *ceccai*, a rectangular case distinctively executed in silver (figures 6 and 7). I was told by Sangamar informants that the Tecantara Kurukkals do not wear the *ceccai* lingam. Some Tecantara clansmen disagreed, but in fact I never saw a Tecantara Kurukkal wearing one. Distinctive egg-shaped lingam caskets (*kauri caṅkam*, *nelli kūtu*) were mentioned as a special mark of the Tecantara Kurukkals, but I also never saw any of these worn. If a Kurukkal wears a lingam, it is necessary for him to remove the inner stone from the *ceccai* and perform a purification (*abishēkam*) of it every morning and to conduct puja worship of the lingam (*liṅka pūcai*) before taking meals, three times each day.

Mortuary customs were also frequently mentioned as distinctive among the Virasaiva Kurukkals, although the absence of any Kurukkal funerals during my fieldwork makes it necessary for me to rely solely on the secondhand accounts I recorded. The striking features include, instead of cremation, the burial of the corpse in a seated upright *camāti* position, legs folded, facing in a northeasterly direction, with the deceased’s personal lingam stone placed inside the mouth. Camphor (or, because of the exorbitant cost of camphor, salt) is packed around the body, and a hole is left in the masonry slab over the grave through which the various substances in a purificatory *abishēkam* rite are poured over the head of the corpse three days later. I was told that if



**MAP 11.** Legendary Kurukkal connection to the Virasaiva center at Sri Sailam, Andhra Pradesh

the Kurukkal had been truly saintly, his personal lingam stone would gradually sprout up through the top of his skull, and when it eventually emerged aboveground like a *svayampulinkam* (self-appearing lingam), a temple would be erected on the spot to venerate this saintly icon. Funerary practices of a similar sort are attested for Virasaiva holy men in present-day Karnataka, pro-



**FIGURE 6.** Nallatamby Kurukkal from Tampaddai, a member of the Vira Sangamar matriline, reading from a palm-leaf manuscript (1971).

viding further circumstantial evidence of a common sectarian heritage (Rev. Miron Winslow 1862: 405; Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 4:285; Enthoven 1922, 2:367; Michael 1992: 3–4).

#### **Annual Circuit of the Pakuti Kurukkal**

The official title of the leading priest of the Sangamar Kurukkal matriline in the Akkaraipattu area had been Pakuti Kurukkal, which means “Kurukkal of the local area” (*pakuti*). The practice is now defunct, but as late as the 1930s the senior Sangamar would undertake an annual circuit or circumambulation (*ūrcurru*) of the Tamil villages in the Akkaraipattu-Tirukkovil area during the month of Markali (December–January) in order to protect Tamil households from the malevolent spirits and sorcerers believed to be active during this damp season. An entourage of Sangamars would accompany the ochre-robed Pakuti Kurukkal as he visited each household to bestow blessings and to receive alms (*tāṇam, kurutaṭṭaṇai*). The Pakuti Kurukkal would stand upon a



**FIGURE 7.** Silver lingam case worn by Nallatamby Kurukkal, with the lingam stone removed for worship (1971).

wooden plank at each house while the members of the household washed and worshiped his feet using turmeric-water (which then becomes *pātōtakam*, or “sanctified foot-washing effluent”), and members of the priestly party would blow the conch to dispel all the lingering spirits in the vicinity.<sup>43</sup> Only the Sangamar Kurukkals took part in the annual circuit, but the alms they collected were subsequently shared with members of the Tecantara Kurukkal matriline, who apparently worked solely as temple priests. Although such an annual circuit has probably not taken place in Akkaraipattu for well over fifty years, and no one presently enacts the role of Pakuti Kurukkal, descriptions of the custom seem consistent with what is known of Lingayat Jangamas and Jagadguru Swamis in Mysore who embody the “moving Siva” during periodic tours and processions within their specific territorial units (McCormack 1963: 63; Parvathamma 1971: 88).

The exclusive role of the Sangamars in this annual circuit was attributed by some informants to their greater imperviousness to ritual pollution, as compared with the Tecantara Kurukkals. It was also mentioned by several Tamil lay people that only the Sangamar Kurukkals would accept cooked vegetarian food served at thirty-first-day domestic *amutu* offerings marking the end of ordinary death pollution. As for their own degree of liminal susceptibility, both Sangamars and Tecantaras observe twelve days of death pollution, as op-

posed to thirty-one days observed by all other Tamils in the Batticaloa region. Several people voiced the conviction that Virasaiva Kurukkals who were of “unmixed” Kurukkal descent and who faithfully obeyed every single Virasaiva sectarian rule would experience no death pollution at all, but in practice they all routinely observed twelve days.

### Clues to Kurukkal Origins

Two members of the Kurukkal vamsam in Akkaraipattu were able to give me partial lists of the technical gotra names recognized by Virasaiva Kurukkals in this region. It should be noted, however, that most ordinary members of the Kurukkal clans showed little interest in, or knowledge of, such gotras. In any case they are inherited, not patrilineally in the orthodox Brahmanical manner, but matrilineally in accordance with the matrilineal kudi system common to all Hindu and Muslim groups in the Batticaloa region. Four of them closely resemble Lingayat gotras documented in the ethnographic literature, and three others have a similarity to common Brahmin gotras.<sup>44</sup> It is reasonably clear from my conversations with the Kurukkals that, in Akkaraipattu at least, the gotras are little more than esoteric names for the major Kurukkal matriclans.<sup>45</sup>

There is a popular belief that the historic “original settlement” of the Sangamar Kurukkals was the seaside hamlet of Tampaddai located midway between Akkaraipattu and Tirukkovil on a sandbar separating the lagoon from the sea (see map 7), although there is also a textual tradition that Tampaddai had once been a Brahmin colony.<sup>46</sup> In the 1970s very few residents of Tampaddai were endogamously married within the Kurukkal vamsam; the vast majority of marriages were between Kurukkals and a number of recognized Velalar matriclans. In Akkaraipattu the Kurukkals, unlike the Mukkuvars and Velalars, do have a slight geographical concentration. Although the neighborhood surrounding the high-caste Pillaiyar temple is often referred to as *kurukkal vaṭṭai* (Kurukkals’ field), they are no longer densely settled there. Instead, many of the members of the Kurukkal vamsam are nowadays found within the outlying suburb of Alaiyadivembu, which falls within Akkaraipattu Division 7.

Apart from the knowledge I gained from the late Nallatamby Kurukkal, who was perhaps the last plausible claimant to the title of Pakuti Kurukkal, I found that the dual division between Sangamars and Tecantara Kurukkals was not widely recognized in Tampaddai. This might indicate that the Tecantara

lineage has historical origins elsewhere; certainly all the Tecantara Kurukkals I met were living in or near to Akkaraipattu.

Tamils in Akkaraipattu also noted that the initiation title of Desikar (*tēcīkar*) was sometimes assumed by the Tecantara Kurukkals, although I met only one person bearing the title during my fieldwork. The Desikars are said to be a section of the non-Brahmin Pandaram priests in South India, according to Thurston and Rangachari, who also discuss the great similarities between Pandarams and Lingayats (1909, 4:46–48). One informant mentioned a tradition of the Virasaiva Kurukkals having come to Sri Lanka from Tiruvaduturai near Mayuram in Tanjavur District, a town with a reputation for Pandaram religious institutions (Thurston and Rangachari 1909: 6:46). A Pandaram connection is also suggested by Ponnampalam Ragupathy (1987: 210), who differentiates the lingam-wearing, Kannada-inflected Virasaiva Pandarams of Jaffna from the “conch-blowing” (*caṅkūti*) or Āṅṅi Pandarams. Alternatively, there is also a possibility that the Virasaiva Kurukkals could have once been linked in some way with the so-called Ārādhyā Brahmins of northern Tamilnadu and the Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh, whose doctrines and rites participate strongly in the Virasaiva tradition and “who differ in almost every important respect from other Brahmins” (Thurston and Rangachari 1909: 1:50–54). According to McCormack, in Mysore “there is a tendency to regard jangamas and aradhya (Saiva) Brahmins as closely related if not identical castes,” either of which may perform life-crisis rites for Lingayat households (1973: 178).<sup>47</sup> However, until further evidence comes to light, all of these possibilities must remain unresolved.

### The Sociology of the Kurukkals

The long historical association of the Virasaiva Kurukkals with villages and temples on the east coast of Sri Lanka has bequeathed a sociological legacy of great significance when compared with the usual Brahmanical tradition of Hinduism. It seems likely that Virasaiva values and beliefs regarding the direct embodiment of Siva, the protective qualities of initiation and the personal lingam, the duty of the Sangamars to guard and sanctify the village area with their “moving presence,” and the lessening of ritual pollution as a barrier to religious participation have all had some impact on the dominant caste ideology prevalent in this region. The caste ideology of the dominant cultivating castes of Batticaloa, the Mukkuvars and Velalars, seems noticeably less concerned with the classic Brahmanical ideal of hereditary blood purity and



much more concerned with a “political” ideology of kingly offices, titles, and honors associated with the regional chiefship of the Mukkuvars. It stands to reason that a ruling group like the Mukkuvars, who rose from humble origins to regional dominance and high status through military conquest, would find in the Virasaiva Kurukkals a more useful and compatible embodiment of Hindu religious authority than a hierarchical, fastidious, and purity-oriented Brahmin priesthood.

Outside of the Akkaraipattu-Tirukkivil area, there are families of Vira Sangamars still living in Vantharumoolai, Kaluvanchikudy, Palugamam, and Kokkadichcholai. While they are said to still serve as temple pusaris at a number of smaller temples in those areas, as well as at Okanda and Naypattimuni, the only major *tēcattukōvil* where hereditary Sangamar Kurukkals are still officiating is the Tāntōṅṅīsvaṅṅar Siva temple at Kokkadichcholai (Kana-patippillai 1977; my fieldwork 1993; Theyvanayagam 2006). Although the Virasaiva Kurukkals seem to have been out of direct contact with the larger South Indian Lingayat religious tradition for some time, Mr. Kulantaivel Kurukkal, a Sangamar priest who officiated at the Murugan temple in Okanda south of Panama, told me he had spent four years studying with a celebrated Virasaiva preceptor whose ashram is located at Kirimalai, Jaffna.<sup>48</sup> The presence of this Virasaiva “teaching throne” (*kurupītam*) in Jaffna raises the possibility that a larger island-wide religious network among Virasaiva Kurukkals may have existed at one time, although this would require additional verification.<sup>49</sup> The availability of inexpensive books and pamphlets in Tamil on Virasaivism is also a factor to be reckoned with; I was once shown a popular book printed in Tamilnadu entitled *Vīraśaiva Viḷakkam* (Elucidation of Virasaivism) which, I was assured, would answer all my questions.

Even so, the current prospects for Batticaloa’s distinctive Virasaiva Kurukkal priesthood do not seem bright. Today the personal lingam is still worn by only a few practicing temple priests and an even smaller number of independent Sangamar Kurukkals, and many of the Virasaiva doctrines are abridged, qualified, or attenuated in practice. In the course of my fieldwork I came across no younger members of the Kurukkal vamsam who were planning to pursue careers as Hindu priests, and in fact many of the hereditary Sangamar families at Tampaddai were living in acute poverty, gleaning a livelihood from any available opportunity. Tragically, the 2004 tsunami directly hit the exposed Tampaddai seashore village site, and many people perished. Unless Virasaiva Kurukkal priests are more actively recruited as temple officiants, the caste pro-

fession itself appears headed for extinction, their place taken by a wide assortment of non-Brahmin and Brahmin priests trained outside of the region. Within the last forty years, apparently to assert status equality with more hierarchically minded Jaffna Brahmins and Saiva Kurukkals, some of the Virasaiva Kurukkals in the Akkaraipattu area have begun to abandon their commensal tradition of eating food from other castes on polluting occasions such as the thirty-first-day amutu household food offerings for a dead soul. The response of the high-caste Tamil population, especially the older generation, has been indignant and vocal. Most everyone in Akkaraipattu agrees, regardless of their opinion, that until the 1970s all local Virasaiva Kurukkals ate the cooked food offered at life-crisis rituals. In India, of course, the Lingayat Jangama priest observes commensality only with other Lingayat castes, but in the Batticaloa region there is no such sectarian bloc with whom the Kurukkals can forge an exclusive ritual alliance. Lacking the support of a full-fledged Virasaiva social order, the Kurukkals obviously adjusted their practices to the realities of Mukkuvar and Velalar caste dominance in the region.

Returning, finally, to the prospect of increasing Sanskritization and the rise of a more Brahminical-style priesthood in the east coast region, I can only assume that this influence will grow in the absence of active resistance or competition from the Sangamars and the Tecantara Kurukkals. The most likely possibility is that the Virasaiva Kurukkals who wish to perpetuate their priestly lineage will eventually “become” Brahmins or at least more generic non-Brahmin priests. I noted two instances in Akkaraipattu of hereditary Virasaiva Kurukkals who had visibly acquired a more Brahminical vocabulary and ritual repertoire within living memory, including the introduction of the orthodox *piṇṭam* (rice-flour ball) offering at funerals, which bemused many of the older, more seasoned Hindu residents. Apart from the Brahmin *arccakar* (ritually initiated priest) at the Kandaswamy temple in Tirukkivil, I knew of only one self-proclaimed “Brahmin” priest in the Akkaraipattu area, a young man recently appointed to officiate at a Siva temple in an outlying village. Genealogically speaking, his matrilineal credentials as a hereditary Sangamar Kurukkal were impeccable, and two of his uncles in fact enjoyed regional fame as Vira Sangamar priests. Nevertheless the young man had chosen to obtain “Brahmin ordination” (*pirāmaṇi tīṭcai*) at Tirukketisvaram near Mannar and had now adopted the Brahmin title of Sarma as part of his name. It is possible that the distinctive Virasaiva priestly tradition in Batticaloa might survive in some form if local patrons and devotees would take a renewed interest and if

the liturgical authority of texts such as the *Virākamam* could be reestablished. In 2007 there was still a Virsaiva Kurukkal priest presiding at the Kokkadich-cholai Siva temple, but, at this point, most of the Virasaiva Kurukkals appear to be marrying and merging with the uppermost stratum of Batticaloa Tamil society.

**SUMMARY: THE DISTINCTIVENESS  
OF BATTICALOA HISTORY**

Regarded from the standpoint of Sri Lankan Tamil history as a region peripheral to the rise of the Jaffna Kingdom, and treated in Sinhala historiography as an outpost of the Kandyan feudal domain, Batticaloa has not been fully accorded the historical attention it deserves. With the publication of a new edition of the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Pūrva Carittiram* (Kamalanathan and Kamalanathan 2005), scholars will have access to what appears to be a unique chronicle of Tamil kingdoms and chiefdoms in the Batticaloa region, with some events potentially correlated with developments in the Pali chronicles. This should attract renewed interest by Sri Lankan historians to a region distinctive for its non-Brahmanical caste hierarchy, its multireligious (Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian) communities, its intriguing matrilineal clan traditions, and its matrilocal family and dowry property system. Many of these elements deserve further research: Mukkuvar martial dominance as an example of kingly power over a Hindu caste society, Moorish enclaves with deep historical connections to their Tamil neighbors and to other Muslim communities in South India, Kerala migratory connections that seem to have transplanted matrilineal kinship and family institutions on Sri Lankan soil, and even a rare—soon to be extinct?—Virasaiva priesthood with historic anti-Brahmin tendencies. Just as important, these are the kinds of regionally rooted historical factors that continue to generate strong ethnic, religious, and caste identities in eastern Sri Lanka. Both historically and sociologically, Batticaloa is quite different from Jaffna; as the Eelam conflict stretches into the twenty-first century, this fact is becoming increasingly apparent to parties on all sides. The rebellion of the Batticaloa-based Karuna faction against the Vanni-based LTTE leadership in 2004, whatever its ultimate motives may be, clearly resonated with a significant segment of Tamil opinion on the east coast of the island.

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**ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY**

**A**ny cultural anthropologist doing fieldwork in the Batticaloa region must engage not only with the comparative scholarship on Tamil and Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka, but just as important, and much more daunting, with the vast ethnographic literature on caste and kinship in India and South Asia more broadly. Fortunately, because I was extending—both theoretically and geographically—the intraregional comparative project of Yalman, Leach, Obeyesekere, and others, the idea of a dialog between my own Batticaloa fieldwork data and the corpus of Sri Lankan and South Indian ethnography was always one of my interests. A broader reading of the regional literature provokes some very basic questions about Tamil and Moorish society, and these in turn suggest some significant new interpretations of caste hierarchy and matrilineal descent in Akkaraipattu and in the Batticaloa region generally.

**THE QUESTION OF CASTE BOUNDARIES**

A question that Yalman posed in the context of his fieldwork data from Tambiluvil, and which also quickly came to occupy my own thoughts in the field,

was whether or not the highest-status Tamil groups—Mukkuvar, Velalar, and Kurukkal—were organized and conceived along the same lines as the conventional “castes” and “subcastes” ethnographically documented from other parts of Sri Lanka and South India. Yalman concluded that they were not, arguing that in this region of Sri Lanka a principle of membership by matrilineal descent and a pattern of hypergamous marriage of lower-ranking women to higher-ranking men had come to replace, or substitute for, the rule of bilaterally inherited caste membership which is commonly found elsewhere in Hindu South Asia (1967: chap.15). However, it soon became clear in the course of my fieldwork that no rule of hypergamy, formal or otherwise, governed people’s marriage choices in Akkaraipattu; instead, I found that there was a strong preference for isogamous marriage alliance between high-ranking matrilineal clans of roughly equal status. Among the Tamils in Akkaraipattu, these marriages were sometimes within, and sometimes across, “caste” lines. I therefore realized it would be necessary to look afresh at the whole question of caste boundaries.

#### “High Caste” Identity

With respect to Mukkuvar versus Velalar caste identity, there is strong evidence that cultural images vary sharply from one locality to another, and these may be dramatized publicly in Hindu temple rituals. For example, at the ancient temple village of Kokkadichcholai, located thirty miles north of Akkaraipattu, I found that political control or ownership of the shrine was an undisputed prerogative of the local Mukkuvar matriclans, but that certain prestigious clans of Velalars from the village of Palugamam had traditionally held internal supervisory offices overseeing the actual performance of temple rituals. The distinction between Mukkuvar and Velalar is clearly enunciated at Kokkadichcholai, with each caste having distinct temple roles, each caste residing in separate villages, and (nowadays) each caste having some degree of political animus toward the other (McGilvray 1982b: 79–82). A similar instance of ritual and political differentiation between Velalars, who are said to have been placed in charge of conducting temple worship, and other high-ranking temple patron castes is found at the Mandur Kandaswamy temple, where there have been political and legal tussles between the Velalar chief trustee and representatives from the Cirpatar and Karaiyar castes going back to the 1920s (Whitaker 1999). At Tirukkovil, too, there have been chronic disputes and lawsuits over temple control between the local hereditary Kandankudi Velalar chief trustee and the wider committee of temple overseers

from the Mukkuvar caste, including the regional *Talaivar* (head, chief) of the temple, a colonial Vanniah from Naipattimunai near Kalmunai.

These relatively clear-cut examples serve as a contrast to the data I collected in Akkaraipattu, where the Mukkuvar-Velalar distinction has much less clarity, and evokes much less depth of feeling, than it does in Kokkadichcholi or Mandur. In fact, even in the “pure Velalar” villages of Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil, both Hiatt (1973) and I found two matriclans identical in name to the two highest-ranking matriclans in Akkaraipattu, a place unequivocally considered a “Mukkuvar settlement” by everyone I spoke with in Tambiluvil. On further inspection, the “pure Velalar” ideology in Tambiluvil is most strongly enunciated by members of the two matrimonially allied high-status matriclans (*Kaṇṭaṅ* kudi and *Kaṭṭappattāṅ* kudi), while the caste identity of some of the remaining matriclans is more ambiguous or polysemic. Of the twelve kudis encountered in Tambiluvil by Hiatt, six are also found in Akkaraipattu. To anticipate an empirical finding to which I will devote greater attention later, there is a strong pattern of reciprocal marriage alliance in Akkaraipattu between the two highest-ranking kudis from the Mukkuvar and Velalar castes, and the offspring of such unions share the caste and matriclan identity of their mothers. In other words, not only is caste membership at the uppermost level of the local Tamil society in Akkaraipattu matrilineally ascribed, but cross-caste marriage alliance is sanctioned and legitimized by legend.

### Organization of the Lower Castes

We need to ask whether such high-status, but matrilineally-inflected, Tamil “castes” can be equated with the endogamous, territorially bounded, “jāti” units of Indian village ethnography. The evidence from the high-caste community in Akkaraipattu clearly shows that they cannot, even though there are some features in common. Below the elite stratum of Mukkuvars, Velalars, and Kurukkals, however, the middle- and low-ranking specialist and service castes show much more resemblance to the conventional endogamous South Asian caste or subcaste unit. In discussing the topic of caste with me, Tamils used the words *cāti* and *kuṭi* to their full polysemantic potential. The Tamil term *cāti* in the most general sense means “kind, type, or species,” but in a more restricted semantic environment it means “caste.” *Kudi* can mean “small dwelling or hut” (a shortened form of *kuṭicai*) or a “settlement or colony,” as in the many east-coast village names like Kaluvanchikudy or Putukkudiyiruppu. It is also the root of the Tamil verb *to drink*, and was thus the source of many routine puns and wisecracks about liquor during my fieldwork. Its specific kinship referent

in the Batticaloa region, however, is what eighteenth-century Dutch colonial officials had called “native families” and what anthropologists have called a “matriclan.” The scope for ambiguity with both of these terms, *cāti* and *kuṭi*, could easily explain Yalman’s impression that, in Tambiluvil, the two categories had become virtually synonymous (1967: 325–31). The word *kulam* (descent group, lineage, caste), which is frequently found in ethnohistorical texts such as the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam*, is rarely heard in ordinary speech in the Akkaraipattu area. On occasions when greater politeness or tact seemed called for, I adopted the modern Tamil word *camuṭāyam* (community, profession, group) to refer to local castes, a rhetorical move which served to dignify and clarify my questions in some people’s minds.

When I inquired about the structures of their “castes,” members of the lower-ranked groups did not respond in a manner that suggested a contrastively defined, territorially identified subcaste of the kind reported by Brenda Beck (1972) for Konku, by Michael Moffatt (1979b) for Chingleput, or by E. Valentine Daniel (1984) for Trichy. The replies I received were often phrased in terms of “*eṅkaḷ cātiyāṇārkkal*,” which means “our kind of people,” rather than a territorially delimited subcaste population within a larger occupational category. Intercaste marriages among all the castes in Akkaraipattu except the three highest were strongly disapproved, and when such violations of endogamy occurred they were carefully noted. Intercaste married couples faced the choice of residing in the caste neighborhood of the lower-ranking spouse (reversing the matrilocal rule in some instances) or leaving the area entirely in search of greater anonymity elsewhere. But in all the intercaste marriages I learned about, the transgression was viewed as mixing up two generic kinds of people (“Washermen and Barbers”) rather than mixing two territorially separate, distinctively named subcategories of Barbers and Washermen. Such highly segmented subgroups, which would be called subcastes in the Indian literature, do not seem to exist here. In keeping with this pattern, there are no unique subcaste names or titles: all Barbers are generically called *Nāvitar* (or, colloquially, “*Nācuvaṇ*”), all Drummers are Paraiyars, and so forth. Although as many as two-thirds of low-caste marriages are contracted locally, affinal ties can be traced throughout the Batticaloa region. However, the home villages of “external” spouses in Akkaraipattu (the majority of whom were males, because of matrilocal residence) were generally found to be located within a radius of forty miles, and there were practically no low-caste marriages with spouses from outside of the Batticaloa region as a whole.

It seems that these castes are invisibly bounded by the kinship praxis of



the Batticaloa region itself, since they all—with the exception of the Catholic Kadaiyar Limeburners—have an internal matrilineal clan organization and they all follow a pattern of matrilocal marriage and dowry, which is distinctive to the east coast. The only marriages recorded in my low-caste household surveys involving spouses from outside of the Batticaloa region were among the Barbers, the group who were the least consistent in following the matrilineal marriage paradigm. Still, I am unaware of any special title or regional subcaste identity, such as “Batticaloa Washerman,” that would formally differentiate the matrilineal Washermen or other service castes of the Batticaloa coast from their counterparts in Jaffna or Colombo.

The contrasts between the lower-caste and the higher-caste discourses of identity were particularly intriguing. People who consider themselves to be Mukkuvars, Velalars, or Kurukkals seldom use these labels in discussing their own “caste” identity or that of their peers. Instead, such a person would refer to himself simply as “a Tamil” (*oru tamilaṅ*), in semantically unmarked contrast to any low-caste person, who would be unequivocally marked as “a Sandar” or “a Paraiyan,” for example. Lower castes sometimes adopted the same convention, so when I inquired in low-caste neighborhoods about “Tamil customs,” I was occasionally told that I should go ask some “Tamil people” rather than to ask Sandars or Paraiyars about such unfamiliar concerns. The term *Tamil* in this context was taken to mean “high caste” (*uyarnta cāti*) or “good people” (*nallārkkal*), both expressions that were readily voiced in popular usage. It often required a concrete example to elicit specific caste identity: “Is he a Karaiyar, perhaps, or a Velalar?” I was grateful that the classic fourfold Hindu varna scheme was far from people’s consciousness in Batticaloa, because it meant that I did not have to start every inquiry about caste membership at the level of Sanskrit cosmogonic texts. But even so, I found it exhausting to have to work up the branching cognitive tree from “Tamil,” say, to loosely defined “Velalar” to more strictly defined “Kurukkal vamicam” to an exact identity as a Vira Sangamar.

#### WHAT IS A KUDI?

The old Tamil chronicles and *kalvetṭu* manuscripts of the Batticaloa region often identify local groups by the term *kudi*, but they offer no definition of what the word means—or what it meant when these ethnohistorical texts were compiled. However, many of the textual names of these kudis are identical or very similar to the names of matrilineal clans found in the Tamil and Muslim population today, so it seems reasonable to assume that they refer to matrilineal de-

scent groups. In light of the antiquity and salience of matrilineal organization in Batticaloa, particularly its economic and political dimensions, it is odd that neither the Portuguese nor the Dutch colonial regimes took much detailed notice of it. Dutch administrators in Batticaloa such as Jacob Burnand must have grasped some outline of the matrilineal system among the Mukkuvars in particular, since those troublesome “Headmen of the Moekoewas called Pedies” he so bitterly complained of were acknowledged to hold their offices by matrilineal succession within “their seven Families,” that is, seven matriclans (Burnand 1794: 13). It was Simon Casie Chitty in 1834 who offered the first published account of the matrilineal clan system among the Mukkuvars of Ceylon, but his brief description is limited to the “Mookwas” of the Puttalam District on the northwest coast of the island (1834: 275–80). There, he states, the Mukkuvars recognize “seven distinct tribes,” each termed a “vagei” (*vakai*, type or kind), the names of which bear almost no resemblance to the Mukkuvar kudi names in Batticaloa.

The first specific information about the matriclan system of the Batticaloa region was published in Canagaratnam’s colonial-era *Monograph of the Batticaloa District* (1921: 35), which recognizes a tradition of seven kudis each among the Mukkuvars, the Velalars, and the Moors. A list of Mukkuvar matriclans in Batticaloa is also found in Raghavan (1962: 218–22), along with their respective cattle brands, but neither Canagaratnam nor Raghavan indicate exactly where they collected their data. Raghavan also mentions a section of the Mukkuvars in Puttalam and Batticaloa who claim the title of *vaṇṇiyaṇār*, descendants of noble families elevated by the Kandyan kings (1962: 222), but the only place I encountered a distinct “*vaṇṇiyār kudi*” was in the neighborhood of the temple at Sittandy, fifteen miles north of Batticaloa town.<sup>1</sup> In the early stages of my fieldwork I gathered lists of kudi names both in Akkarai-pattu and in Kokkadichcholai, and I soon became accustomed to hearing idiomatic references to the *ēlukkūṭi* (seven-kudi) Mukkuvar, which conformed to an idealized model of seven clans within each of the major castes. High-caste informants in both of these locations also confirmed that Canagaratnam’s list of Mukkuvar clans was more accurate than his list of Velalar clans, which includes three that are widely considered to be “Mukkuvar kudis.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems likely that both Canagaratnam and Raghavan experienced the same problems of ambiguity and inconsistency that I encountered in attempting to map the basic distribution of castes and matriclans in the region. However, while there is potential overlap and confusion between several of the kudi names found in the high-ranking Mukkuvar and Velalar castes, the names

of matrilineal clans among the middle- and lower-ranking Tamil castes are generally more distinctive and more uniform across the Batticaloa region. When one learns a person's *kudi* identity among these groups, one can usually make a strong inference about his or her caste membership as well. Although the demographic strength of certain matrilineal clans is much more pronounced in some villages than in others, and a few small clans are extremely localized, I found that the names of some—but not all—of the more common *kudis* in Akkaraipattu could be recognized by people located as far apart as Pottuvil and Kokkadichcholai, a distance of sixty miles. The only groups in the Batticaloa region that I have verified as lacking matrilineal clans of any kind are the Kuravar Gypsies of Alikambai, the Kadaiyar Limeburners of Akkaraipattu, the Pandarappillai Lascreeens of Kaluthavalai, and the Paraiyar Drummers of Tivukkudi, a hamlet near Ambilanturai.<sup>3</sup>

### The Matrilineal Clan as a Kinship Group

I have used the word *matrilineal* in speaking of the *kudi* because it is an exogamous, named matrilineal-descent unit whose members see themselves in principle as kin but cannot supply any overall genealogical map of the group. In only a small handful of cases was I told of a legendary founding ancestor of the *kudi*, and these stories were extremely weak and sketchy. The ancestor (whose name may or may not be part of the name of the matrilineal clan itself) is more often male than female, and there is no knowledge of the earliest descendants of these ancestors. For a great many *kudis*, there is no ancestral myth at all, no major lineages or branches of the clan are remembered in name or in fact, and often there are only the shallowest of local sublineages. These sublineages, seldom more than three generations deep, are referred to by a variety of terms: *vayirruvār* (people of the womb), *vakuttuvār* (divided-up people), *kūṭṭam* (crowd, meeting), *kattarai* (family, race), *tatti* (“clique,” from *tati*, “strength, influence”). The *kudi* name does not form a part of one's personal name in the way the *taravād* (descent group), for example, does among the matrilineal Nayars (Fuller 1976: 54; Unny 1994: 123). Male and female personal names in the Batticaloa region, both Tamil and Moorish, follow the common Tamil pattern, consisting simply of the father's personal name (or his initial) followed by the individual's own personal name. No matronymic or patronymic surnames (family names) are kept.

The *kudi*, as it exists today, does not fully measure up to David Schneider's (1961: 4) definition of a matrilineal “descent group,” which would require it to have regular decision-making powers and an internal hierarchy of male

authority, nor does it perfectly fit George Murdock's (1949: 66–70) complex definition of a matrilineal clan, because it does not assimilate in-married males as members of their wives' clans.<sup>4</sup> The activities of the kudi and its internal authority structure are vastly attenuated in comparison with the classic Kerala Nayar *taravād*, for example, which both controlled a house and land and gave coercive authority to a senior male head (the *kāranavan*). Although the kudi, or subsections of it, may have operated as a landholding unit in the past, this is not true today.<sup>5</sup>

### Temple and Mosque Trusteeship

The most visible institutionalized role of the kudi today is seen in the management of Hindu temples and Muslim mosques, whose administrative boards are constituted by male trustees (Hindu *vannakkār*, Muslim *maraikkār*), each representing a local matrilineal clan. The impact of these local temple and mosque boards on the conduct of life and the enforcement of social norms was apparently quite strong in the Batticaloa region until recent decades. Within living memory, the mosque trustees in Akkaraipattu had the authority to administer corporal punishment (caning) for offenses against Muslim rules. Today, often despite the wishes of the Vannakkars and the Maraikkars, the authority of temple and mosque boards has been eroded, and their effective degree of political or moral influence is difficult to measure. Since the 1980s, the rise of very young armed militant groups such as the LTTE, whose gun-toting teenage cadres are referred to as “the boys” (*poṭiyāṅkal*), has no doubt further weakened the authority of these elders.

Members of each kudi within a local area—which can vary in size from a single village to an entire town such as Akkaraipattu, depending on the size of the caste or community involved—select a Vannakkār or a Maraikkār who represents them at the temple or mosque with which they have a hereditary matrilineal affiliation. For the Tamils, this is usually straightforward, since each Hindu caste in a particular village or neighborhood tends to have one major temple that it controls and manages. The Muslims, however, constitute two-thirds of Akkaraipattu's population of over 57,000, and they have established three major mosques in separate parts of town, plus a number of smaller *taikkyas* (tomb-shrines and Sufi chapels) as well as some newer missionizing mosques. Because there is no territorial boundary defining each mosque congregation, a devout Muslim may bypass a nearby mosque attended by his wife's family to attend the more distant mosque of his own mother.

Authority within the kudi is described as consensual. Depending on

whether or not there are strong religious, political, or economic issues at stake, the local degree of interest in kudi affairs can vary from apathetic to zealous. The Vannakkar or Maraikkar is formally chosen by the adult males of the local kudi membership, and he serves under their mandate. There is no automatic rule of succession from mother's brother to sister's son. Usually the eligible candidates are older men with spare time to devote to this honorific but nonremunerative post, but qualities of piety, talent, and character are all taken into consideration. Judging from the (Muslim) shaved heads and (Tamil) *kaṭukkan* earrings worn by many of the Maraikkars and Vannakkars I met early in my fieldwork, it is probably fair to say that the position has attracted cultural conservatives and traditionalists. If the mosque or temple possesses substantial assets, such as paddy lands, or earns considerable revenue from pilgrims and festivals, then the leadership stakes are obviously much higher and the possibility of mismanagement, graft, or political intrigue much greater. At the Kandaswamy temples in Mandur as well as in Tirukkovil, where daily temple affairs are largely vested in one chief Vannakkar from a locally powerful matriline, the political infighting between the chief Vannakkar and the other trustees has been at times endemic.

Once chosen, the Vannakkar or Maraikkar exercises authority in proportion to his social esteem and degree of respect—what people in Mandur call his *kauravam* (Whitaker 1999)—although the role itself also confers some charisma of office. As leader or senior representative of the kudi, the trustee is sometimes called on to help settle minor disputes among its members. He is also delegated to collect money from them for the operation and upkeep of the temple or mosque, as well as to solicit special donations for construction projects and to defray the cost of specifically allocated kudi “shares” of the annual Muslim kandoori feasts at the mosque or of the nightly processions during annual Hindu temple festivals. The burden of such costs is usually apportioned among the various kudis in proportion to their numerical strength within the congregation, and each trustee levies individual households as he sees fit. Nowadays there is not much coercive power in the hands of the kudi elder, so his assessments have to be seen as fair if the members are going to be persuaded to pay.

#### ***Varicai*: Marks of Matriline Honor**

Certain Tamil castes and kudis, particularly among the higher-ranked castes, have the right to display traditionally apportioned “marks of honor” (*varicai*), which serve to identify different levels of rank or status among matri-

clans. These marks include the right to display at weddings and other auspicious domestic rites a specific number of decorated brass *kumpam* pots (referred to in this context by the terms *kūrai muṭi*, “roof crown,” or *vīṭṭu muṭi*, “house crown”) that are arranged on the roof above the main doorway of the house (figure 8). Other carefully calibrated domestic honors include a specific number of saris to be draped in bundles flanking the main doorway and a certain type of brass oil lamp to be lit for the occasion. There are also specific varicai honors for funerals, such as the right to have the Washermen spread cloths (*nilappāvāṭai*) on the ground in front of the funeral procession. The list of honors usually starts with entitlement to enjoy the services of the three *kuṭimai* (domestic service) castes: Barber, Washerman, and Drummer. The higher-caste matrilineal clans enjoy the services of all three, but *kudis* among middle-ranking Smiths and Climbers were traditionally accorded only the first two. Each of the castes, and many of the higher-caste *kudis* as well, have recognized insignia (*virutu*) that are used primarily as cattle brands, and these are also considered to be marks of honor.

My Mukkuvar and Velalar informants racked their brains but were unable to supply a uniform list of the “eighteen varicai” to which their castes were entitled, reflecting no doubt the potential for insinuating new honors where none existed before, as well as the modern decay of this entire symbolic idiom. Trying to identify an exhaustive list was futile, since the concept of varicai could be extended to include any number of obscure sumptuary privileges no longer relevant to modern life, and also because the scope for disagreement over particular symbolic markers was enormous in a contemporary setting where the Urpodiya had lost his powers of decision making and enforcement. My high-caste Maluvarasan *kudi* landlord in Akkaraipattu summed up his disdain for the modern cheapening of varicai honors by observing that “the little people do it now, not the big people.” Nevertheless, from “crowns” atop the house to white cloths underfoot, these varicai honors obviously expressed a kingly ritual idiom.

### Regional Comparisons

Unlike Kallar patrilineages in Tamilnadu (Dumont 1986: 185–92, 392; Dirks 1987: 203–305), or Nayar matrilineages in Kerala (Gough 1961: 330), or indeed most other lineage-based castes in South India, the matrilineal descent system in the Batticaloa region does not feature the worship of a clan or lineage deity, *kula teyvam* (Kjaerholm 1990). On the east coast, the term *kula teyvam*



**FIGURE 8.** Doorway of a High Caste house in Akkaraipattu that has been decorated for a Tamil girl's puberty ritual. Coconut-topped "house crown" pots and hanging saris represent traditional caste and *kudi varicai* marks of honor (1975).

is applied only to the tutelary deities of entire castes, and in Akkaraipattu this type of collective caste-based worship is found mainly among the Tattar Smiths and the Paraiyar Drummers. There are also no shrines for clan ancestors such as one finds with the Nayar cults of the dead (Gough 1959) or among the patrilineal Coorgs of Mysore (Srinivas 1952). Deceased bilateral kin are commemorated and propitiated annually on the death anniversary with food offerings and/or charitable feasts among both the Tamils and the Muslims, but the matrilineal plays no role in these events. Nor is there any concept of an ancestral place of origin for the *kudi* which might provide the focus for a territorially based cult, as among the *Āru Nāṭṭu Velalars* near Trichy described by Daniel (1984). Although there is a tendency for married daughters (members of the same *kudi* and sublineage) to form adjacent matrilocal household clusters, there is also nothing remotely like the exclusive lineage neighborhoods of Louis Dumont's *Pramalai Kallar* (1986: 50–53).

Possessing no real property, lacking a corporate religious cult of a clan

deity or of ancestral spirits, and bereft of any formal territorial identity, the kudi today appears to stand out from the South Indian ethnographic literature as a descent group without much purpose, although that may be an artifact of the colonial encounter. While the precise extent to which kudis exercised corporate powers in the precolonial period may never be known, it is clear from the ethnohistorical texts and from the remnants of communal ritual still celebrated at mosque feasts and regional temple festivals that the Tamil and Moorish matriclans once constituted major units of the pre-modern society and polity in the Batticaloa region. That polity and its underlying organic vision of society were dramatized and reaffirmed in religious rituals of caste and matriclan hierarchy, and the constitutive role of the kudi in the management of temples and mosques remains today as the most conspicuous artifact of a system that lost its real political clout when the Europeans usurped its regional hegemony starting in the sixteenth century. Still, a question remains as to how the rule of matrilineal descent and succession in the Batticaloa region compares with the better-known South Asian principle of patrilineal organization.

#### MODELS OF MATRILINY

Once the nineteenth-century evolutionary paradigm of mother-right (or matriarchy) as an inevitable stage of unilineal cultural development had been overthrown, there was a focus in twentieth-century structural-functionalist anthropology on the idea that matriliney must entail a set of logically and functionally interrelated cultural patterns and institutionalized arrangements in order to work at all. Matrilineal societies posed a functional puzzle, or a set of evolutionary and adaptive problems to which a limited number of solutions seemed possible, given the facts of procreation and child development, a gendered division of labor, and the imperatives of economic subsistence and political order (Murdock 1949; Schneider 1961). A tension would be expected to exist between a man's love for his biological offspring and his duties to his sister's children, who were his closest matrilineal kin. (Malinkowki's Trobriand Islanders were said to circumvent this problem by not believing in biological paternity at all.) If matrilineal organization were an idealized "package deal," a totally functional and adaptive package would include a rule of matrilineally transmitted descent-group membership, a system of matrilineally inherited wealth and property, a rule of matrilineal succession to political or ritual offices, a rule of matrilocal or avunculocal postmarital residence, and



an indigenous cosmological belief system which chartered or rationalized all of these components in terms of a mythical founding ancestress, or a matrilineally based religious cult, or a female theory of reproduction and the body, or a female spiritual essence of the clan, or at least *some* kind of gynocentric cultural principle. Few, if any, matrilineal societies in the world would fit this mold perfectly, but one could think of it as a sort of Weberian ideal type whose elements logically resonate with, and reinforce, each other.

When one surveys the range of South Asian caste and kinship systems, most of which are strongly patrilineal in emphasis, it is possible to see patrilineal analogs to every one of these idealized matrilineal institutions: patrilineal clans and lineages (often territorially based), patrilineal inheritance (usually to sons only), patrilineal succession to (male) office, patrilocal residence (often in joint families), worship of patrilineage deities and ancestors (again, often territorially based), and a male-centered theory of conception which emphasizes the metaphor of the active male “seed” sown in the passive female “field” (Karve 1968; Dube 2001a). In addition, it is a common belief among Hindus, based on the Sanskritic textual doctrine of *sapinda*, that a patrilineal descent group jointly shares the temporary ritual pollution which arises when one of its members gives birth or dies, and this is further rationalized by Brahminical wedding rites that, in many parts of Hindu South Asia, ritually transubstantiate the bride, transferring her from membership in her father’s patrilineage to membership in the patrilineage or gotra of her husband (e.g., Fruzzetti 1982).

There is one famous matrilineal caste in South India, the Nayars of central Kerala, studied by Kathleen Gough, that seems to fit—at least in the ethnographic past—the formal requirements of the ideal matrilineal package. The Nayar *taravād* (matrilineage) was territorially identified with a house and the agricultural land it owned; it had a hereditary head, and it resided in a joint matrilineal household (with nocturnally visiting *sambandam* husbands). Its members sustained a belief in a founding ancestress (whose name was not known), worshiped both the tutelary goddess Bhagavati and the souls of dead taravad ancestors, and observed a common period of death pollution whenever a member died (Gough 1961; Moore 1985, 1988, 1990). Even personal names among the Nayars incorporate the name of the matrilineal taravad.

Although I am sure that my friends in Akkaraipattu never realized it, the pervasive patrilineal Indian model of caste and kinship organization and the striking matrilineal counter-example of the Nayars (as well, of course, as

the Sinhalese and Jaffna Tamil social systems) served as my silent frame of reference during fieldwork in Akkaraipattu. I quickly learned that the common expression for the idea of matrilineal descent (i.e., the general rule governing membership in a matriclan) was the phrase *tāy vali* or *peṇ vali*, which translates as “mother-way (or path)” or “woman’s descendants” and is cognate with the Malayalam word *tāvali*, a Nayar submatrilineage.<sup>6</sup> But what did it really mean? Whenever an opportunity arose, I eagerly pursued the question of how the “matrilineal idea” manifested itself in the Batticaloa region.

Some of the reasons for my concern should already be obvious. The *kudi*, or “matrilineal descent unit” as it is called in the traditional kinship literature, did not exercise the sort of corporate responsibilities or possess the robust segmentary structure which the African-inspired “descent theory” approach of Gough would have predicted. To recapitulate: I found that the *kudi* or matriclan in Akkaraipattu had no uniform or well-defined segmentary structure of sublineages (although I eventually found some of these elsewhere), lacked a joint dwelling (although dowry-houses are required for all daughters), owned no agricultural land (although this may not have been true in the past), had no territorial or geographical foundation (in the sense of a place of origin or a settlement area), and worshiped no ancestors or tutelary clan deities. Its main functions were in the domain of marriage choice and in the conduct of Muslim and Hindu religious rituals that served to dramatize the hierarchical claims of rival matriclans and castes. In these and other respects the contrasts with Nayar society in central Kerala are quite marked, while there are greater resemblances to northern Kerala Nayars, Tiyyars, and Mappilas (Gough 1961; Aiyappan 1944). The *kudi* exists and reproduces itself everywhere in the Batticaloa region, but without a stronger set of material or symbolic interests to promote or defend, what is its conceptual basis? How do people actually think about the seemingly interconnected principles of matriliney and caste or *kudi* ranking?

### Divergent Discourses of Blood and Purity

In the hope of finding some indigenous ideas to explain these atypical patterns, I turned, particularly in my second fieldwork trip, to the investigation of beliefs about bodily substances, ideologies of caste and matriclan membership, and theories of purity and pollution. Or as one of my teachers, Barney Cohn, more pithily put it, I was exploring the domain of “blood, mud, and crud.” Some of my information was gleaned from casual remarks, but much of

it comes from discussions with members of a nonrandom sample of thirty-five informants, all but two of whom were Hindu Tamils, selected for their previously proven reliability and their likely familiarity with, and interest in, local ethnophysiological and ethnomedical beliefs.<sup>7</sup> My two Moorish informants were both non-Western curing specialists influenced by the local Ayurvedic tradition whose views largely agreed with those of the Tamils, but the ethnic and religious imbalance in my sample should be noted.

Dumont's theory of caste, which also influenced the work of Yalman, assumes that individual states of ritual pollution arising out of contact with birth, menstruation, death, and other such contaminating junctures with "organic life" (Dumont 1970: 47) are assimilated to, and equated with, collective states of caste pollution. Because, according to Dumont, purity and pollution are the fundamental basis for all Hindu hierarchy, it seemed reasonable to follow the same line of inquiry in Akkaraipattu. It is certainly true that high-caste Tamils will say that the *kuṭimai* castes (Washerman, Barber, and Drummer) are saturated in pollution arising from their work bleaching menstrual cloths, cutting hair, and conducting funerals. In fact, pollution concepts were easy to explore, since everyone acknowledged the inconvenience of temporary ritual impurity caused by birth, death, menstruation, and the like, but the concept of purity was more elusive. The Tamil dictionary lists many words for "purity," but I found only one or two that were in common use in Akkaraipattu. The most general word is *cuttam* (Skt. *shuddham*), which denotes secular cleanliness, lack of admixture, or ritual fastidiousness, depending on the context. A second word is *tupparavu*, which usually connotes secular cleanliness and is more commonly heard in its negative form, *tupparavillai* (uncleanliness). I came across no term in the Batticaloa Tamil dialect for a temporary state of enhanced ritual purity such as that described for the Havik Brahmins, Coorgs, and Kondai Katti Velalars of South India (Harper 1964: 152; Srinivas 1952: chap. 4; Barnett 1976: 143).

I discovered that the vocabulary of purity in the Batticaloa region was relatively underdeveloped, or at least underutilized, while the ethnosemantic domain of uncleanliness and impurity was far more open-ended than most South Asian ethnographic sources had led me to expect. Here the most general and most formal term is *acuttam* (the opposite of *cuttam*, and similarly defined by context), although I also heard the Sanskritic term *acaucam* from one or two Hindu priests. More commonly heard terms referring to specific types of physical dirtiness include *alukku* and *ūttai* (filth, stain, contamination), *kup-*

*pai* (rubbish, garbage), and *narakal* (revolting substances like excrement and entrails). Occasionally one hears the word *tīṭṭu* or the metaphorical expression *vīṭṭukku tūram* (distance from the house), referring specifically to states of menstrual pollution. The most universal word for ritual pollution among the Tamils, however, is *tuṭakku*, which refers to the varying degrees of contamination resulting from sexual relations, menstruation, childbirth, and, especially, death. The removal of *tuṭakku* must invariably culminate in the bathing of the entire body from the top down: *talai muḷukkīratu* (head bathing). The general word for ritual pollution among the Muslims is *muḷukku*, which is apparently derived from the same verb, *muḷuka* (to bathe completely).<sup>8</sup> As noted in Jaffna by Ryan (1980) and Pfaffenberger (1982), the vocabulary of ritual pollution can also overlap to some degree with that of moral and spiritual defects, so that in Batticaloa *tuṭakku* is sometimes described as a *kurram* (fault, blemish) or as *tōsham* (malevolent cosmic influence).

Judging from Yalman's vivid reports of "good" and "bad" blood among the Kandyan Sinhalese (1967: 138–49, 172–80), and from a number of later "cultural accounts" of caste and kinship which explore the ethnosociological substance-code paradigm of McKim Marriott (1976, 1990; Marriott and Inden 1974, 1977) in Bengal, Tamilnadu, and Jaffna (e.g., Inden and Nicholas 1977; Fruzetti and Ostor 1976; Barnett 1976; David 1973), it seemed reasonable to expect that an indigenous theory of blood purity would inform local discussions of caste status and matriclan ranking. However, when I initially asked about blood in conversations with people in Akkaraipattu, it turned out to be an awkward and embarrassing topic for them: the Tamil word for blood (*irattam*) seemed to conjure up images of the butcher shop or of menstrual bleeding rather than to offer a rationale for higher-caste status. As I eventually learned, blood plays a key role in traditional ethnomedical thinking about bodily health and vitality, but it is *not* a fundamental symbol of caste or matriclan hierarchy in the Batticaloa region. Blood can be reduced, thinned, weakened, or have an imbalance of Ayurvedic humors, in which case the individual's health and libido must suffer, or blood can be copious, thick, and pressurized, in which case one's health must prosper. No one, however, voiced a belief in the "purity" of blood; there was not even an idiomatic expression for this idea in the local Tamil dialect. When I pressed onward to ask whether the blood of people belonging to different castes and *kudis* could be said to have any distinctive "qualities" (*kuṇam*) of any kind, the reply was again negative. Instead, informants told me "blood is all the same" (*irattam oṇṇu tāṇ*). On the face of it, this empirical finding severely undermines the credibility of

both a Dumontian purity-based interpretation of caste and kudi ranking and a Marriott-style “substance-code” approach to the Batticaloa data.<sup>9</sup>

Blood is the key concept in local ethnophysiological theories of human conception in Akkaraipattu, but unlike the more widespread South Asian belief that it is a form of concentrated male blood (semen) which provides the “seed” of the embryo, the most common belief here is that conception occurs through the mixing or curdling of *two* semens, one male and one female. Once conceived, the embryo or fetus receives direct blood transfusions from the mother through an opening in the top of the skull (in Western medical terminology, the fontanelle). Not only is it the mother’s very own vital bodily substance (blood) that infuses the child in the womb, but it is also her blood (in the form of breast milk) that nourishes the child after it is born (McGilvray 1982c). In an effort to crystallize some of these ideas and to force a rhetorical engagement with my queries about caste rank and the “matrilineal principle,” I asked, “Whose blood, the father’s or the mother’s, flows in the veins of the child?” It seems the question had scarcely occurred to most people, and their opinions were sharply and rather evenly divided three ways. Some informants who had emphasized potency of the father’s semen (concentrated or distilled blood) in conception argued that the child shared the blood of the father, but others vehemently opposed this view, saying that the tiny amount of father’s blood at the moment of conception was insignificant in comparison to the massive transfusion of maternal blood to the fetus during pregnancy and lactation. For them, the child’s blood was definitely that of the mother. A third group of informants took the position that the child’s blood was a bilateral composite of the mother’s and the father’s blood, and I was once again left with little evidence of a coherent bodily substance-code ideology in the cultural construction of either group hierarchy or matrilineal descent.

It was clear that in local eyes the status or identity of the matriclan was neither transmitted via the blood, nor was it inscribed in a discourse of the blood. How, then, I asked, does ritual pollution become shared among the members of a family or a kin group? It is known, for example, that an ideology of shared patrilineal blood or *sapinda* particles often serves to explain why agnatic kinsmen in many Indian castes are immediately and simultaneously affected by death pollution (Beck 1972: 4; Manu 1886: chap. 5, verses 57–109; and especially Trautmann 1981: chap. 4). In fact, a similar pattern of patrilineal death pollution is also found in Jaffna (Banks 1957: 117; Pfaffenberger 1982: 195, 204). In Batticaloa, however, the local members of a matriclan do *not* share death pollution, although a more restricted group of household members and

close relatives definitely does. For all the Hindus (except the Virasaiva Kurukals and the Telugu-speaking Kuravar Gypsies, who both observe twelve days) the standard pollution period is the shastric norm for Sudra castes, thirty-one days. For the Moors, both birth and death pollution lasts for the standard Islamic period of forty days. Although my previous question concerning maternal versus paternal blood in the body of the child was clearly novel and hypothetical, I assumed that the issue of who exactly is affected by the spread of death pollution would be a matter of clear and widespread agreement, particularly among the Hindu Tamils who are subject to more pollution rules than the Moors. Instead, as with the interpretation of the child's blood connection, I found a striking divergence of opinion among the Tamils, and many informants were as surprised as I was to discover that individual opinions varied so greatly. A detailed analysis of the astonishing variety of views on death pollution would require an essay in itself, but a general classification of responses is summarized in table 3.

Almost half of the informants made explicit reference to the principle of matriliney (*tāy valī* or *peṇ valī*), or the pollution diagrams I asked them to draw demonstrated obvious matrilineal reasoning. Many of the bilateral opinions stressed the idea that the most severe pollution affected the nuclear kin group (spouse, siblings, parents, and children), especially the residents of the "death house" (*cāvīṭu*), but approximately half of the bilateral opinions also gave secondary or partial acknowledgment of the matrilineal idea (e.g., effects on daughters' but not sons' children, or on sisters' but not brothers' children). The patrilineal principle, however, had a staunch minority of defenders, a few of whom said that pollution follows the father's blood (semen), but most of whom could supply no ideological or ethnomedical justification commensurate with the force of their convictions. Several of the latter were forced into perplexed silence in public discussions of the topic, although their views remained unshaken. There was also a group of "other" opinions that were idiosyncratic, including several statements that the pattern of pollution must vary depending on the sex of the deceased.<sup>10</sup>

There was no standard genealogical depth to the pollution, and no one viewed the matrilineal, or a sublineage, or any other specific group as the "unit" of death pollution. The justifications offered for the matrilineal spread of *tutakku* sometimes mentioned matrilineal ethnoreproductive ideas (e.g., uterine blood), but most often they appealed to an image of the matrilineal household and its linked mothers and daughters as a sort of enduring socio-spatial establishment cemented by ties of matrilineal affiliation, feeling, and physical

TABLE 3. Tamil opinions regarding the principle governing the spread of death pollution (*tuṭakku*) among kinspeople

Matrilineal	Bilateral	Patrilineal	Other	Total
13	9	7	4	33

propinquity. Unlike the minority patrilineal view, which traced the father's blood, the matrilineal theory of pollution made constant reference to the importance of emotional bonds of love and attachment (*aṅṅpu, pācam*) in delineating who was susceptible. Sometimes the insistence on a strict matrilineal connection was so emphatic one might be led to assume that children were unpolluted by the death of their own fathers, yet everyone agreed that children do experience severe *tuṭakku* on such occasions. All were agreed that the chief mourner should be the eldest son, but the matrilineal theory of pollution stipulates that only daughters' children, not sons' children, observe *tuṭakku*. Ideas of sexual and commensal intimacy and emotional attachment were cited to explain why a person is polluted when his or her spouse dies, even though such a person also remains susceptible to pollution from deaths in his or her own natal family. Pollution received through a marriage connection is always intensified when there is a simultaneous bond of kinship, as when a daughter's husband is also her actual mother's brother's son (MBS) or father's sister's son (FZS). It is frequently said that, failing such kinship reinforcement, such in-laws need to observe only eight days of real pollution. One of the things my questioning demonstrated is that ritual pollution is observed to quite differing degrees and extents, indeed more so than people in Akkaraipattu themselves ever realized.

Even so, most of my questions about blood and pollution struck people as amusing but hopelessly academic, because they left out of consideration the whole dimension of maternal emotions and matrilocal attachments (*aṅṅpu*, love; *pācam*, bonds; *parru*, attachment). The maternal connection is paramount in all discussion of childhood feelings. It recurs in discussion of dowry and matrilocal residence, and it emerges again in talk about the spread of death pollution. Although I never actually encountered a statement that the matrilocal residence rule made an in-marriage husband or son-in-law a "stranger" to the household (see Yalman 1967: 286–87)—indeed the frequency of close cross-cousin marriage would make this improbable—the obverse point of view, that the women in their natal or dowry-houses in their natal villages form the stable conceptual and emotional core of the household, was

frequently expressed. The expression *tāy pācam* (maternal bonds) is something of a cliché everywhere in the Tamil-speaking world, but in the Batticaloa region, where the matrilocal household provides a kind of sociospatial continuity, where dowry is the main channel of property transmission, and where the matriclan plays a role in one's social rank and identity, it seems to reflect a more substantial feature of the social structure. A proverb quoted to me often in the course of my fieldwork seemed to sum up that diffuse sense of maternal/matrilocal/matrilineal connectedness: *vērōṭi vaḷartti muḷaittālum, tāy vaḷit tappātu* (although the root may grow out, develop, and sprout up, the maternal/matrilineal connection is never lost).

### Caste as a Matrilineal Concept

While the kudi today exhibits a rather weak descent-group structure in comparison with the more robust and multifunctional Nayar *taravād*, for example, there is no doubt that it expresses a clear, formal principle of matrilineal membership, *tāy vaḷi*. However, it is just as true, but more difficult to accept, given the conventional assumptions of South Asian anthropology, that Tamil caste membership is also governed by a matrilineal rule in the Batticaloa region. My survey of ethnophysiological beliefs and ideas about purity and pollution revealed no underlying theory of distinctive blood purity or biomoral substance which would account for the unique identity of castes or matriclans, yet both of these social units seem to be defined by a concept of matrifiliation: a person takes the caste and kudi membership of his or her mother. This opinion was voiced by members of all the Tamil castes, and it was buttressed by appeal to the same principles of intimate maternal care and affection, the same mixed factors of matrilocal residence, propinquity, and maternal dowry property, and the same jural rule of matrilineal "rights" as one encounters in discussions of kudi membership. Such unilineal caste identity is not entirely unique in Sri Lanka: for example, R. L. Stirrat (1982: 14) documented an ideology of caste membership which was unequivocally patrilineal (derived solely from the father) among the Catholic Karavas of Chilaw. However, the matrilineal caste rule in Batticaloa clearly contrasts with the bilateral Kandyan Sinhalese and Jaffna caste systems, as well as with the overwhelmingly bilateral nature of caste systems in the Indian Subcontinent (Yalman 1967; Mandelbaum 1972).

Admittedly, the rule of matrilineal caste affiliation is practically moot when considering cross-caste unions involving the lower castes, since members of the high-caste stratum (Mukkuvar, Velalar, and Kurukkal) advocate and enforce a rule of strict caste endogamy among these groups. In casual conver-



sations with me on this topic, members of lower castes such as the Vannar Washermen or the Paraiyar Drummers said that, apart from competing family pressures to marry a close cross-cousin, they saw no intrinsic reason to pass up any opportunity to marry a higher-caste person and thus to rise up a bit in the world. Actually, if caste membership derives from the mother, then hypogamous unions (where the woman marries “down”), rather than hypergamous unions (where the woman marries “up”), would be more advantageous to the offspring, but no one I spoke to even wanted to think it through that far. Instead, they pointed out that the highest castes would never tolerate such marriages and that, formerly at least, the local Mukkuvar establishment (i.e., the Urpodiya and other higher-caste leaders) would have meted out swift punishment for any such violation of the social order. My high-caste informants, in turn, confirmed this. It is not a concern with conserving ritual purity or with preventing the mixture of caste blood which motivates these high-caste strictures, but a determination not to allow ancient prerogatives and honors to be usurped by those who have no rights to them, and an absolute refusal to recognize the reciprocal caste equality which would be implied by such intermarriage in this culture. Other high-caste informants made reference to a hierarchical image of society historically laid down by kings “in the time of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandiyans,” deviation from which would represent a feckless breach of faith with the past. The function of lower castes in such a social order is expressed as a “duty” (*kaṭamai*) to perform “service” (*ūḷiyam*) to the higher castes and to the deity of the temple. The higher castes are so strongly imbued with these traditions of historically sanctioned political subordination and are so firmly opposed to any kind of lower-caste exogamy that the idea of purely matrilineal caste affiliation is something the lower castes are seldom if ever permitted to put to the test.

It is also important to note that even among the high castes the mother’s caste and kudi identity does not wholly determine the status of her offspring. Local ethnoreproductive theories acknowledge, and genealogical research confirms, that the father plays a role with the mother in endowing the child with bodily substance, personal qualities, and social identity. Thus, although a child is always assigned to the caste and matriclan of its mother, the personal status of that child *within* the caste and matriclan will definitely be enhanced or diminished by the caste rank of its father. In one documented example the illegitimate offspring of a Barber woman by a Mukkuvar landlord gained prestige in her community for having a high-caste genitor and were particularly fond of verbally teasing the Mukkuvar landlord’s nephews and nieces as their

“cross-cousins.” It is obvious that noncaste factors such as class, occupation, and level of education, as well as appearance and character, can compensate for shortcomings of caste or kudi status when marriage is being considered. In one such case a respected Velalar schoolteacher’s daughter was married matrilocally to a Karaiyar caste man in Akkaraipattu. Although the children carry their mother’s caste and kudi affiliation, some neighbors still discreetly talk of it as an irregular marriage.

These latent bilateral components of individual status pose much less of a problem when both of the spouses are drawn from among the “good people” (*nallārkkal*) of the Mukkuvar-Velalar-Kurukkal stratum. In comparison to the steep caste gradient among the middle- and low-ranking Tamil castes, the absolute difference in rank between the “good people” of the three upper castes is, at least in a large town like Akkaraipattu, not all that great, and the same is true for their constituent matrilineal clans. Marriage between kudis in this upper-caste stratum, some of which are traditionally identified as “Mukkuvar matrilineal clans” and others that are historically tagged as “Velalar matrilineal clans,” seems to pose no problem for Tamils in Akkaraipattu. In fact, here the highest-ranking and most closely intermarried pair of kudis are separately identified with the Mukkuvar and Velalar castes, respectively: *Paṇikkaṇā* kudi and *Maḷuvaracaṇ* kudi. In addition to these and other such “caste-linked” matrilineal clans, there are also a number of residual kudis whose caste identity is ambiguous or indeterminate, although the tendency in such cases is to claim “Velalar” origins. I should also point out, however, that the relative flexibility and openness to cross-caste marriage between Mukkuvars and Velalars which I found in Akkaraipattu was not found in more exclusively monocaste settlements such as those around Kokkadichcholai (a Mukkuvar stronghold) or in Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil (a largely Velalar settlement). In each of these local areas, a looser ideology of matrilineal caste affiliation is pitted against a stricter desire to assert superior caste status through endogamy, and the sociological outcome varies accordingly, from a pattern of cross-caste alliance in Akkaraipattu to a pattern of more exclusive Mukkuvar and Velalar caste endogamy elsewhere (McGilvray 1982b: 76–86).

#### WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MUKKUVAR LAW?

Local thinking about blood, matrilineal descent, and pollution often turned out to be more complex, more disjunctive, more contextual, and more open-ended than the leading South Asian anthropological paradigms had led me to

expect. Because I could find few of the indigenous concepts central either to a strict Dumontian structuralist theory of hierarchy based on Hindu purity or to a more broadly encompassing Marriott-style “ethnosociological” interpretation based on belief in the coded qualities of blood or bodily substance, I had to listen once again to what people actually said about the Hindu caste hierarchy and about the status of local matriclans. There was a diffuse assumption behind many of the remarks I heard that “matrilineal reckoning” (*tāy valī murai*) made common sense in terms of a combination of factors: maternal intrauterine blood transfusion, maternal sentiments and emotions, matri-uxorilocal residence after marriage, and the transfer of land and property to daughters as dowry. Eventually, I also had to acknowledge an earnest, tradition-based Tamil discourse of caste and matriclan “rights” (*urimai*) and “shares” (*paṅku*) which often centered on questions of mosque or temple administration or on matters pertaining to the ceremonial precedence of castes and kudis in the sponsorship of religious rituals. This way of talking was loaded with political and legal metaphors I could no longer ignore.

#### **Ancestral Land in the Mother’s Line**

Admittedly, I had been hoping to discover an exotic idiom of ritual purity or bodily substance-codes in what people said about “matrilineal reckoning,” so I was not particularly excited or attentive when, instead, they spoke of matrilineal patterns in terms of historical precedence and jural rules, of ancient temple rights and the imposed laws of the Mukkuvars. There was a certain dry, matter-of-fact quality to the way my informants explained why succession to a specific office, such as that of the Akkaraipattu Urpodiya, for example, had to be kept within a certain matriclan (Panikkana kudi). People would readily volunteer that the basic principle was matrilineal, but when pressed for further justification they often flatly asserted that it was the “customary practice” (*valakkam*) or the “law” (*caṭṭam*) of the Batticaloa region. Several of my older Tamil friends said that they had heard of a palmyra-leaf code of traditional Mukkuvar rules called the *Mukkuvar ērppātu* (Mukkuvar enactments), but I was never able to locate it. My more scholarly acquaintances referred me to a nineteenth-century codification of the “Mukkuva Law” compiled by a Colombo Burgher lawyer, Christopher Brito, who had practiced in the Batticaloa law courts (Brito 1876). Reluctantly, I was forced to acknowledge that the present-day discourse of “rights” and “shares” was probably linked to an older body of traditional law that recognized and enforced a Mukkuvar-inspired

system of matrilineal inheritance and succession, although no one could recall how these “Mukkuvar laws” actually worked.

Apart from Brito’s opaque and frustrating little book, which attempts to recast the Mukkuvar inheritance law in obtuse Roman-Dutch legal phraseology, there are few historical sources from which earlier forms of the matrilineal inheritance system can be reconstructed. Jacob Burnand in the late eighteenth century briefly referred to the matrilineal inheritance system and land monopoly of the Mukkuvar head Podiyars, but he provided few specific details (1794: 86, 138). A simplified précis is given in an English translation of a Tamil document in the Sir Alexander Johnston Papers entitled *Mukkuvarin Cātivalamai*, or “Mukkuvar Caste Customs” (CO54/123: 183–86, National Archives, Kew, UK; the Tamil text is published in Pathmanathan 1976c), in a larger section entitled “Laws and Usages of the Moquas in the Province of Putalam and Batticaloa.” The rambling and difficult opening paragraph seems to suggest that hereditary property passes to brothers and sisters, as well as to “nephews or son-in-law” who might be sisters’ sons: “All the hereditary property such as gardens, houses, jewels, etc. belonging to a Headman as well as the documents and titles given to him by government shall after his death be devolved on his brothers, nephews or son in law and the relation of his wife, but the property which he himself has acquired and that which he had obtained as dowry shall be devolved on his children, but in case he should die without issue his hereditary property shall be devolved on his brothers, sisters and nephews and the dowry property which he had obtained shall be devolved on the relation of his wife, but the property which he had himself acquired shall be equally divided between the relation of him and his wife.” The general principle that daughters receive houses and that sons control land is suggested in another anonymous document in the Alexander Johnston Papers entitled “The Tamil Customs of Batticaloa”: “If a son or daughter is born unto a Father and Mother, and they are become of age to marry, they will give unto the girl, according to their capability, gold, silver, copper, houses, slaves, and so give her in marriage. They will give unto the son earrings, rings, waist ring, cattle, plains, paddy fields, and such things” (CO54/123: 54–55, National Archives, Kew, UK).

The Mukkuvar law shares some features with both Kandyan law and the Thesawalamai code of Jaffna, principally the fact that in all three legal systems each spouse retains separate and distinct ownership of his or her property. Likewise, a fundamental division between “acquired” and “ancestral” property

is central to all three systems. An essential point in all accounts of the Mukkuvar law is that this latter category of maternally inherited “ancestral land” — the houses and compounds as well as the “plains, paddy fields, and such things” which were both the source of agricultural wealth and the basis of Mukkuvar political authority throughout the Batticaloa region — devolved ultimately on sisters and sisters’ daughters (*peṇ valī urimai peṇ pillai*, “women with matrilineal rights” [Brito 1876: 12]), even though it was controlled and managed by their brothers and maternal uncles during their lifetimes. In Brito’s legal jargon, the men had the “enjoyment” of a “life interest” in the land, while their sisters retained “bare dominium” over it. Such land could be mortgaged for cultivation debts or for taxes by the brothers who cultivated it, but it could never be sold without the formal concurrence of their sisters or sisters’ daughters.

Despite the mistaken impression of such a respected legal scholar as H. W. Tambiah (1950: 8–11; 1954: 129–32), the Mukkuvar law condensed and summarized by Brito in 1876 was not at all identical with the Marumakkattayam law followed by the Nayars of Kerala. In the latter, *all* property inherited or acquired by a man or woman during his or her lifetime passed at death to surviving members of his or her matrilineal *taravād*, whereas in the Mukkuvar law there were several different categories of inherited property, only one of which was inalienable matrilineal property in the strictest sense, what Brito calls “maternal muthu som” (*tāy valī mutucom*, ancestral property in the mother’s line). Brito’s misleading summation of his own book, in which he concludes that “all inheritance is from the mother and none from the father” (1876: 44), is partially to blame for this confusion. The reader will find that in the previous forty-three pages, Brito had tortuously defined four different categories of inherited property, two of which derive from the mother (maternal *com*, maternal *mutucom*) and two of which derive from the father (paternal *com*, paternal *mutucom*), plus the property acquired during one’s own lifetime (*tēṭiyatēṭṭam*).<sup>11</sup>

Although the hypothetical operation of this idealized Mukkuvar inheritance system over time is better conceptualized visually (figure 9) or even arithmetically (figure 10), there can be no doubt that it had elements of bilateral as well as of matrilineal property transfer. This feature of the Mukkuvar law gives it a greater resemblance to the so-called *Misrattayam* or “mixed inheritance” systems once followed by the Iravars and Tiyyars of Kerala, than to the matrilineally simpler Marumakkattayam law of the Nayars (Derrett

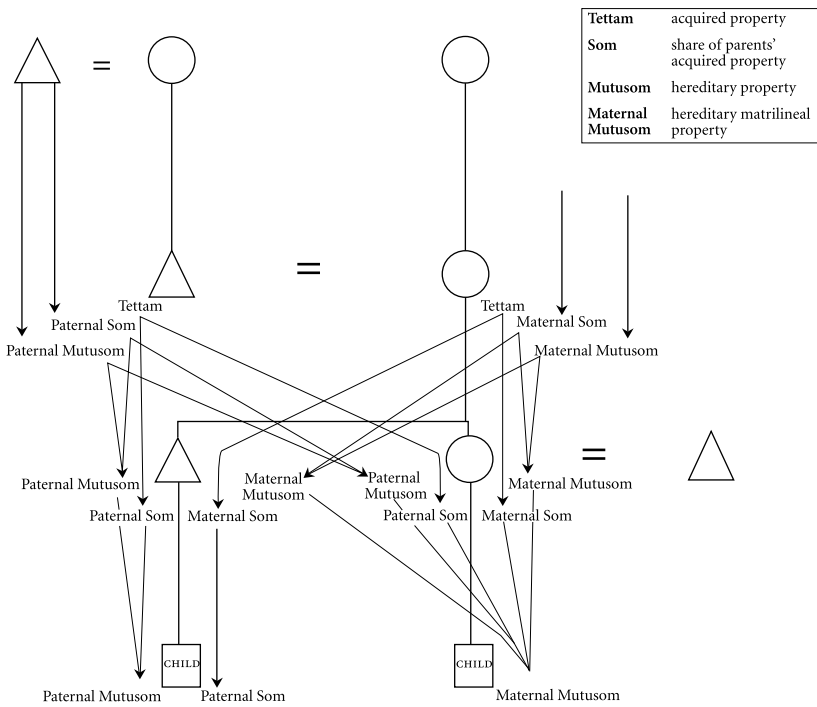
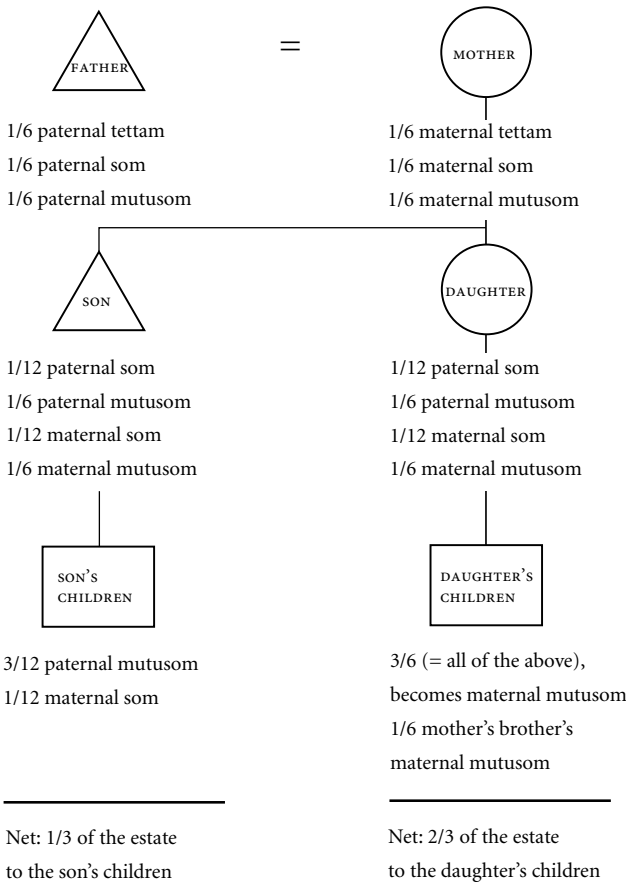


FIGURE 9. Property categories in the Mukkuvar law (extrapolated from Brito 1876).

1957: 248–50 and personal communication). Gradually, a certain portion of the property bilaterally bequeathed by each of the parents to their offspring of both sexes would become irrevocably transformed into Brito’s “maternal muthu som,” captured, if you will, by daughters as their inalienable, ancestral property within the matriline. If this tendency were not counterbalanced by other contingent factors such as bankruptcy or forfeiture, and if the rules were strictly applied in every case—assumptions which may be risky to make without a great deal more information—then the inheritance system would have served to reinforce the power of the Batticaloa head Podiyars and to perpetuate the harsh land monopoly which Jacob Burnand thought was so counterproductive to the Dutch East India Company in the late eighteenth century.

All the Great and petty Headmen of the Mockawass keep it as an ancient custom not to sell any [of] their lands to other Casts, nor even to alienate them out of their families, however they may be burthened with debts, and it is a further custom with them (for reasons to be hereafter alleged) to hypothecate their Lands for these Debts. The other Pagan Inhabitants in

ASSUME THE NET WORTH OF THE ESTATE = 1



**FIGURE 10.** Devolution of inheritance shares in the Mukkuvar law (extrapolated from Brito 1876).

the Country as well as some Maurmen follow the same custom, to the great prejudice of Agriculture. In this manner the Heir gets the Lands burthened with debts, and if according to the Customs of the Country there are no lawful heirs or Sisters Sons (or Sisters daughters Sons) of the deceased, in such a case the Slaves or freed persons born in the house do inherit, without that the relations and children (who together with their Mother get nothing than the property accumulated during the Marriage) have anything to say against it, as they inherit from their uncle or the brother of their Mother.

Hence it follows that the Lands are an entail in the female line of the family, and whatever reasons there may be for this particular right of suc-

cession, it is obvious that two great inconveniences arise from it to the prejudice of the Welfare of the Country and particularly the cultivation of Lands.

First that the Headmen of the Mockawass seldom pay their Debts unless they are compelled to it, in which case the only useful mode of compelling them is to make them cede their lands for a certain time to the complaining Creditor, and even this causes other Creditors to come forward, to whom the same Lands are already mortgaged and who claim the same in concurrence with other Creditors, thereby creating endless enquiries. Second, that from the natural greater love a parent feels for his children, than for those of his Sister, the field owner uses every indirect means to augment his debts, and to give all he can secretly to his own children. This not only created frequent disputes among the two families but what is worse, it is the cause of the Lands being but badly or not all cultivated for some years, the owner not being able to raise any more money on the same. (Burnand 1794: 86–89)

Although Burnand focuses here on Mukkuvar lands, it is clear from other sections of his 1794 *Memorial* and from the accounts of early British administrators that the Velalars, too, held large tracts of land in certain areas. Burnand's observation that "the other Pagan Inhabitants in the Country as well as some Maurmen follow the same custom" of matrilineal inheritance makes it clear that the Velalars as well as other castes were governed by the Mukkuvar law. Of course, even if the Mukkuvar land system held true to its own ideal principles, it is not easy to imagine how it might have worked in practice. None of the colonial sources mentions formal joint households or large domestic units of any kind, so it must be assumed that the typical residential group was, as it is today, a matri-uxorilocal family of which the married daughter, her husband, and their children eventually formed the core, plus in some cases the wife's unmarried siblings or elderly parents. According to Brito, the house and compound belonged to the wife as a part of her matrilineal inheritance, but her ancestral paddy lands were controlled and cultivated by her eldest brother, in a pattern somewhat similar to the Nayar *taravād*: "The younger brothers are regarded as his assistants, or a little better than his servants. But in law, all brothers are equal share-holders. . . . A brother who is in POSSESSION and ENJOYMENT of the MATERNAL MUTHU SOM land is expected to behave generously toward his sisters: but he is bound by no law to give them any share" (Brito 1876: 33–34).



It appears, then, that the income or agricultural harvest for a Mukkuvar household might have been derived from any combination of the following: (1) those fields to which the husband had inherited ancestral matrilineal cultivation rights from his mother's brother, (2) those fields individually inherited by the husband or by the wife as their *non*-matrilineal property, (3) those fields received as the wife's dowry at marriage, (4) those fields purchased or acquired in other ways during their own lifetimes, plus (5) whatever largesse or voluntary share of the crop the wife might receive from her brothers, who cultivated the ancestral fields to which she held matrilineal title. Actually, however, under such a severe land monopoly as Burnand described in 1794, very few Mukkuvar or Velalar households would have had this amount or variety of land to cultivate. Most people, presumably, were poor tenant farmers working the fields of the big Podiyars, or they were landless Tamil lower castes performing hereditary service duties and casual field labor, or they were Moors plying their specialized trades. Burnand says that the granting of collectively held service-tenure fields to the lower castes was not at all popular with the Mukkuvars (1794: 149). However, for the leading Podiyars and Vanniyars who simultaneously occupied matrilineal land *and* matrilineal office, the system afforded them positions of wealth and power culturally legitimized by a venerable "legal" ideology of matrilineal rights, shares, and duties.

#### From Matrilineal Inheritance to Dowry

I have neither the archival data nor the expertise to fully explore the history of land tenure in the Batticaloa District. However, several factors must have contributed to the erosion of this Mukkuvar land monopoly during the nineteenth century: a propensity of brothers and sisters to sell their ancestral lands, a significant expansion of total landholdings through the sale of Crown lands, and an abrupt change in the inheritance laws recognized by the British colonial courts. The unauthorized sale of ancestral "maternal muthu som" lands is attested in the cases cited by Brito (1876: 35), although there is no indication of how widespread it was. For land hopelessly burdened with debts incurred by shortsighted maternal uncles, this may have been the only realistic option available to sisters' children. As for new land, there were always virgin forests and uncut chena lands on the periphery of the coastal lowland paddy belt, some of which were steadily cleared and planted by industrious, land-poor farmers. The *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalveṭṭu* clearly documents this colonization process at the dawn of the colonial era, and the *Mukkuvariṇ Cātivalamai*

discusses the various legal provisions for such new land to be cleared and shared by a tenant. Greatly contributing to this process was the restoration and expansion of local tanks and irrigation works by the Dutch and British administrations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which served to increase the acreage of land under wet-rice cultivation and to enhance Batticaloa's reputation as a highly productive paddy-growing region of the island. When, in the 1840s, it became legal for Moors officially to buy land in Ceylon, this opportunity would also have been seized on by Moors in the Batticaloa region, even though it seems clear they were already de facto proprietors and tenant cultivators of paddy fields in many places.

Brito found no evidence that the Mukkuvar property laws had ever been interfered with by the Dutch or the British colonial administrations, although he admits that "the Rules set forth in this brochure have, most of them, no better authority than the dicta of old men" and also that there was popular disagreement on certain points (1876: iii, 38–40). Ironically, the very isolation of Mukkuvar inheritance rules from the mainstream of colonial jurisprudence may have contributed to its demise, for the nineteenth century saw the legal extinction of the Mukkuvar law of inheritance. In the interests of expediency and uniformity, or perhaps just out of impatience or neglect, the British colonial government drafted the Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance of 1876 without any reference to the local Mukkuvar case law on which Brito had based his entire treatise published in the same year, thus abruptly depriving the "Mukkuvar Law" of any legal standing in the courts from that date forward (H. W. Tambiah 1954: 157; Nadaraja 1972). Henceforth, inheritance cases brought to the courts throughout the entire Eastern Province were to be decided by the same law that applied in Colombo and the Maritime Provinces, which is to say the British-influenced Roman-Dutch law which makes both Sri Lanka and South Africa juridically distinctive even today.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly enough, there appears to have been no public outcry at this fundamental change in the matrilineal inheritance law, or at least none that I have come across in a casual search of the nineteenth-century English press and the Batticaloa *kachcheri* archives. The only tangible evidence of resistance to the 1876 ordinance I have seen is in the form of two lawsuits which were decided much later, in 1916 and 1921. In both suits the court ruled against Tamil individuals who had endeavored to create an estate of *tāy valī mutucōm* (matrilineal ancestral) land by legally deeding it to their matrilineal heirs in perpetuity (H. W. Tambiah 1972: 222–24).<sup>13</sup> The reasons for the relative quies-

cence of Batticaloa landowners can only be guessed: perhaps by then only a few large Podiyars saw the system as serving their entrenched interests, while increasing numbers of smallholders favored an inheritance rule which discouraged indebtedness and gave greater flexibility to individual families. Burnand's (admittedly Eurocentric) view nearly a century earlier had identified the "natural greater love a parent feels for his children, than for those of his Sister" as the cause of chronic intrafamilial tensions and as the motive for secret gifts to offspring, so perhaps the loss of matrilineal property rights was not widely mourned. Among the Nayars in nineteenth-century Kerala, a similar erosion of matrilineal law seems to have begun with a desire on the part of men to transmit their recently acquired wealth—although not their ancestral *taravād* lands—to their biological offspring (Fuller 1976: chap. 6; Jeffrey 2001).

In any case, the legal termination of matrilineal inheritance had no impact on the other significant mode of property transfer already established in Batticaloa: the giving of dowry to daughters at marriage. While dowry, or *cītaṇam*, is not mentioned in Burnand's account of Batticaloa, it is briefly discussed in the *Mukkuvariṅ Cātivaḷamai* (CO54/123: 183, National Archives, Kew, UK) and was also documented in the adjacent matrilineal Tamil districts of Koddigar, Tambalagamam, and Kaddukulam south of Trincomalee in the early nineteenth century (CO54/123: 137–42, National Archives, Kew, UK). Dowry had clearly become a recognized practice in Batticaloa by the time Brito compiled his book on the Mukkuvar law in 1876: "A female in whom the DOMINIUM of the MATERNAL MUTHU SOM is vested may deprive her sons of their claims during her life time, for POSSESSION, and after her death, for ENJOYMENT in it, by giving it away to her daughter in Donation, Dowry, or by Sale" (Brito 1876: 34–35).

Since a "house and compound" (*viṭu vaḷavu*) is clearly identified in Brito's account (1876: 34, 40; see also CO54/123: 54–55, National Archives, Kew, UK, quoted above) as that part of the matrilineal *mutucom* over which a daughter has exclusive possession, enjoyment, and dominium, it would seem to be only a matter of convenience whether she received it as postmortem inheritance or as a pre-mortem dowry gift. However, in the matri-uxorilocal residence system of Batticaloa today, a marriage is virtually impossible to arrange without the offer of a house from the bride's party, so mid-nineteenth-century Batticaloa parents might have signed over dowry-houses to their daughters even while ancestral paddy lands continued to be governed by the Mukkuvar

law of matrilineal inheritance. Eventually, enforcement of the Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance of 1876 would have encouraged this domestic option to become a universal practice. The disposition and control of agricultural land itself, however, would have been significantly altered by the new inheritance ordinance—unless by that time there were relatively few ancestral *mutucom* fields still under traditional matrilineal management. In any case, the nineteenth-century colonial ordinance does *not* appear to have generated a pattern of bilateral Anglo-Roman-Dutch land transfer to succeed the former matrilineal inheritance practice in Batticaloa. On this point, the key evidence is that of contemporary ethnography, which reveals that, despite the legal sovereignty of Sri Lankan inheritance law in Batticaloa for over a century and a quarter, there is very little real property left to inherit after death in most families even today. The vast majority of lands and houses are deeded as dowry property to daughters, or to daughters and sons-in-law jointly, at the time of marriage. I would guess that it has been this way since 1876 or even earlier, in light of the apparent calmness with which the Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance was received by the people of Batticaloa.

In the changing nineteenth-century colonial order, which saw the erosion of the Mukkuvar (and Velalar) land monopoly and the expansion of landholding to a much broader section of the peasantry, as well as the abrogation of hereditary rights of matrilineal succession to Mukkuvar chiefships and Vanniyar-ships by the supervening British colonial power, the economic and political advantages of the matrilineal inheritance rule to these entrenched high-caste Headmen and Podiyars was outweighed by the increasing popularity of a more flexible, and less debt-ridden, land-tenure system entirely managed and enjoyed by members of the same household.<sup>14</sup> I also hypothesize that the growing popularity of dowry throughout Ceylon (part of a larger historical trend throughout South Asia [see Srinivas 1989]), and the steady inflation in the Batticaloa dowry market in particular, was forcing parents to channel an increasing share of their assets into this form of pre-mortem inheritance. The giving of dowry-houses and residential compounds to sisters and daughters could have easily become a standard practice, since it kept an important part of the ancestral matrilineal *mutucom* estate in exactly the same hands, occupied by the appropriate female heirs. According to the Mukkuvar law, any part of a woman's dowry property that remained after her death was reabsorbed into her ancestral matrilineal estate. However, if the moral pressure of dowry negotiations was felt in those days as keenly as it is today, a demand from the

groom for some paddy lands in addition to a house would have been very hard to resist. In other words, large amounts of hereditary matrilineal property—both houses and lands—may have begun to pass to daughters as dowry even while the Mukkuvar law of matrilineal inheritance remained technically enforceable. Indeed, the fact that brothers had no legal obligation to share the harvest of their matrilineal fields with their sisters would almost imply that a significant portion of the parental property had been given in advance to the sisters as dowry. The choice of dowry would also have given parents much greater flexibility in the allocation of their wealth, since such gifts were not bound by the principle of equal shares for siblings that was fundamental to the Mukkuvar law (Brito 1876: 24–36).

When the new statute of 1876 was enacted, nullifying the matrilineal law that had governed the Mukkuvars and other castes as well, the preexisting dowry institution was quickly adopted as a functional substitute for whatever pockets of matrilineal inheritance may have still been in existence. The basic difference was that husbands ceased to have a divided interest in their own and their sisters' paddy fields, and they were able instead to consolidate the cultivation of their own (acquired) and their wives' (matrilineal) paddy fields, redefined now as conjugal dowry property to be used for the benefit of the couple and their own children. Even prior to the 1876 ordinance, parents were free to convert any portion of their nonmatrilineal lands, or any share of their *tēṭiyatēṭṭam* (acquired wealth and property) into dowry presentations. Ancestral matrilineal *mutucom* paddy land, too, could be legally bestowed as dowry according to Brito, although to do so widely would have undermined the political solidarity and agrestic power of brothers and their maternal uncles in the big Podiyar landlord matrilineal lines within the most powerful Mukkuvar clans. Yet it is even possible that this might have happened long before the 1876 ordinance was enacted. With their former land monopoly fragmented by the dowry system, or forfeited to creditors, and their matrilineal political authority preempted by the colonial regime, the Mukkuvar Podiyars—who nevertheless stood to lose more than anyone from the disestablishment of matrilineal law—were evidently unable to mount an effective campaign against the new legislation.

### The Muslim Dowry System in Batticaloa

While this hypothetical dowry scenario may seem plausible for the Tamils, could it also have applied to the Moors?<sup>15</sup> Islamic law in Sri Lanka has

undergone significant statutory development only in the twentieth century (Farouque 1965, 1986). During the eighteenth century, Muslim law was recognized in Colombo courts only insofar as it was outlined in Governor Falck's 1766 proclamation of Islamic laws obtained from Dutch Batavia, which was later redacted by Sir Alexander Johnston as the Muslim Code of 1806 ("Special Laws Concerning Maurs or Mahomedans"). Legally speaking, even this rudimentary body of Muslim law, based on the Shafi'i *madhhab* tradition, did not apply to all Muslims throughout the island until 1852 (Farouque 1986: 388). Isolated by colonial embargo from the mainstream of Islamic jurisprudence, governed for 150 years by a Muslim code cobbled together by Dutch merchants and English jurists, deprived of any official Qāzis (local Muslim magistrates) until 1929, the Moors of Sri Lanka must often have been thrown back on their own customary resources for the settlement of marriage and property questions.

Even so, it seems unlikely that Moors anywhere on the island would have been completely unaware of one of the most basic principles of Islamic law, namely, that a son inherits two shares of property for every share inherited by a daughter. If enforced, such a patrilineally slanted Islamic inheritance rule would have been diametrically opposed to the matrilineal Mukkuvar law. However, Burnand's comment that "some Maurmen" in Batticaloa observe the matrilineal land system in the same fashion as the Mukkuvars and Velalars would suggest that an orthodox Islamic inheritance system was never broadly implemented. It seems certain that the process of Tamil-Moorish intermarriage, and the conversion of Tamil women to Islam, in the early stages of Moorish settlement in Batticaloa would have encountered a great deal more resistance had it been understood that the women's matrilineal land rights would be supplanted by Islamic inheritance law. Given the preexisting matrilineal social structure in Batticaloa, and the relative isolation of the entire island from orthodox Muslim courts and legal scholarship, it is likely that the principles of Mukkuvar law remained largely in force among the Moors. Hard historical data are scarce on this point, but the circumstances suggest that among the Muslims, as among the Tamils, immovable property was largely transferred as postmortem matrilineal *mutucom* property or as pre-mortem dowry or outright gift to daughters, regardless of Islamic Sharia law.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that when a special commission on Muslim law chaired by Justice M. T. Akbar proposed in 1928 to implement Sharia inheritance law by limiting the testamentary freedom of Sri Lankan Mus-

lms to bequeath no more than one-third of their total assets and to require that the remaining two-thirds be transferred by compulsory Islamic inheritance rules, the recommendation was not implemented. Presently, according to Farouque, “a Muslim retains the right to utilize the Wills Ordinance No. 21 of 1844 to give away all his property according to his own wishes, even to persons other than his heirs at Muslim law” (1986: 403). This is quite different from the Muslim law of India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, where the one-third testamentary limitation of the Sharia applies, at least formally (Farouque 1965: 21; Diwan 1987: 159). In both India and Sri Lanka it remains legal for a Muslim to dispose of any or all of his property by gift *inter vivos*, which obviates the question of Islamic wills and estates. In Akkaraipattu today the Moorish property system follows a pattern similar to that of the Tamils: almost all land and houses, and a large share of a family’s liquid assets, are either gifted in advance to daughters, transferred to daughters and sons-in-law jointly by dowry deed at the time of marriage, or later conveyed to female relations by deathbed covenants, leaving very little property to devolve by orthodox Muslim inheritance rules after death.<sup>16</sup>

### Modern Dowry and Traces of Matrilineal Management

This hypothesis obviously invites further historical testing, but it also helps to explain the strong value still placed on dowry as the joint estate of the conjugal couple in the Batticaloa region. In an era when middle-class dowries in Colombo or Chennai are increasingly thought of as “bridegroom-price” (Caplan 1984) offered in the form of cash or movable property to directly attract a desirable son-in-law (who may in turn transfer the cash into a dowry fund for his own unmarried sister), the definition of *cīṭaṇam* in a town like Akkaraipattu remains firmly rooted in the idea of a house and land for the bride and her matrilocal groom. In comparison with women’s property rights elsewhere in South Asia (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Agarwal 1994), the dowry system in eastern Sri Lanka has clear advantages for women, although it does require them to marry in order to acquire family property. In some cases, the dowry deeds are not fully executed until after the bridegroom has demonstrated his rectitude and reliability over a period of time, and I observed one instance where an unstable son-in-law was expelled from his wife’s house (McGilvray 1989: 223–27). Although cash and flashy consumer goods seem to be exempt from these rules, the essence of dowry in Akkaraipattu is still a conjugal house and paddy land. This dowry pattern preserves one part of the earlier

matrilineal land system, the concept that houses and property should pass down generation-to-generation from mothers to daughters, and this in turn, together with ideas about uterine blood, maternal emotions, and matrilineal propinquity, is cited by informants as part of the diffuse, low-key matrilineal outlook I have described.

However, one historical mystery remains unsolved. Was the matriclan itself ever a corporate land-owning unit? The fact that Brito identifies the eldest brother as the holder of executive authority over his sisters' lands immediately suggests a parallel with the corporate Nayar *taravād* and its stereotypically autocratic male head, the *kāranavan*. However, there is little else that would support this comparison, historically or ethnographically. It seems there was never a Mukkuvar joint-household system, and Brito discusses the kudi (matriclan) itself as if it were synonymous with the much smaller *vayiruvār* (matrilineal sublineage) (1876: 8). Today one finds little evidence of "jointness" either in household structure or in cultivation practices. Nevertheless, I did come across two isolated instances of collective management of agricultural lands on the basis of kudi membership. The first case is that of the Attiyā kudi and Vaittinā kudi Velalars in Palugamam, who formerly enjoyed hereditary rights to cultivate the paddy tract named Attiyā Muṇmāri owned by the Kokkadicholai Siva temple in return for their "inner supervision" (*uṭkaṭampai atikāram*) duties at the Hindu shrine (McGilvray 1982b: 79–82). When these Velalars withdrew their services from the temple in the 1960s, the harvest from this land was appropriated to support a brand-new temple controlled by a twenty-four-member committee drawn exclusively from Attiyā kudi and Vaittinā kudi and erected at Mavatkuda junction, nearer to Palugamam and adjacent to the temple land itself.

The second case is that of seventeenth-century Kandyan royal service-tenure lands in the Cirpatam caste village of Turaineelavanai, where members of thirteen different kudis are annually allocated eighty-eight standard shares of land in accordance with a principle of rotation. This is a complex system in which a special group of eight land managers (*kāṇi aṭappan*) each allots the shares annually in rotation to eight subgroups, each containing eleven hereditary families. I was told that the land managers report to a committee of thirteen kudi Adappans who oversee the Kannaki Amman temple, and that revenue from these lands should support Hindu worship in Turaineelavanai and Mandur. However, there has been chronic litigation over the mismanagement of these lands, and the operational details of the system remain murky



(see also Whitaker 1999: 70–72). In addition to these two examples, I heard some very sketchy references to “kudi-share lands” (*kuṭi paṅku kāṇi*) in both Moorish and Tamil areas, but no one could locate them for me. The principle of *taṭṭumāru*, or rotation of shares of cultivation rights within a larger field, is an old form of land tenure which informants said was still followed only in a few fields in the Kokkadichchola area. Today, at any rate, the shareholders belong to many different kudis, but the similarities with other land-sharing systems in Sri Lanka are obvious (Leach 1961; Obeyesekere 1967).

#### MATRILINEAL RIGHTS AND TEMPLE HONORS

The language of the Mukkuvar law is silent on the subject of matrilineal blood or purity, but it says a great deal about matrilineal rights. The same word (*urimai*) means both “right” and “inheritance,” which is to be expected in a society where virtually all traditional privileges were secured by reference to some aspect of birth status. Thus the phrase *peṇ valī urimai peṇ piḷḷai* may be translated as “woman with matrilineal rights” or as “female heir from a female line.” The right of matrilineal succession to political office, a fundamental principle enforced by the Head Podiyars during the pre-modern Mukkuvar hegemony over Batticaloa and a pattern that Jacob Burnand found still operating in the late Dutch period, is moribund today, except for such isolated examples as the Akkaraipattu Urpodiyar. Even here, however, a lesson can be learned about the way Tamils think about “matrilineal rights” (*tāy valī urimai*) as collective matrilineal prerogatives.

Ideally, the office of Urpodiyar passes from mother’s brother to sister’s son, but my genealogical investigations and interview data show that a higher value has been placed on simply keeping the office within Panikkana kudi, which has the collective right (*urimai*) to this office. There is also a traditional expectation in Akkaraipattu that the Urpodiyar’s father and wife will both be members of matrimonially allied Maluvarasan kudi. Of course, personal character and social standing are important to take into account as well. A single successor satisfying all these preconditions has not always been available, so in the past, the adult male members of Panikkana kudi have been called on to decide the succession and to ratify the outcome of disputes between rival candidates. The Urpodiyar’s matrilineal *urimai*, in other words, is just as much a matter of the joint rights and collective honors of Panikkana kudi and Maluvarasan kudi as groups, that is, an enduring pair of reciprocally allied matrilineal clans, as it is a question of hereditary succession from a specific maternal uncle to his specific

sororal nephew. Further examples of this tendency for two high-ranking, reciprocally intermarried matriclans to monopolize the rights to local office are found at Kokkadichchola and Tirukkivil.

### *Nāṭṭu Kūṭṭam*: The Country Assembly

The local office of Urpodiya in Akkaraipattu is all that remains today of a broader hierarchy of regional Mukkuvar Podiyars, a ranked oligarchy of matrilineal chiefs who controlled roughly 50 percent of the agricultural land and dominated the Hindu caste hierarchy in the provinces of the Batticaloa District in late precolonial and in Dutch times. The institution of regional governance under the Mukkuvar chiefs was the “country assembly” (*nāṭṭu kūṭṭam*), a district-wide assembly of the leading Podiyars and their clients. Such a pattern of local assemblies was also characteristic of medieval Kerala, where they formed a hierarchy of increasing political authority from the village (*tārā kūṭṭam*), to the district (*nāṭṭu kūṭṭam*), to even broader territorial units (Padmanabha Menon 1924–1937: 250–69). I found the oral memory of district assemblies was still recalled by the older generation of Tamils and Moors in the Batticaloa region, part of a precolonial political legacy shared with the west-coast Moors, who once convened village assemblies (*ūr kūṭṭam*) under the leadership of mosque trustees (Mahroof 1986). The likelihood that a prior “Kerala connection” accounts for many of these political and cultural institutions among both the Tamils and Moors of Sri Lanka—including the “Malabar inhabitants” of Jaffna—seems quite strong (Raghavan 1971: 199–217).

The actual operation of the *nāṭṭu kūṭṭam* as a political institution in Batticaloa, however, is undocumented historically, except for the partisan testimony of colonial officials such as Jacob Burnand. Under Burnand’s Dutch East India Company administration of Batticaloa starting in 1784, the *nāṭṭu kūṭṭam* (translated quite accurately in Dutch as *lands vergadering*, “district meeting,” or *staats vergadering*, “state meeting”) became a twice-annual convocation of the hereditary Mukkuvar chiefs, together with the ranking local Dutch authorities and several Dutch-appointed native officials, to discuss and ratify reports of the paddy harvest, the grain-tax revenues, and the performance of annual caste service obligations (*ūḷiyam*) to the colonial government (Toussaint 1930: 196). Burnand soon removed the hearing of personal grievances and the administration of justice from the agenda of the *nāṭṭu kūṭṭam*. He conferred these powers on an independent judiciary council (*landraad*) on the grounds that the Mukkuvar Podiyars “have no idea of the manner in

which justice ought to be done” (1794: 146), thus eliminating one of the most basic expressions of the Podiyars’ caste-based power and authority. By eventually limiting the *nāṭṭu kūṭṭam* to only two meetings per year, in August and December, Burnand sought to further reduce the political charisma of the Mukkuvar chiefs, “who as often as they attended the meeting assumed greater authority in the Country than their offices really required” (1794: 145). It is clear, however, that Burnand could not entirely disband these formal district meetings, because they remained a potent symbol of the hereditary power and matrilineal *urimai* rights of the Mukkuvar chiefs, a recalcitrant bloc always capable of insurrection and sudden defection to the Kandyan kingdom. Writing in the early years of the nineteenth century, F. W. Ellis put a much more positive spin on the matter: “The Moquas of Batticaloa may be considered as the first natives on Ceylon, or indeed in any part of Asia, who were authorised by a European Government to become Members of a Legislative Assembly for the government of their own country” (Sources of Hindoo Law, CO54/123: 6, National Archives, Kew, UK).

#### Allocation of Temple Honors

The word *urimai* is also encountered whenever Hindu temple prerogatives and ceremonial precedence are being discussed, along with the words *paṅku* (share) and *varicai* (mark of honor). For the Hindu Tamils in Batticaloa, as for Tamils elsewhere (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Stein 1980; Dirks 1987), the temple plays an extremely important role in the way society is understood and imagined. Both from what people said to me and from allusions in traditional Tamil texts such as the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam*, it appears that the most sacred Hindu temples in the region are imagined as being historically and ontologically prior to the founding of settled village life. The usual cosmogonic script, elaborated in various ways in the origin myths of different temples in the Batticaloa region, begins with a Vedda hunter (or a vow-keeping pilgrim, or a sanniyasi world-renouncer) who accidentally discovers a self-appearing manifestation of the deity: a lingamlike root which bleeds when accidentally stumbled upon, for example, or Murugan’s golden lance (*vēl*) lodged in a *kokaṭṭi* tree. When word of this hierophanous event becomes known, a pious king—or his local political representative—takes on the royal duty to protect the sacred site, raise up a temple, and bring in colonists from elsewhere who provide all the caste occupations necessary to perform the god’s daily worship. In the course of “staffing” the temple (*kōvil*, residence of

the lord), as well as in enacting the king's own domestic and political economy, an organic, caste-based Hindu social order is mythically reproduced. The god of the shrine enjoys supreme spiritual sovereignty over his domain, but he delegates mundane political sovereignty to the king or the king's historical legatees: for example, the locally prominent Cirpatam, Karaiyar, and Velalar caste officials at the Mandur temple (Whitaker 1999). This is how Tamil society is popularly thought to have begun: as the sociological basis for worship and as the byproduct of royal temple patronage in ancient times. The whole scheme fits remarkably well with Maurice Hocart's image of the caste system as a sacrificial organization instituted by the king (Hocart 1950).

Not all of the temples that exist today share such a protohistorical charter, but it is certainly true of the so-called regional or "national" temples (*tēcattukōvil*, temple of the *tēcam*) such as Kokkadichcholai, Mandur, and Tirukkovil, that figure prominently in regional history and which in former times were—and to some degree still are today—places where annual displays of caste and matriclan honors occur.<sup>17</sup> As Val Daniel has noted (1984: 68), there is a strongly public, political connotation to the Sanskritic Tamil word *tēcam* (Skt. *dēsh*), which refers to a territorial unit under legitimate governmental authority. It is instructive to note that the 1766 Deed of Submission to the Dutch East India Company, which was signed by the rebellious Mukkuvar chiefs, guaranteed their right "to follow their ancient Custom with respect to entering into offices of Native headman and in their usual Festivals" (Burnand 1794). The importance of the annual festivals at the regional temples was obvious to a colonial observer like Burnand, who advised Dutch East India Company officials to keep the annual pujas at these major "pagodas" under close surveillance and to announce all colonial edicts and proclamations there, because they were key political venues for all the Mukkuvar chiefs of Batticaloa. In their most elaborated form these annual festivals would have provided the venue to publicly dramatize, through a pattern of carefully measured "shares" of patronage and participation in the nightly rituals, the hierarchical constitution of Tamil society in that locality. It is the essence of such festivals, of course, that some shares—particularly the hereditary duties of the lowest castes—are smaller or more demeaning than others, but at least the rhetoric of *pañku* (shares) is uniform. The quick assumption of my more conservative high-caste acquaintances was that having any *pañku* would be better than having no *pañku* at all. However, the history of lower-caste boycotts and even occasional high-caste abdications of festival duties in the twentieth century suggests that, in the past,

certain shares in temple ritual may have been performed only under the latent sanction of force on the part of the ranking Podiyars and temple Vannakkars. Diane Mines (2005) offers contemporary examples of similar Maravar temple dominance and lower-caste ritual resistance in Hindu temple festivals near Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu.

The biggest and most prestigious shares in a Hindu temple entail the right to sponsor, and to participate in, specific “nights” of the annual festival, the most glorious and theatrical of which are usually the final few evenings before the morning *tīrttam*, or bathing of the deity, which concludes the entire event. The gradual reallocation of ritual shares to different castes and kudis over time, as well as the consolidation of joint sponsorship by several smaller groups on a single night, is a well-attested feature of the system. The display of a preeminent position in temple ritual, particularly one dramatized by receiving the god’s flower garland and the first portion of the returned offerings, is a recognized honor called *munṇītu* (foremost position).<sup>18</sup> On most evenings of the annual festival, this honor is given to one or more men called *tiruvilākkāraṅ* (festival-men), who are the designated leaders of the group(s) sponsoring the ritual that night. Nowadays, on the final night of the festival, the *munṇītu* honor is typically accorded to the temple trustees who represent the locally dominant matriclans. In colonial and pre-colonial times, however, a regional political chief, such as the Mukkuvar head Podiyar or the Vanniah of the district, would have claimed it.

This is one of the most dynamic arenas of caste and kudi ranking, since sponsorship requires not only a historically sanctioned claim to precedence but social standing, manpower, and financial resources as well. Perennial quarrels over the sequence of such honors, or disputes over the qualifications of particular individuals to receive them on behalf of their matriclans, plagued the law courts and district officials in many parts of the Batticaloa region throughout the twentieth century and probably earlier as well. Mark Whitaker, who carefully studied the rituals and politics of one major *tēcattukōvil*, the Sri Kandaswamy Temple in Mandur, found that a temple dispute might begin as a *kauravam caṅṅai*, a prominent individual’s struggle to assert or protect his social status. Such disputes often escalate to a group level, at which point the collective ability of members of any local kudi or caste to successfully defend or assert their *urimai* rights to sponsor a share of the annual festival depends in the long run on four key factors: (1) a plausible claim to membership in a caste or matriclan that is believed to have participated in the mythical found-

ing of the temple, or that played a role in its historical development; (2) a sufficient degree of generalized respect, influence, and standing in the community (*kauravam*); (3) a record of prior financial support of the temple and a demonstrated ability to cover the current costs of the rituals; and (4) some evidence—or at least an absence of counter-evidence—that the deity of the temple recognizes and sanctions the role to be played in the festival (Whitaker 1999: 266–69). Whitaker also found that the fights over hereditary rights at the Mandur temple from the 1920s onward have been framed in two mutually incoherent modes of discourse: the mythohistorical “temple ideology” of caste and kudi rights versus the legalistic British colonial language of religious trusts and charitable endowments (see Appadurai 1981 for South Indian parallels).

### Temple Honors at Kokkadichchulai

In the isolated vicinity of Kokkadichchulai, located on the *paṭuvāṇ karai*, the inland shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon, the traditional patterns of Mukkuvar solidarity and dominance persisted longer than elsewhere in the region. Since the mid-1980s, however, the village and surrounding area have largely been under the revolutionary control of the LTTE, so the following ethnographic portrait reflects information I gathered primarily in the 1970s, plus one quick visit in 1993. The ancient Tāntōṇricuvarar Kovil (Temple of the Self-manifesting Siva) at Kokkadichchulai is still considered to be one of the most important of Batticaloa’s “national temples,” and despite the inevitable erosion of their traditional power, the Mukkuvars here tried to preserve the symbols and prerogatives of temple overlordship which validated the Mukkuvar *vannimai*, or regional chiefship. The temple is governed by three trustees (*vannakkkar*) representing the three most prestigious kudis in the region (*Ulakippōṭi kudi*, *Kālīnkā kudi*, and *Paṭaiyāṇṭa kudi*), and the temple priests are Virasaiva Kurukkals. The lesser servants of the temple are members of the Kovilar caste whose hereditary ritual duties are differentiated and assigned among six named matriline.

Direct “supervision of the inner-duties” (*uṭkaṭampai atikāram*) of the temple staff was, until sometime in the 1960s, delegated by the Mukkuvar trustees to a hereditary Velalar temple officer called the *Tēcattu Vannimai* who acted as a sort of chief ritual factotum for the Mukkuvars. This Velalar temple chief was by right always a member of one of the two high-status matrilineans (*Attiyā kudi* and *Vaittiṇā kudi*) that predominate in the Velalar village of Palu-

gamam about eight miles south of the temple. Holding this office was seen as the joint prerogative of these two matrilineal clans, which are historically allied in a reciprocal marriage-exchange relationship. These two kudis also enjoyed specified prebendary rights over a large tract of temple paddy land named after one of the clans, Attiyā Muṇmāri, in return for the ritual services they rendered to the temple, particularly during the annual festival. A special committee of elders, known as the *kaṭukkenṭār* and representing all the major sublineages within Attiya and Vaittina kudis, had special responsibility for selecting each new ritual overseer as well as for managing the prebendary lands and marshaling the revenue from these lands to fulfill the hereditary Velalar duties at the temple. At the time of the annual festival, this ritual overseer took up temporary residence near the temple and directed the conduct of the pujas, including the provision of extra Velalar manpower (from Attiya kudi and Vaittina kudi, of course) to perform certain higher-status tasks such as carrying the deity's palanquin in procession and riding alongside the god's idol atop the temple car (figure 11).

At the close of the festival, a ceremony was performed in the vicinity of the temple before a temporary image of the deity which was known variously as *kuṭukkai kūrūtal* (calling out the water pots), *kañci muṭṭi kūrūtal* (calling out the rice-gruel pots), or *paṅku kūrūtal* (calling out the shares). In former times the Velalar ritual overseer (the *Tēcattu Vanṇimai*) would have customarily called out in strict order a list of arcane titles identifying all the castes and kudis in the Manmunai region recognized as having a share in the celebration of the temple festival. When I witnessed the list being recited in 1975 by a respected Mukkuvar schoolmaster, it contained a total of 120 titles, some of which appeared to commemorate mythological figures, but most of which represented Tamil castes and kudis recognized in specific localities throughout the Batticaloa region. Three pots for members of the Moorish community were also recited, but no one came forward to receive them.

When a representative of a group would step forward to accept a pot, the onlookers occasionally challenged the recipient to explain his hereditary qualification to receive that share. This could be done by reciting from memory a metered line or a poetic fragment from one of the recognized sources of Batticaloa historical tradition (e.g., a phrase identifying the caste or matrilineal clan from one of the constituent texts of the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam*). The list of titles began with *Vētam* (Veda, or scripture in general) and ended with *Mūppan* (chief of the Paraiyar Drummers). Many titles and subtitles in the



FIGURE 11. Lifting the icon of the deity onto the temple car at the Kakkadichcholai Siva temple, so that devotees can pull it around the shrine during the annual festival (1971).

middle of the list bore scant relationship to present-day realities. Ten different kinds of shares for the Chetty (*Ceṭṭiyār*) caste, which has virtually vanished from the Batticaloa region in modern times, were called but not taken up, and in the end, only thirty-six pots—less than one-third of the total—were actually distributed. The principle behind the *kañci muṭṭi* ritual was nevertheless clear: it publicly dramatized the entire social order, validating group status in terms of rank-order as the shares were called. At the same time, the uniform size, shape, and content of all the pots reflected the principle that all shareholders, however humble their contribution, play a constituent role in worshipping the deity.

Much more could be said about interkudi and intercaste relationships dramatized during the Kakkadichcholai temple festival, but the important point here is to recognize the tense and unequal balance between the political dominance of the Mukkuvars, expressed in overall control of the temple, and the competing claims of Velalar ritual excellence ambiguously sanctioned by the Velalar's special "servitude" to the temple. The Velalars from the village of Palugamam were given a good measure of recognition and status in the affairs of the temple, but the Mukkuvars always retained ultimate control. My informants recalled that even when the Velalars were given the right to assume the former priestly duty of passing out the *kañci muṭṭi* pots, they were required to cover the first-awarded pots (i.e., the Mukkuvars' pots) with a silk cloth,



while their own pots and those of all other groups remained uncovered. The Mukkuvars, then and now, see the Velalars as the hereditary servants of “their” temple and, within the context of temple ritual, as their delegated overseers of the lower service castes. As such, the Velalars are seen as subject to kingly Mukkuvar discipline if they betray their hereditary obligation to serve the deity. Temple legend preserves the memory of one such misdemeanor, which involved the complicity of a Velalar temple storekeeper in a theft of temple valuables. A public expiation of this sin was incorporated by the Mukkuvars into the annual temple rituals: at the end of each festival, I was told, a representative of the Velalars was symbolically tied and theatrically whipped by women of the Kovilar caste at the order of the Mukkuvar trustees. A reference to the original event appears in the *Maṭṭukkalaṭṭappu Māṇṇiyam* (Nadarajah 1962: 98).

By the 1950s and 1960s the Velalars were chafing under this symbolic domination by the Mukkuvars, and the ensuing hostility was reflected in bitter electoral politics within the local legislative constituency. An old antagonism seems also to have been exacerbated between the higher-status absentee functionaries from Palugamam (who styled themselves “Maruṅkūr Velalars,” and the lower-status permanent Kovilar Temple Servants resident in Kokkadichchulai, who claimed corresponding textual validation as “Kāraikkāl Velalars.” At some point in the 1960s, the Velalars unilaterally severed their service relationship to the Kokkadichchulai temple entirely. They retained, however, de facto possession of the temple paddy fields at Attiyā Muṇmāri, fertile land the Mukkuvar trustees angrily claim had been given to the Velalars strictly on temple-service tenure. Eventually the temple’s claim to recover the fields failed in the courts, and now the responsibility for “supervision of the inner-duties” of the temple has fallen quite happily on the Kovilars, who were formerly in chronic friction with the Velalar overseer in the day-to-day running of the temple. This turn of events has also had the effect of strengthening the Kovilars’ claim to be considered genuine Velalars themselves, and, ironically, the same kinds of symbolic rights and disabilities that fueled the Mukkuvar-Velalar dispute now figure prominently in aggravated Mukkuvar-Kovilar tensions. Despite this, I documented a considerable degree of intermarriage between Mukkuvars and Kovilars in the vicinity of the temple.<sup>19</sup> Here, not only is the matrilineal rule invoked to distinguish the caste of mixed Mukkuvar-Kovilar offspring, it is still the basis for allocating specific hereditary categories of temple work among the different matrilineal lines within the Kovilar caste.

The Kokkadichchulai example is extremely useful in establishing a tradi-

tional base line for judging data gathered elsewhere. All the characteristic assumptions of matrilineal caste and kudi affiliation are found here, but the Mukkuvars of Kokkadichcholai and the Velalars of Palugamam also observe mutually exclusive endogamous caste boundaries and residential segregation. In this locality there remains a clear distinction between the two castes, not to mention, nowadays at least, considerable hard feeling. Vivid evidence of the Mukkuvar cultural ideal of regional political domination can be seen in the temple ritual, and even where Velalar claims to caste precedence carry an implication of intrinsic religious superiority, these claims are given concrete expression in much the same metaphors of power, honor, and authority. Thus the Velalar temple chief, whose responsibility is ostensibly limited to the strictly religious conduct of the temple festival, nevertheless carries the full kingly title of *Pūpāla Kōttira Tēcattu Vaṇṇimai* (regional chiefship of the earth-guarding lineage). It is also “supervision” (*atikāram*) of the rituals, rather than performance of historically recognized “hereditary service” (*tonṭūliyam*) to the temple deity, which is emphasized in contemporary Velalar ideology.

#### Temple Honors at Tirukkivil

Forty miles from Kokkadichcholai, but only eight miles south of Akkarai-pattu, it is the Velalars who dominate the affairs of an equally famous regional temple to Lord Kandaswamy, known here as Cittiravēlayutacuvāmi (Lord of the Beautiful Lance) at Tirukkivil. The nearby village of Tambiluvil, which has been studied by at least four anthropologists (Yalman 1967: chap. 15; Hiatt 1973; Obeyesekere 1984: 555–63, 594–96; McGilvray 1974, 1982b), is typically described by its inhabitants as a “Velalar village.” Two Velalar matrilineal clans, whose names are well attested in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam*, share preeminence within the village and observe an explicitly preferred pattern of reciprocal marriage alliance. One of these matrilineal clans, *Kaṇṭaṇ* kudi, furnishes the single Vannakkar of the Tirukkivil temple by matrilineal right, while the other clan, *Kaṭṭappattāṇ* kudi, enjoys a similar right to appoint the single Vannakkar of the Kaṇṇaki Amman temple in neighboring Tambiluvil.

Many more features of the temple organization and festival ritual have undergone change at Tirukkivil than at Kokkadichcholai, but they are still recalled in oral traditions preserved by the elderly. In fact, it was Yalman’s informants from Tambiluvil who first mentioned the existence of the *kañci muṭṭi*, or as they expressed it to him, the “kudi-calling” ritual that was still being conducted at Tirukkivil in 1955 (Yalman 1967: 326–27). I could find

nothing left of this ritual in the 1970s, however, nor was there much evidence of the Mukkuvar regional chiefship that formerly presided over the annual festival. There was an acknowledged, but inactive, Mukkuvar *Talaivar* (headman, regional chief) whose title and office descended matrilineally in Panikkana kudi, but his home was twenty miles away, and I was told that he was working as an engineer in Colombo.

Mukkuvar traditionalists in Akkaraipattu argued that the Velalar Vannakkar of the Tirukkovil temple was originally analogous to the Velalar *Tēcattu Vannimai* temple supervisor at Kokkadichcholai: that is, no more than an overseer of temple ritual appointed under the historic Mukkuvar mandate. By the time I arrived in 1970, the temple had already experienced lengthy court litigation brought by leading Mukkuvars and others from outside the immediate vicinity, claiming mismanagement and usurpation of authority by the Velalar (Kantan kudi) trustee, but the truth was that wider Mukkuvar regional dominance could no longer be imposed on Tirukkovil in the modern legal and social setting. The annual festival is still a major regional event, and there is still differentiated sponsorship of nightly shares of the ritual. However, along with the lapse of the *kañci muṭṭi* ritual, there has been an evident change of emphasis from the validation of fixed hereditary ranks in society to a more pragmatic and “devotional” pattern of voluntary sponsorship by delegations from a variety of local villages and settlement areas.

The local demographic concentration of Velalar matrilineal clans has enabled the Tamils to maintain their sense of Velalar identity and to consolidate greater control over the Tirukkovil temple as Mukkuvar dominance has dissolved. Inhabitants of Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil are sometimes heard to say that they are “pure, unmixed” (*cutta, kalavillāta*) Velalars, but the strongest adherents to this claim are members of the two large, high-status kudis who have a tradition of marriage exchange and who control the two main temples. In fact, nearly half of the population of Tambiluvil belongs to one of these two leading matrilineal clans (Hiatt 1973: 248), and succession to the matrilineal trusteeship at the two temples is predicated on the assumption that the candidate’s parents are drawn from these two allied clans. The existence of two separately governed temple complexes in these two adjacent villages provides scope for some degree of “friendly rivalry” between the two matrilineal clans, but marriage exchange is certainly two-directional (Hiatt 1973: 237–38, 248).

Based on the remarks I heard from local informants in the 1970s, one might have thought these two allied matrilineal clans constituted the entire village of Tam-

biluvil and that they were synonymous with the entire Velalar caste. I was assured that the Virasaiva Kurukkals, whose ancestral village of Tampaddai is only a few miles up the coast, are merely a lesser kudi *within* the Velalar caste category. Such oversimplifications were soon challenged, however, by readily available evidence that over 50 percent of Kantan kudi and Kattappattan kudi marriages are contracted with other, lower-prestige, matriclans (Hiatt 1973: 248). Some of these lesser kudis are unique to the village, but 20 percent of the inhabitants belong to matriclans also found in the nearby town of Akkaraipattu, a place denigrated by some residents of Tambiluvil as a “Mukkuvar settlement.” In fact, despite the vocal emphasis on “Velalar” caste identity in Tambiluvil, I found the actual degree of Velalar endogamy and caste separation from the Mukkuvars and the Kurukkals to be less than in the Kokkadichcholai-Palugamam area.

**SUMMARY: MATRILINEAL VALUES AND  
CASTE POLITICS IN BATTICALOA**

In the final analysis the ethnographic puzzles explored in this chapter all revolve around matrilineal identities, women’s property, and traditional forms of caste-based temple politics—issues that speak to ethnographic debates in South Indian and South Asian anthropology more generally. First of all, Hindu caste organization in eastern Sri Lanka incorporates a matrilineally inflected ideology of Mukkuvar and Velalar political dominance, at least at the highest levels of the Tamil caste hierarchy, while at the same time it lacks the highly segmented, territorially demarcated, subcaste units characteristic of so much South Indian village ethnography. As an expression of South Asian matrilineal kinship organization, the traditions of Tamil and Moorish matriclans reflect the political role they played in pre-modern and colonial period temple and mosque hierarchies in the Batticaloa region, rather than expressing a Dumontian (Brahmanical) emphasis on ritual purity or a Marriott-Inden bodily substance-code ideology. Despite the assumptions of legal scholars, the system of matrilineal inheritance law documented in the Batticaloa region in Dutch and early British times was not a transplanted version of the classic Marumakkattayam Law of the central Kerala Nayars, but rather a “mixed” (Misrattayam) inheritance pattern of considerable complexity that seems to have gone into decline by the mid-nineteenth century. The overriding value of women’s property, however, was strongly preserved in the comprehensive system of pre-mortem, dowry-based inheritance that emerged after the extinction of the

“Mukkuvar Law” and that continues to characterize both Tamil and Muslim marriage arrangements in the east-coast region to this day. Finally, the historic patterns of Tamil caste rank in the Batticaloa region have been shown to participate in the larger traditions of Hindu temple honors that have been studied by scholars such as Dirks and Appadurai working in Tamilnadu, although the specific ritual traditions and political forms appear to derive historically from medieval Kerala. Altogether, these findings point to strong cultural affinities, and also important ethnographic variations, in Batticaloa social structure that can be discerned through a continued anthropological dialogue between Sri Lanka and South India.



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**PART 3.**

TAMIL AND MUSLIM SOCIAL STRUCTURE





## VIEWS OF THE TAMIL CASTE HIERARCHY

In Akkaraipattu there are eight principal Tamil castes that possess a customary “share” (*pañku*) of rights and duties in the local caste system. The Mukkuvars, Velalars, and Virasaiva Kurukkals are clustered together in what I hereafter term the “High Caste” echelon, and five specialist castes are arrayed in descending rank below them. There are also three castes of even lower rank that, for reasons of religion, language, livelihood, or recent foreign origin, are seen as external to the system. Table 4 reveals the overall picture of the local caste hierarchy in Akkaraipattu as most Tamils viewed it. Getting to this overall picture, however, was an interesting and laborious process involving observations, informal discussions, and some formal survey procedures. After I determined the Tamil viewpoint, I explored the perceptions of the Muslims of Akkaraipattu about the caste hierarchy of their Tamil neighbors.

Among the key findings is that publicly observable exchanges of food between castes are only seen in household offerings to the three *kuṭimai* service castes, so communitywide food-transaction rankings of the sort found in Indian village ethnographies are

TABLE 4. Tamil caste hierarchy in Akkaraipattu

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High Caste Stratum (“Tamils”)
Mukkuvars, Velalars, Virasaiva Kurukkals
Shareholding Castes
Tattar (Smiths)
Sandar (Climbers)
Vannar (Washermen), Navitar (Barbers)
Paraiyar (Drummers)
Nonshareholding Castes
Kadaiyar (Christian Limeburners)
Kuravar (Telugu-speaking Gypsies)
Cakkiliyar (Indian Sweepers)

---

not possible for all the castes in Akkaraipattu. Formal opinion rankings by both Tamil and Moorish informants gave higher prestige to Velalars and Kurukkals than to Mukkuvars, which reflects the growing fame of the Velalars today in the larger Tamil world. A distinction between the shareholding Hindu castes and the various “anomalous” groups, such as Kuravars, was very clearly shown, and the stated value of lower-caste domestic service in the eyes of the higher castes is to validate political authority and kingly honor rather than to remove ritual pollution.

#### HOW TAMILS SEE THE CASTE SYSTEM

To my earliest inquiries regarding the local caste system, Tamil informants responded with a curious blend of embarrassment and pride. High Caste persons, my first social contacts among the Tamils, were initially a bit perplexed when I expressed an interest in learning about each of the castes, yet they soon took pride in showing me around the various parts of town and pointing out caste neighborhoods with a proprietary air. The adjectives which came into my meager Tamil vocabulary during these early inquiries included dyadic contrasts between *uyarnta* (high) and *tālnta* (low), *nalla* (good) and *mōcamāṇa* (bad), *periya* (big, eminent) and *kūṭāta* (forbidden, restricted). Many people were aware that a Westerner might disapprove of caste ideas, particularly since an American Jesuit priest who had earlier lived in town had energetically condemned traditional caste sentiments. I decided to delve into less-controversial issues before returning openly to the question of caste ranking. Much later, when suspicion that I might be a Christian missionary had subsided, a few conservative Tamil elders nostalgically remarked that the British Raj had recognized and supported caste distinctions. They said that everything, including the caste system, had gone downhill since independence.

My initial impressions of the Tamil caste-ranking logic were highly confused. Some informants initially justified their views of other castes by appealing to ideas of pollution and uncleanness, although not specifically as a biomoral quality of the blood (Marriott and Inden 1974; Marriott 1990).<sup>1</sup> One Kurukkal informant so strongly favored the idea of cleanliness as the key to caste distinctions that he even asserted that “hygiene and Hinduism are the very same thing” (*cukātāramum caivacamayamum onru*). Charges of pollution were made against traditional lower-caste occupations and presumed caste lifestyles, including dietary and hygiene habits. The hereditary occupations of lower castes were also described by High Caste informants as being unclean, some because of contact with polluting human bodily substances and exuviae (hair, sweat, blood, feces, and other products), some because of dealings in unclean natural substances (alcoholic coconut or palmyra toddy), and others because of responsibility for killing creatures or disposing of human corpses. Questionable dietary habits or negligence in washing after defecation were attributed to several castes. The practice of washing polluted clothes beside their household wells was said by one High Caste informant to have thoroughly contaminated the Paraiyars’ well water through seepage. Partiality to alcohol was alleged against the Sandar toddy tappers and all the castes who ranked below them. The problem with all of these explanations was that they did not account for some huge differences in caste rank, such as between the Karaiyar Fishermen and the Kadaiyar Limeburners, both of whom are associated with killing marine creatures. At the same time, I was surprised how much effort it took to convince my local informants of these inconsistencies.

Another approach I encountered was to denigrate the presumed inner character of all members of a given caste. A few individuals contended that low-caste individuals suffer the consequences of an ancient curse (*cāpam*) that their forebears earned by committing a heinous primordial sin, although no one could specify what that sin was. Others simply declared some castes to be morally or intellectually deficient, without offering any further explanation. Interestingly, almost no one invoked the general concepts of dharma (*tarumam*) or karma (*karumam*) in discussing caste destiny. Instead, ad hoc charges were made toward specific castes. For example, the Tattar Smiths were said to be dishonest and greedy, as shown by their treachery in the *Cilappatikāram* legend (Parthasarathy 1993), while Paraiyar Drummers and other low-service castes were described as likely to experiment with evil sorcery (*cūṇiyam*) using bits of a victim’s exuviae or shreds of his clothing. One final approach to local caste ranking was evident in the comments of informants who were particu-

larly close to the offices of the Mukkuvar Urpodyar, the High Caste temple trustees, and the High Caste temple priest. Instead of citing occupational, metaphysical, or other types of explanations for the existence of particular caste rankings, these informants stressed the idea of a local caste system sanctified by political tradition, implying there had been a primordial charter that had assigned castes to their appropriate ranks long ago, when Tamil society first formed in the Batticaloa region. These informants would say, for example, that “in those days” (“*anta kālattilē*”) the Sandar caste had never been granted the public honor (*varicai*) of having Paraiyar Drummers serve at their funerals, and one should never violate such an ancient precedent.

To sort out these different ideas, I eventually conducted a formal caste-ranking survey, although I had some initial doubts about the list of castes I should include. There were nine caste groups in Akkaraipattu each of which comprised more than a hundred adults: Velalar Cultivators, Kurukkal Priests, Mukkuvar Cultivators, Tattar Smiths, Sandar Climbers, Vannar Washermen, Navitar Barbers, Paraiyar Drummers, and Kadaiyar Limeburners. In addition, there were some smaller groups and castes in town that were well known (Portuguese Burghers, Cakkiliyar Sweepers) or that, while not represented locally, were widely recognized in the region (Kovilar Temple Servants, Karaiyar Fishermen, Kuravar Gypsies). I wanted to learn something about perceptions of castes found in smaller numbers or found only in other villages, so for this reason I included the five smaller groups in the list of castes to be ranked by informants. Respondents raised several objections when they were presented with this list of fourteen castes, as I will discuss later.

The basic procedure I employed in charting opinions about the caste hierarchy in Akkaraipattu was the one developed by Stanley Freed (1963) and applied by McKim Marriott (1968), Paul Hiebert (1969, 1971), and others in India. I wrote the name of each of the fourteen castes on a separate card in Tamil, then shuffled the stack of cards to promote randomness. I instructed each informant to examine the cards and to arrange them in an order which would correspond to their relative rank. Typically, I asked the informant to select the card of the highest-ranking caste and set it aside, followed by the card bearing the name of the second highest-ranking caste, and so on, until the cards were exhausted. Then I slowly read out the cards to the informant in the order he had designated and asked if he would like to alter the order in any way. He could have as much time as he needed to rearrange the cards to suit his final preference. I carried out this procedure with a total of forty-nine

Tamil informants distributed among eight local castes as follows: twenty-nine High Castes, one Smith, four Climbers, three Washermen, one Barber, and five Drummers. There were only two women in the sample, both of whom belonged to the High Castes.

The persons selected for this special caste-ranking survey were not chosen by random means. My prior experience had shown that not all persons would willingly trouble themselves with the ranking of castes and that others found it awkward to voice opinions about specific castes in the presence of the inevitable crowd of onlookers. I finally decided that my sample of informants for the opinion-ranking survey would have to be selected from among the set of informants who had shown themselves to be cooperative in preliminary conversations and whose knowledge of the community I judged to be superior to others. Although I tried to include members from every local caste in town in rough proportion to their demographic strength, it was not possible to stratify this sample rigorously. In general, opinion ranking of castes was not a matter of urgent concern to most people in Akkaraipattu, and in the end it was necessary to settle for whatever information I could garner from a group of sometimes reluctant respondents.<sup>2</sup>

When informants were presented with the stack of cards, several problems arose. Some individuals in the sample were illiterate or had very poor eyesight, so I had to carefully read the cards aloud to these informants many times. A number of respondents objected that the card stack included groups that were incommensurate. For example, it was said that the Portuguese Burghers and the Kuravar Gypsies were not really “castes” in the same sense as the others. Some informants said the Burghers were technically Europeans or “whitemen” (*vellaikkārar*). This idea of a separate racial identity was maintained despite the admitted “Dravidian cut” (physiognomy) of some Burghers. I had received a similar answer earlier in my research when I asked Tamils whether the Moors might be considered a ranked caste. The Moors were said to be a separate race (*inam*), therefore not part of the caste structure.

The Telugu-speaking Kuravars were likened to the Veddas (*Vēṭar*), who are the indigenous jungle hunters of Sri Lanka. They were characterized as itinerant tribals who until recently had roamed the forest and who were still not really members of village society. The fact that the Kuravars now live in the Catholic-sponsored Alikambai settlement colony ten miles out of town and are only seen as periodic snake charmers and alms-seekers on festival days was taken as additional proof that they should be treated as a special cate-

gory. Nevertheless, it was possible to elicit qualified rankings of the Burghers and the Kuravars from 73 percent and 88 percent of my respondents, respectively.

Two of the remaining castes on the list, specifically the Kovilar and the Karaiyars, were said to be absent from the local community and therefore difficult to compare with the castes actually resident in Akkaraipattu. Again, however, it was possible to obtain qualified rankings of these two castes from most informants. Finally, it was said that the Kadaiyar Limeburners and the Cakkiliyar Sweepers, although presently living in town, were not “original inhabitants” of Akkaraipattu. The Kadaiyars migrated from Kallar, twenty-five miles north of Akkaraipattu, sometime in the twentieth century. They were formerly Catholics, but I was told that after a quarrel with the Catholic Sandars in Kallar over where a new church should be built, they adopted Methodism and migrated to the coast road just south of Akkaraipattu. Since their arrival, they seem never to have become integrated into any sort of hereditary service relationship with local households, instead providing their lime and white-washing services for simple cash payment. Also, because of their Christianity and their recent arrival, the Kadaiyars have never been given a role in local Hindu temple affairs or in domestic ritual. The Cakkiliyars, too, are described as recent arrivals. At the time of my fieldwork there were no more than two or three Cakkiliyar adults in town, all employed by the village council as garbage collectors and latrine cleaners. Before the advent of the bucket latrine around World War II, it is said, there were no Cakkiliyars at all in Akkaraipattu. Neither the Kadaiyars nor the Cakkiliyars are regarded as having a traditional place in the town’s political or ritual economy. They are not considered to be the hereditary household servants (*kuṭimai*) of the higher castes, and they are not viewed as holding a share (*paṅku*) in the Hindu festivals of Akkaraipattu. Only reluctantly were people willing to rank them in comparison with other castes in the same stack of cards. Yet, despite all of these caveats, my informants provided solid data for the overall opinion ranking of the castes tabulated in table 5.

The criterion of discrete caste rank applied by Marriott and others, and which I have also adopted here, is that there should be at least a 2:1 majority of opinions in order to rank one caste above another. This brings up several important findings in the Akkaraipattu data. First of all, among the three highest-ranking castes, the Velalars are clearly ranked superior to the Mukkuvars by margin of 3:1, while the Kurukkal Priests occupy an intermediate position

TABLE 5. Tamil opinion ranking of the eight shareholding castes

Velalar	28	35.5	46	45	46	46	43
	18	11.5	0	1	0	0	3
Kurukkal		30	45	45	45	46	44
		16	1	1	1	0	2
Mukkuvar			45	43	46	46	42
			1	3	0	0	4
			Tattar	35.5	45	45	39
				10.5	1	1	7
				Sandar	39	38	40
					7	8	6
					Vannar	26	35
						20	11
						Navitar	35
							11
							Paraiyar

Note: Compare the upper and lower numbers in each cell, e.g., 28 informants said that Velalars outranked Kurukkals, but 18 said exactly the opposite was true. When respondents said two castes were equal, each caste was awarded a vote of .5. A margin of at least 2:1 is taken to indicate a clear difference in caste rank. Numbers inside the bars show significant lack of consensus as to which caste ranks higher.

which is nearly, but not fully, differentiated from the other two castes (i.e, they fail to exhibit a 2:1 margin of difference in rank). This absence of complete transitivity in the ranking of the three High Caste groups reflects the emphasis placed on the collective status of these “good people” (the true “Tamils” in an unmarked but privileged sense) previously observed in the comments of most informants, as well as in the widespread intermarriage between matriclans of these castes. However, the statistical pattern also plainly reflects the prestige of the Velalar title throughout the modern Tamil world, a prestige increasingly expressed in the Batticaloa region because of the decay of regional Mukkuvar caste dominance in the postcolonial period.

The most unpredictable and intransitive cells in the Tamil opinion-ranking matrix pertained to the Portuguese Burghers, more a race than a caste in local eyes.<sup>3</sup> The Kovilar caste proved to be much less well known than I had expected. I had to jog my respondents’ memory by referring to Kovilar Temple Servants at the famous Tirukkovil shrine located eight miles south of Akkarai-pattu, and it seemed that the ranking of the Kovilars was not based on much firsthand evidence. For these reasons, I have excluded the Burghers and the Kovilars from the list of castes ranked in tables 4–6.



The second broad tier of the local Tamil caste hierarchy consists of specialized castes whose jobs are not linked closely to hereditary household-service obligations. In Akkaraipattu these consist of the Tattar Smiths who rank highest, followed by the Sandar Climbers. The Karaiyar Fishermen tended to outrank both the Smiths and the Climbers in the local opinion survey, but, apart from a few professionals who work here, the Karaiyars are not a resident caste community in Akkaraipattu. Despite their stigmatic profession as fishermen, the Karaiyars' generally acknowledged prosperity and political influence in villages further north, such as Periya Kallar and Koddai Kallar, was noted by many informants. Older Tamils remembered that the last colonial Vanniah of Akkaraipattu appointed by the British before Sri Lankan independence, Dharmaretnam Vanniah, was a wealthy Karaiyar who owned a large coconut plantation in Tirukkovil (Whitaker 2007: 37–47).

The third broad echelon of the Tamil caste hierarchy as it is conceived locally consists of the so-called *kuṭimai*, or household servant, castes: Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers. The first two, the Washermen and the Barbers, are tied for higher rank, while the Drummers are unambiguously ranked beneath them. The Washermen and Barbers, both of whom remove bodily pollution from High Caste households, are frequently spoken of as being “like cross-cousins” (*maccāṇ maccinaṇ pola*), a Dravidian kinship metaphor which suggests equality, familiarity, and reciprocity. Often the two castes are mentioned in the same breath (“*Vaṇṇāṇ Nācuvan*”), because they constitute a complementary dyad serving High Caste households during life-crisis rituals. There is also, however, an element of rivalry between these two castes: neither will exchange services or food with the other, and there have been chronic disputes over whether the Washerman or the Barber should receive the first gifts of food for their duties at life-crisis ceremonies.

The Paraiyar Drummers complete the local triad of *kuṭimai* household-service castes. Although the Kadaiyar Limeburners were accorded formally equal rank with the Paraiyars in my opinion survey, this was probably based largely on Hindu pollution concepts which stigmatize both castes because of contact with death: funerals and corpses in the case of the Paraiyar Drummers, and the smelly incineration of coral polyps in the case of the Kadaiyar Limeburners. Sociologically, however, the Paraiyars are regarded as shareholding members of the local Hindu caste system, while the Kadaiyars are completely marginal, having arrived recently as Christians from the outside.

Near the very bottom of the opinion survey one finds the Kuravar Gyp-

sies, followed in last place by the Cakkiliyar Sweepers. Traits which respondents cited in ranking the Kuravars low included their “lack of civilization” (*nakarīkamillai*) as nomadic forest-dwellers, and particularly their alleged diet and sanitary habits. Many Tamils in Akkaraipattu are in sympathy with the Muslim injunction against eating pork, and it was thought likely that the Kuravars would eat the wild boar they hunted in the Dry Zone forests in this part of the island.<sup>4</sup> The Kuravars, with their “tribal” beaded necklaces and massive silver jewelry, are visible to residents of Akkaraipattu primarily on occasions of almsgiving, as at Tai Pongal or at temple festivals, and their public stance as beggars must also contribute to their low status. Informants also argued that the Kuravars were a race (*inam*) apart, a group with no direct participation in the local caste system, but very few mentioned the Kuravars’ distinctive Telugu dialect.

Members of the lowest group in the opinion survey, the Cakkiliyar Sweeper caste, are employed by the local authorities to empty bucket latrines near the center of town. Although some people in Akkaraipattu seemed aware that the traditional occupation of this caste in South India would be leatherworking and shoemaking (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 2:2–7), it was the fact that the local Cakkiliyars worked as garbage collectors and latrine cleaners that was cited as the main reason for their low status. It was remarkable that a group of such small size (no more than three adult men) was universally recognized when so few people in Akkaraipattu owned bucket latrines. What made the lone Cakkiliyar man particularly visible, however, was his work as a public servant for the village council, collecting trash of various kinds, including night soil, and transporting it in a pushcart to a municipal dumping ground. Several informants told me that if an autopsy were to be performed at the local government hospital, it would be a Cakkiliyar orderly who would be called on to make the actual incisions in the corpse. Vivid comments regarding these kinds of activities by the Cakkiliyars were made by virtually every respondent. As with the Kuravars, however, I have excluded the Cakkiliyars from the caste rankings in tables 4 and 5, because both castes are clearly outside the framework of intercaste rights and duties that constitute the armature of Tamil Hindu society in Akkaraipattu.

#### MOORISH PERSPECTIVES ON THE TAMIL HIERARCHY

To obtain comparative data from the Muslim point of view, I asked a total of 143 Moorish informants to rank a list of Tamil castes that was nearly identical

to the list ranked by the Tamil informants. The only difference was the exclusion of the Kovilar caste from the Moorish list, a decision I made after pilot interviews showed that practically no Moors had ever heard of the Kovilars. Because the Moors found it a nonthreatening exercise, it was possible to gather information on the ranking of the Tamil castes from a much larger sample of persons in the Moorish community than had been possible among the Tamils. In comparing certain castes their rate of response fell as low as 36 percent, but on the whole the Moors seemed to find the ranking of the Tamil castes a novel and amusing task.

However, a number of Muslims immediately noted that members of the Islamic faith should recognize no caste distinctions among themselves or among others. Therefore, they asked, should their ranking represent their own views, or should it reflect their understanding of how the Tamils' would rank the castes? For those Moors who maintained an Islamic position against "acknowledging" Hindu castes, I suggested they rank them as they presumed the Tamils themselves would. The majority of Moorish informants assured me they had no particular interest in the caste distinctions of the Tamils, but they were also less reticent about offering a set of rankings.

Despite some equivocations, the results showed a surprising consistency, and unlike the Tamils' ranking, the Moorish ranking was uniformly transitive and scalable. Also, the ordinal ranking of the castes by Moorish informants differed in only a few places from that of my Tamil informants. As table 6 indicates, the Muslims tended to rank the Kurukkals higher than the Velalars by a tiny margin, while strongly asserting the superiority of both Kurukkals and Velalars over the Mukkuvars. Opinion was evenly split over which of the two uppermost castes should be given precedence, yet the reasons given for the rankings were uniform: the Kurukkal is a religious leader, while the Velalar is a custodian of the sacred paddy crop. Few specific comments were made regarding the Mukkuvar caste, but several were nonetheless quite revealing. In particular, some remarked that "Mukkuvar" was not truly a caste, but rather was a sort of regional term applied to Muslims of the entire Batticaloa area. One man said that nearly everyone in that part of the island was a Mukkuvar, so it was too broad a term to be included in a list of distinct castes. To some Moorish informants, the term *Mukkuvar* seemed unexpected and not quite polite; others were convinced that it was not a high-ranking caste. In short, the responses were widely divergent, but they tended to reflect the infrequency with which the term Mukkuvar was used in ordinary conversation. The fact

TABLE 6. Moorish opinion ranking of the eight shareholding Tamil castes

Kurukkal	62	101	108	110	109	107	109
	59	8	1	0	0	1	2
Velalar		99	98	104	104	104	104
		5	7	1	1	5	8
Mukkuvar			51	60	56	61	63
			23	9	15	16	20
		Tattar		55	58	60	59
				7	5	6	14
			Navitar		38	29	41
					26	29	32
			Vannar			37	43
						28	34
						Sandar	36
							35
							Paraiyar

Note: Compare the upper and lower numbers in each cell, e.g., 62 informants said that Kurukkals outrank Velalars, but 59 said exactly the opposite was true. When respondents said two castes were equal, each caste was awarded a vote of .5. A margin of at least 2:1 is taken to indicate a clear difference in caste rank. Numbers inside the bars show significant lack of consensus as to which caste ranks higher.

that Moors in the Batticaloa region follow numerous customs and social practices derived from the Mukkuvar heritage was apparent to all, but there was some reluctance to mention this openly, possibly because it would seem to undermine the rationale for the contemporary polarization between Muslims and Tamils.

In the middle range of the Moorish caste rankings only the Tattar Smiths stood out, possibly because Moorish farmers have frequent interactions with the Tamil blacksmiths who fashion iron tires for their bullock-cart wheels, forge plows and other agricultural implements, and—with the mechanization of agriculture and the increasing ownership of motor vehicles—nowadays repair their tractors, motorbikes, and automobiles. Tattar goldsmiths also produce jewelry which is purchased by Muslim families, but typically a Muslim jewelry-shop owner serves as the intermediary retailer in such transactions. With regard to the lower ranges of the Tamil caste hierarchy, the Moors did not make clearly ranked distinctions between the Barbers, Washermen, Climbers, and Drummers. However the Moors agreed with the Tamils that the Kuravar Gypsies and the Cakkiliyan Sweepers were at the very bottom of Tamil society.

Although not shown in table 6, the Portuguese Burghers, all of whom are Catholic, were ranked quite highly by the Muslims, just beneath the Mukkuvars and on a par with Tattar Smiths. Curiously, Burgher drinking habits, an issue for some of the Tamils, were never mentioned. Instead, many Moors noted with approval that Burghers were Christians, members of one of the “four religions of the Book” (*nālu vētam*), as well as descendants of European rulers. Similarly, the Kadaiyar Limeburners were also ranked highly, just below the Smiths, presumably also because of their Christianity. The fact that Burghers are often found in blacksmithing, carpentry, and the mechanical trades also may have prompted Moorish informants to judge them equal in rank to the Tattar Smiths.

Among the traditional Hindu shareholding castes, the Sandar Climbers scored relatively low in Moorish judgment, probably because of the Moors’ strong public opposition to toddy tapping and other forms of alcoholic indulgence. One of the most surprising things is the relatively strong showing by the Paraiyars, who were specifically mentioned by many Muslim informants as being worthy of respect. One factor which may account for this is the prominence of the Paraiyar Drummer as an official crier in the Moorish neighborhoods, whereas other Tamils, apart from the Vannar Washermen, seldom have business in the Moorish sections of town. It also seems likely that the once common use of Paraiyar Drummers as entertainment at Muslim weddings, circumcisions, and mosque kandoori feasts, a practice curtailed on political and religious grounds only in recent years, has perpetuated some favorable Moorish attitudes toward the Paraiyars.

#### TRACES OF CASTE IN DAILY LIFE

The opinion surveys about caste ranking were useful, but such formal methods also struck my Tamil and Moorish friends as contrived and hypothetical. For this reason, I was eager to collect more information about the everyday behavioral practices and special ritual occasions through which the local caste hierarchy was dramatized, contested, and publicly validated. I soon discovered that public, face-to-face transactions in food, water, tobacco, garbage, and waste removal between members of different castes, so important in Indian villages as indicators of relative caste rank, were not nearly as important or as frequent in Akkaraipattu. Whether because of the dense quasi-urban nature of the settlement pattern or because of a difference in social idiom, the fact remains that the kind of large intercaste feasts given “to the whole village” by

particular families in Uttar Pradesh (Marriott 1968: 151) or given at weddings in the Konku region of Tamilnadu (Beck 1972: 154–81) are not found in eastern Sri Lanka. Wedding celebrations in Akkaraipattu usually conclude with a meal served to the invited guests, but these guests are drawn primarily from the same caste as the marriage party itself. The Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers are the only exceptions to this general rule. They are expected to perform ritual duties at functions such as weddings, funerals, and birth rituals at High Caste households, and on such occasions the members of these service castes may be offered raw or cooked food, plus tobacco, arecanut, or liquor. Sometimes this food will be eaten at the patron's house, or it may be wrapped up and taken home for later consumption. If any of these three castes—referred to collectively as the *kuṭimai* (domestic service) castes or as *kuṭimakkal*, (children of the house)—were to refuse to accept food from their traditional High Caste patrons, it would provoke considerable wrath. No such refusal occurs, since accepting food is viewed as a perquisite of providing *kuṭimai* service. Other items, such as textiles or money, are sometimes given as well.

The receiving of food in exchange for ritual service to the household is found only in the case of the three *kuṭimai* castes, and within these castes it applies only to a few individuals in each instance who hereditarily attend to a particular family. Outside of these formal situations, food transactions in Akkaraipattu appear to be highly divergent and variable. Informants within the very same caste differed sharply regarding whether or not they would, themselves, accept food from members of other castes, but they often noted that if food transactions were not reciprocal between two groups, they would usually be avoided altogether. My overall impression was that these questions were largely hypothetical and irrelevant to actual behavioral situations. Intercaste food exchange was simply a rare thing. The only other venue for public feasting among the Tamils—the distribution of fruit and milk-rice offerings at Hindu temple festivals—conveys little evidence of caste hierarchy, since the food is considered to be *prasādam* (blessed offering) and is eaten by everyone.<sup>5</sup>

Two categories of food are recognized: raw (*paccai*, “green, unripe”) and cooked (*camaitta*). Cooked foods—for example, curries and boiled rice, deep-fried or steamed rice-flour sweets, and savory snacks—convey the pollution states of the persons who prepare them, including their caste occupational pollution, while raw foods are much more resistant to this sort of contamination. Even persons who seemed especially concerned not to accept cooked food from other groups were often willing, at least hypothetically, to accept

raw foods from a wide range of other castes. A number of my High Caste informants, for example, alleged their willingness to accept food given in a raw state (*paccaippati*) by members of any caste. These brave declarations meant relatively little, however, since opportunities for such food transactions practically never arose.

Water, tea, coconut water, and fresh fruit juices were felt to have the same pollution-transmitting qualities as cooked food if they were prepared or served with regular household utensils or vessels. Fresh young coconut water (*iḷanīr*), for example, can be drunk without pollution directly from the virgin husk, and therefore it is considered to be more acceptable if served in this fashion.<sup>6</sup> Modern carbonated soft drinks sold in factory-sealed bottles are treated the same as an unopened drinking coconut. They can be accepted from any caste, especially if they are poured directly into one's open mouth without touching the lips.

Two other consumable substances often exchanged by individuals are betel leaf served with arecanut and quicklime (*verriḷaippāḷku*), and tobacco rolled into a cheroot (*curuṭṭu*, rolled up) or as a tiny handmade smoke (beedi, *pīṭi*) or as a commercial cigarette. Informants treated betel and tobacco as consumable media of exchange roughly on a par with uncooked foodstuffs. There was a great deal of individual variation in the exchange of these substances, and no scalable pattern of distribution could be detected in their use. The use of betel leaf and arecanut is notable, however, for its traditional role in social etiquette. A tray of betel is customarily sent as a preliminary offering to a high-ranking person whose presence is requested, as in the case of a Kurukkal priest who is summoned to one's home to read signs and omens. When male guests arrive at a house for a social visit, a tray of betel is always brought out, a gesture called "placing the betel leaf and arecanut" (*verriḷaippāḷku vaittal*). Betel leaves and arecanuts are employed as offerings to deities and spirits, and they are also used in the most common forms of divination. The fact that betel leaves and arecanut are the only whole botanical products commonly consumed (i.e., chewed) in the raw state without being peeled or unhusked in any way further underscores their special purity.

Although food transactions in Akkaraipattu were rare and difficult for me to document, some informants described patterns they had observed in the way food or drink was served to members of different castes. Individuals regarded as caste equals receive utensils and vessels of the same kind as the host would use, while lower-caste recipients may be handed a specially reserved

glass tumbler, a discarded coconut shell, or an empty food tin to be used for drinking purposes. In some instances the host will pour water from his own small brass *cempu* pot into the cupped palms of the recipient, who then drinks from his bare hands. If cooked food is served to a lower-caste person, a banana leaf is normally used and discarded afterward.

Another kind of caste demarcation is found in the spatial rules that govern the access of lower castes to the compound or house of a higher-caste person. In the 1970s Paraiyar Drummer musicians, for example, were expected to remain in a corner of the household compound while drumming for a High Caste funeral, while members of higher castes were allowed to sit closer to the doorway or even inside the front room if it were unoccupied. In the course of performing their ritual duties, of course, certain low-caste officiants such as the Washerman and the Barber had to enter the house itself. The type of seating offered to a visitor was another index of his caste rank. Equals or near equals were given chairs if possible. Lower-ranking persons received reed mats (*pāy*) to sit upon, while even lower-ranking persons might have received only an empty burlap sack. The very lowest individuals, such as the Paraiyars, were expected to use a portion of their own shoulder cloth (*cālvai*) or nothing at all, in which case they would simply squat on the ground with knees bent.

Finally, there were sumptuary restrictions intended to dramatize the differential power, privilege, and honor of the highest castes and which, under the earlier Mukkuvar regime, were applied very harshly to the lower castes. These were rules mainly governing clothing and personal accoutrements, all of which have been bitterly but successfully contested in the past fifty years. Still, in the 1970s, when interacting with particular High Caste individuals who were known to be powerful traditionalists, low-caste individuals at times reverted to their former deferential practices out of respect or expediency. For example, low-ranking *kuṭimai* castes such as the Washermen or Barbers were formerly denied the right to footwear of any kind; the men were expected to call on their traditional patrons bare-chested as a mark of respect (just as a Hindu devotee stands before his temple deity); and they were required to fold up their white *vēṭṭi* waistcloths so as to expose their knees and lower legs. Only in the middle of the twentieth century were lower castes finally permitted to carry umbrellas or to have bicycles. In the 1970s, despite their hard-earned right to wear shirts or other apparel on the upper body, lower-caste men still often showed respect by switching their shoulder cloth from their shoulder to their right forearm when they passed a higher-caste person. Women in the



lowest castes are now permitted to wear a tailored blouse (*raukkai*), but in earlier days they would have covered their breasts only with the ends of their saris.

Throughout my caste-ranking discussions, one of the most frequently mentioned considerations was whether or not the household services of the Washerman, the Barber, or the Drummer were available by hereditary right (or High Caste authorization) to the members of a caste in question. Access to the services of one or more of the *kuṭimai* castes is regarded as a traditional mark of honor, a *varicai*, which sets the upper castes apart from the lower. Having the services of the Barber also implies having the service of the Washerman, and vice versa, since these two castes are commonly viewed as near equals who supply complementary services. The right to use Paraiyar Drummers is, according to High Caste canons, a separate honor over and above the right to enjoy the services of the Barber and the Washerman. The linguistic context in which people spoke of the obligatory services of the Washerman, Barber, and Drummer presumed a relationship of traditional caste servitude regulated by the Mukkuvar Urpodiyar. My informants talked about whether or not certain castes had “rights” (*urimai*) to service from the Washerman, Barber, or Drummer as if these hereditary privileges had been instituted when society was first created. Oral traditions and ethnographic evidence suggests that the Mukkuvars once tried very hard to appropriate the service castes solely to themselves, to the Kurukkals, and to the Velalars.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1970s, however, many of these precedents had already been under attack by members of upwardly mobile castes who had been denied *kuṭimai* services in the past, particularly the honorific funeral drumming of the Paraiyars. The Tattar Smiths enjoyed full access to the Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers, although the right to have Paraiyar Drummers perform at the Smith-caste temple for the goddess Bhadrakali was only secured in 1970. An issue which generated a great deal of heat among some of my informants was whether or not the Sandar Climbers, just below the Smiths in caste rank, could be deemed to have legitimately acquired the services of the Paraiyar Drummers. The question had been simmering for quite a few years when I first arrived in Akkaraipattu in 1970, but it was rekindled by the successful maneuver of several leading Sandars to import Paraiyar musicians from outside the Akkaraipattu area to drum at Sandar funerals. This was a symbolic gesture, because the long-term economics of hiring imported drummers from forty miles away was quite unfavorable. The Sandars ultimately wanted full access to

the local Paraiyars' services, including drumming for the annual Sandar-caste temple festival. It was part and parcel of their larger campaign to renounce their participatory share in High Caste temple rituals and to establish an independent Sandar temple congregation of their own.

During fieldwork, I also considered the possibility that another type of service relationship might serve as a marker of caste rank: access to supernatural specialists. However, I soon learned that fortunetellers and sorcerers (*mantiravāti*) were found in all castes and that they welcomed clients of all castes. This left the possibility that formal priestly specialists, temple kurukkals, *pūcāris*, and the like, might restrict their services to members of certain castes only. I kept my ears open during the opinion-ranking survey, but this issue never came up. Access to, or denial of, priestly services does not function as an important caste marker, since each caste community, with the exception of the Barbers, now maintains a separate temple or shrine and strives for a degree of religious self-sufficiency. The central Pillaiyar temple in the High Caste neighborhood—moribund and crippled by caste conflicts in the 1970s, but reconsecrated and revitalized in the wake of the Eelam Wars of the 1980s and 1990s—supports a full-time non-Brahmin Kurukkal priest. However, there are no domestic priestly rituals (such as the sacred thread investitures or ancestral *shraddha* rites often performed in India by the domestic Brahmin *purohit*) that are, on Hindu religious grounds, prohibited to households of the lower castes. In any event, the castes most likely to seek such services would be the upwardly mobile Tattar Smiths and Sandar Climbers, groups that already have their own temples and priests to serve them.<sup>8</sup> When I asked if they would ever ask the High Caste temple Kurukkal to perform postfunerary *amutu* rites or other domestic rituals for them, my Tattar and Sandar informants replied that it would be unnecessary, since priests attached to their own caste temples could do the job. The Kurukkal seemed willing in principle to perform such rituals for the Tattars and the Sandars, but he said he had received no requests.<sup>9</sup>

The Washermen and the Barbers both lack full-time priests. The Washermen maintain a separate caste temple dedicated to the god Periya Tambiran, and on special occasions several pious Washermen men perform pujas and recite sacred verses from a book. The Barbers have less religious organization than this. Both castes reserve their greatest enthusiasm for the annual Bhadrakali festival held at the Smith-caste temple. There seems to be little desire to conduct elaborate Hindu rituals among the members of these two castes,

and whatever lesser religious or magical services they may require are easily obtained from *mantiravātis* and part-time practitioners. The Paraiyar Drummers are the final group who might desire domestic priestly services of some sort, but these are provided at the present time by the Paraiyar *pūcāri* of the Mariyamman temple located in the Drummer hamlet of Kolavil North.

**SUMMARY: TWO ETHNIC PERSPECTIVES  
ON THE CASTE HIERARCHY**

Comparing ideas and comments from Tamil and Moorish informants reveals some of the ways in which the Hindu caste system in Akkaraipattu is seen differently by the two ethnic communities, yet in the formal opinion-ranking exercise there was a good deal of agreement about the overall caste hierarchy. Most of the Moors do not have Tamil neighbors, and they do not witness interactions between Tamil castes on ritual occasions or in domestic life. As a result, the Moors tended to judge some castes on positive public attributes such as technical skills (blacksmithing) or having a “religion of the Book” (Christianity), or on a negative lifestyle such as consumption of alcohol. Tamils tended to have a wide range of specific ritual stereotypes and mythic justifications for the way the lower castes are discretely ranked, while Moors more often tended to lump the lower castes together as generally similar in rank. The absence of any community-wide food transactions between all of the Tamil castes precludes any public enactment and ratification of an exclusively Hindu purity-based caste ranking, and, in any case, a strong emphasis on historic High Caste honors (*varicai*) and political rights to lower-caste *kuṭimai* service overshadows other justifications for caste rank in terms of inherent religious or biomoral qualities.

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## **THE TAMIL HIGH CASTE ALLIANCE**

One of the unforeseen sociological benefits of Sri Lanka's food-subsidy program during the first twenty-five years of independence (Wriggins 1960: 289) is the demographic information that it generated at the village level. Although phased out by President Jayawardene in 1979, the free weekly per-capita rice ration was still in effect during my early fieldwork in the 1970s. Each divisional headman (Grama Sevaka) was required to maintain an official householder list in which the members of each household were enrolled and verified regularly to prove their eligibility, and I was given access to these registers to tabulate information on occupations and household composition. Without the householder list, it would have been much more difficult for me to construct a profile of the occupational structure and household composition of a town the size of Akkaraipattu.

The three High Caste groups (Mukkuvar, Velalar, Kurukkal) are dispersed across Divisions 7, 8, and 9, although Division 7 on the southwestern side of town is clearly regarded as their special stronghold. Only the Kurukkals can be said to exhibit any significant tendency toward residential segregation. Approximately half of the Kurukkal group resides in Alaiyadivembu,

a satellite hamlet on the southwest side of Akkaraipattu in Division 7 (see map 8) that has recently become the seat of a separate Pradeshya Sabha for the Tamil residents of Akkaraipattu. Working with a local Tamil research assistant, I was able to disaggregate the High Caste families in the householder list from the lower-caste or non-Tamil families (e.g., Sinhala and mixed Sinhala-Tamil families who also lived in the High Caste part of town). Statistics on the overall numerical strength of the High Caste Tamils may be seen in table 7. Although Division 7 is often referred to as the High Caste neighborhood, more than a quarter of the residents belong to lower castes, a tendency which is amplified even more in Divisions 8 and 9.

In some ways the High Caste Tamils of Akkaraipattu exemplify social and cultural patterns widespread in other Tamil regions of South India and Sri Lanka. They are primarily wet rice farmers and cultivators whose symmetrical Dravidian-type kinship system encourages marriage with cross-cousins on both sides of the family, a kinship strategy that reflects a tradition of long-term, two-directional alliance between the highest-ranked matrilineal clans (*kudis*) in the High Caste stratum. However, many of these matriclans are found to have strongly held ethnohistorical or mythic connections to distinct Mukkuvar, Velalar, or Kurukkal caste identities, especially a cultural model of the “seven-kudi Mukkuvars.” A survey of High Caste matriclan membership reveals that in Akkaraipattu the conventional South Asian idea of discrete, endogamous Mukkuvar or Velalar castes has been replaced by a cultural logic that assigns High Caste membership on the basis of matrilineal *kudi* affiliation.

#### **OCCUPATIONAL PROFILE OF THE HIGH CASTES**

A summary of the occupations of High Caste Tamil men aged twenty or older as recorded in the householder lists for 1970 are given in table 8. These occupations were not always precisely enumerated, and many individuals engaged in several lines of work in order to make a living (e.g., cart operator, plus paddy cultivator, plus field laborer). Obviously, illicit occupations such as selling ganja (cannabis) or distilling *vaṭi* (home-brewed liquor) were never recorded in the householder list, and low or stigmatized occupations were often given more dignified labels. For example, bucket-latrines cleaning was listed as “Village Council work,” and hospital orderly was listed as “healing work.” Such jobs as these would never be performed by members of the High Castes.

The occupational list is instructive for what lines of work are excluded. No High Caste men are engaged in blacksmithing, goldsmithing, barbering, toddy

TABLE 7. High Caste Tamil population of Akkaraipattu, 1970

	All Adults	High Caste Adults	Percentage High Caste
Division 7	1,477	1,054	71%
Division 8	1,747	1,060	61%
Division 9	178	56	31%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,402</b>	<b>2,170</b>	<b>64%</b>

Note: Adults are defined as persons at least twenty years old.

tapping, laundry work, limeburning, or drumming, for these are caste-specific occupations they would never enter even if they knew how to perform the jobs. However, both carpentry and masonry, which are often caste occupations in other parts of the Hindu world, are open to all castes here. Carpentry is done equally by Moors and Tamils, while masonry work is mainly a Tamil occupation practiced in Akkaraipattu primarily by the High Castes and the Sandar Climbers.<sup>1</sup>

Fishing or fish-selling were identified as occupations by only five High Caste men, for it would suggest hereditary membership in a fishing caste, for example the Karaiyar. There are very few Karaiyars resident in Akkaraipattu, and those who live there are anxious to erase any association with fishing. Fishing of two kinds is done near Akkaraipattu: ocean fishing with nets carried on hollow-hulled sailing outriggers (*tōṇi*, not to be confused with the solid wood *kaṭṭumaram* of Jaffna), and lagoon fishing with hand nets in shallow water or from smaller outrigger canoes. In ocean fishing, which is done on a very small scale in Akkaraipattu, the Moors have a virtual monopoly, for it is this type of fishing which the Tamils associate so readily with lower-caste status. Both Moors and Tamils are known to engage in lagoon fishing, often a subsistence activity, while ocean fishing can be quite lucrative. Most of the fish *mutalālīs* (marketing entrepreneurs) are either Muslims or Sinhalese.

Included among the “Other” occupations in table 8 are six religious specialists, including the resident Roman Catholic parish priest and five Hindu temple priests who consider this work to be their major occupational identity. However, some of these Hindu priests augment their meager temple incomes with earnings from paddy cultivation, from salaried employment as teachers, from reading horoscopes and telling fortunes, from inscribing protective copper *accaram* talismans, and from calculating the ritually correct sites for wells and new houses.

TABLE 8. Occupations of Tamil High Caste adult men in Akkaraipattu, 1970

Occupation	Div. 7	Div. 8	Div. 9	Total	(%)
Cultivator <sup>a</sup>	323	295	7	625	(54%)
Laborer <sup>b</sup>	77	140	15	232	(20%)
Office Worker <sup>c</sup>	30	27	1	58	(5%)
Building Trades <sup>d</sup>	34	13	0	47	(4%)
Merchant <sup>e</sup>	21	23	0	44	(4%)
Transportation <sup>f</sup>	20	19	1	40	(3%)
Student	16	18	1	35	(3%)
Teacher	17	14	1	32	(3%)
Other <sup>g</sup>	18	14	2	34	(3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>556</b>	<b>563</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>1,147</b>	

<sup>a</sup>The usual entries are the high-status words *kamam* (farming) or *vivacāyam* (cultivation), but these terms do not reveal whether the individual is farming his own land, sharecropping, or working for another landlord.

<sup>b</sup>The typical term is *kāli vēlai* (wage labor). The most common form is agricultural field labor, but there are also laborer jobs in public works such as road repair and irrigation construction.

<sup>c</sup>I combined under this heading post-office employees, government civil servants and technical officers, multipurpose cooperative-society managers, assistants to lawyers and notaries, as well as office clerks and typists.

<sup>d</sup>Building trades is my category for masons, carpenters, electricians, and stonecutters.

<sup>e</sup>I included in the merchant (*viyāpāram*) category seven individuals who said they were shop employees.

<sup>f</sup>Transportation would include bullock-cart operators, car and tractor drivers, and tractor-hire entrepreneurs.

<sup>g</sup>These professions included Tamil policeman (1), fisherman (3), tailor (1), livestock herdsman (5), watchman (7), curing specialist (6), Hindu or Catholic priest (6), coconut planter (1), and factory worker (4). The only factories in 1970 were a sugar mill at Hingurana and a tile kiln at Irakkamam, both located near Ampara, plus some local rice mills nearer to Akkaraipattu.

## KINSHIP STRUCTURE

Quite apart from their economic lives, the Tamils of Akkaraipattu marry and raise their families within a type of kinship system which scholars have called Dravidian, an object of unusual scrutiny ever since it was “discovered” anthropologically by Lewis Henry Morgan in the mid-nineteenth century (Morgan 1871; Trautmann 1987). All three major ethnic communities of Sri Lanka—Sinhala, Tamils, and Moors—have Dravidian-type kinship terminologies. This means that they conform to the same logical structure of the Dravidian-type system despite local linguistic variation in the actual words (kin-terms) they assign to each category of family member. Because of the strong tradition of comparative kinship analysis in Sri Lanka and in South Asia more generally (Leach 1961; Yalman 1967; Dumont 1957; Trautmann 1981; Trawick 1990), and to provide the context for examining marriage preferences and matrilineal exogamy, it is worth documenting what the Tamil kinship terminology in Akkaraipattu looks like (figure 12 and appendix 1). In brief, it is a system that utilizes only the four basic semantic dimensions of what Trautmann has



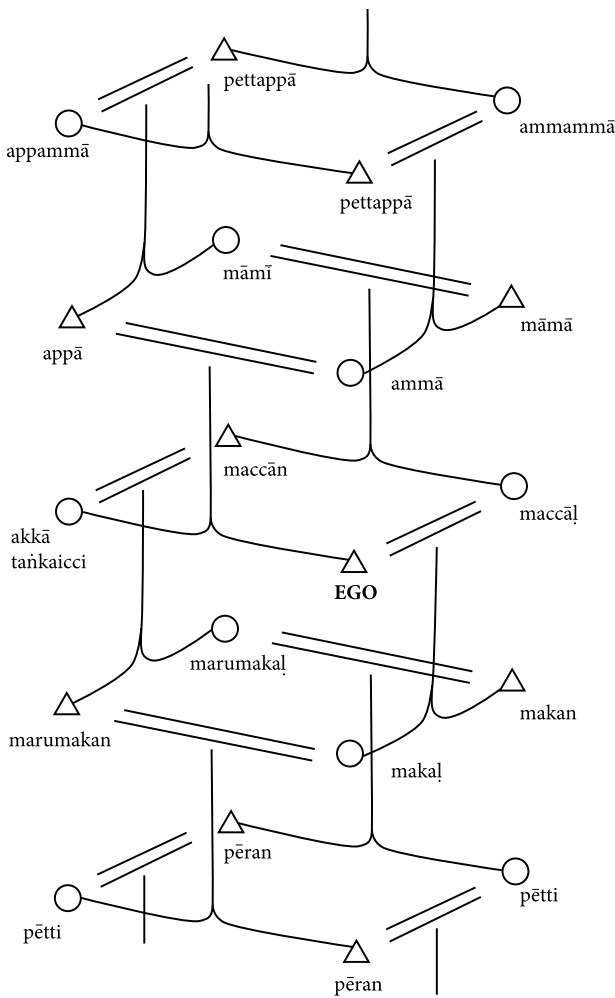


FIGURE 12. Core structure of Tamil kinship terminology in Akkaraipattu (adapted from Trawick 1990).

called a proto-Dravidian kinship paradigm: sex, generation, relative age, and “crossness” (1981: 229–37). If anything, it is a simpler and more symmetrical system than one finds in parts of South India. I learned how to navigate linguistically within the Tamil kinship system through the help of mainly High Caste Hindu friends in Division 7, but the terminological system appears to be uniform across all of the other Tamil castes as well.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE SEVEN-MATRICLAN MODEL

Working on the assumption that I should be able to discover a unique and definitive set of matrilineal clans within each local caste, I set out to enumerate the

“Mukkuvar kudi” soon after I arrived in Akkaraipattu. Initially five clans were mentioned: Panikkana (*Paṇikkaṇā*) kudi, Kalinga (*Kāliṅkā*) kudi, Ula-kippodi (*Ula-kippōṭi*) kudi, Padaiyanda (*Paṭaiyāṇṭa*) kudi, and Sankarappattan (*Caṅkarappattāṇ*) kudi. I was assured there were “really” seven Mukkuvar clans, but that only these five were found in Akkaraipattu. However, when I asked about kudi elsewhere in the Batticaloa region, the names I collected added up to a total of not seven, but ten Mukkuvar matrilineal clans. Although everyone continued to insist on the ancient motto of the “seven-kudi Mukkuvar” (*ēḷukkuṭi mukkuvar*), I was quickly forced to confront the discrepancies between an idealized cultural template and an untidy set of real, historically sedimented social groups. Inquiries about matrilineal clans within the Velalar caste also proved more difficult than expected. In response to my questioning several informants relabeled as “Velalar kudi” matrilineal clans that they had initially tagged as “Mukkuvar kudi.” The only kudi that was uniformly cited as a Velalar matrilineal clan was also the most prestigious one, Maluvaracan (*Maḷuvaracaṅ*) kudi. Two specific matrilineal clans, Maluvaracan kudi and Panikkana kudi (the Mukkuvar Urpodiyar’s clan), were said to be equal or very close to each other in rank, jointly sharing the highest prestige among the matrilineal clans in Akkaraipattu. After Maluvaracan kudi, however, it was difficult for informants to enumerate many more Velalar matrilineal clans. The whole model of “Mukkuvar” versus “Velalar” matrilineal clans that had seemed unproblematic at the beginning of my research was now beginning to look contrived and blurred.

To further complicate matters, local Tamil historians have pointed out to me that the only published ethnohistorical text enumerating the historic Mukkuvar and Velalar matrilineal clans, the *Maṭṭukkalaṅṅu Māṇṇiyam* (Nadarajah 1962), is itself an edited anthology of passages extracted from several different palm-leaf collections privately held by families in the Batticaloa region. These textual fragments show clear evidence of editorial revision and enhancement to serve the interests of local power-holders under the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch colonial regime. The section entitled *Maṭṭakkalaṅṅu Pūva Carittiram* (Ancient History of Batticaloa), the prose chronicle which forms the largest section of Nadarajah’s book, narrates events as late as 1778–1782 (Nadarajah 1962: 68–69), and the shorter section entitled *Periya Kalvetṭu* (Great Inscription) concludes with a Mukkuvar triumphal exhortation addressed to the King of Holland. In the process of “re-caste-ing” these texts for the benefit of Dutch officials, local scribes may have elevated or demoted specific matrilineal clans and castes in the poetically enumerated lists, even in some

cases changing the caste affiliation of certain kudis.<sup>3</sup> This is a question that other scholars, equipped with the necessary epigraphic and historiographic tools, can better address than I.<sup>4</sup>

It was only after I had conducted a survey of 130 households in the High Caste neighborhoods that a clear picture of the distribution of Tamil matrilineal clans in Akkaraipattu began to emerge (table 9). My household sample was selected by delineating a convenient geographical block of houses in Divisions 7 and 8. I wanted to sample a range of economic levels, so the household-survey area extended from the wealthier and more established homes at the center of the Tamil sector to the poor huts of newer settlers on the southwestern fringe of town. No other stratification of this sample was done except to exclude households of total outsiders, for example, civil servants from Jaffna or non-intermarried Sinhalese. The survey was conducted by myself and several local Tamil research assistants on a house-to-house basis. A questionnaire on kudi affiliation, sublineage membership, marriage choice, dowry, religious participation, and a few other socioeconomic indicators was filled out in the course of a discussion with whomever happened to be present in the house at the time. Of 130 respondents, 71 (54.7 percent) were men and 59 (45.3 percent) were women. In every house we inquired about the matrilineal affiliations of the husband and wife, as well as the matrilineal memberships of their respective parents, so we were often able to gain information about three different marriages on a single questionnaire.

My household survey revealed many already-familiar kudis as well as others that I had never heard mentioned in twelve months of prior fieldwork. However, I was able to corroborate the existence of several rare kudis by cross-checking with informants in communities outside of Akkaraipattu. Thus *Matavi* kudi, *Pettāṇ* kudi, *Kalmaṭu* kudi, and *Cinnaṇṇaṭṭaṇ* kudi are recognized matrilineal clans in the region between Mandur and Karaitivu, where they are accorded High Caste status. *Vaṇṇiyā* kudi is recognized in the region north of Batticaloa town, particularly near the temple at Sittandi, near Chengaladi, where members of the clan claim to be heirs to the traditional office of *Vanniah* and exercise leadership in the affairs of major temples. *Kaṇṇaṭṭaṇ* kudi and *Kaṇṇappattāṇ* kudi were recognized to be the leading Velalar matrilineal clans in the nearby village of Tambiluvil, while both *Attiyā* and *Kavuttan* kudis were associated in most people's minds with Velalar settlements to the north, near Mandur, Palugamam, and Kaluvanchikkudy. Three respondents listed caste names as their kudi affiliation (*Kōvilar*, *Paṇṇāram*, and *Vāṇiyar*), while their spouses

TABLE 9. Matrilineal membership in a survey of 130 High Caste Tamil households in Division 7, Akkaraipattu, 1970

Kudi name	Men	Women	Total
Panikkana <sup>a</sup>	62	80	142
Maluvarasan <sup>b</sup>	37	53	90
Vedda Velalar <sup>c</sup>	30	39	69
Ulakippodi <sup>d</sup>	29	24	53
Kurukkals (subtotal) <sup>e</sup>	17	31	48
Sangamar	7	10	17
Tesantara	4	9	13
Sanniyasi	3	1	4
Not specified	3	11	14
Sankarappattan <sup>f</sup>	8	24	32
Padaiyanda <sup>g</sup>	4	23	27
Kalinga <sup>h</sup>	16	7	23
Vira Velalar <sup>i</sup>	8	11	19
Sinhala <sup>j</sup>	7	7	14
Kandan <sup>k</sup>	7	6	13
Chetty <sup>l</sup>	5	8	13
All others <sup>m</sup>	40	38	78
<b>Total</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>621</b>

<sup>a</sup> *Panikkana*. The term *panikkana* (or more honorific *panikkannār*) applies to an expert teacher. In Malayalam it refers especially to a master at arms, but it can also refer to a dancing master or a master of elephants (*Tamil Lexicon* 4:2458).

<sup>b</sup> *Maluvaracan*. A *maḷavan* or *maḷuvan* is a brave warrior, or an inhabitant of *maḷanātu* (a region northwest of Trichy in Tamilnadu). A *maḷu* is also a battle axe. The title *Maluvaracan* could thus mean "warrior-king" or "battle-axe king" or "king of *Maḷanātu*," but in any case it projects a strongly martial identity. A cognate term, *Maḷavarāyan*, is found as a title among Kallars and other castes in Tamilnadu (*Tamil Lexicon* 5:3112–14).

<sup>c</sup> *Vēṭa Vēḷālār*. The *vēṭar* ("hunters," Veddas) are the indigenous forest-dwelling people of Sri Lanka who are assumed to have inhabited the island since before the advent of Tamil or Sinhalese society. The title of Vedda Velalar conveys this autochthonous charisma, despite the lack of civilization or "urbanity" (*nakarīkam*). The only place where Vedda identity is ritually performed is at the Mandur Kandaswamy temple, where a member of the Vedda Velalar kudi enacts the role of the mythic Vedda hunter who first discovered Murugan's lance in the forest (Whitaker 1999).

<sup>d</sup> *Ulakippōṭi*. The most plausible meaning seems to be "world chief" or "worldly chief," from *ulakam* (world) and *pōṭiyār* (landlord, chief).

<sup>e</sup> See chap. 2 for a full discussion of the names of the three Kurukkal matrilineals.

<sup>f</sup> *Caṅkarappattān*. This apparently means "devotee [*pattan*, bhaktar] of Siva."

<sup>g</sup> *Paṭaiyāṅṅa*. This is a title that means "commanding or ruling the army."

<sup>h</sup> *Kāliṅkā*. Kalinga was a medieval kingdom in Orissa and also a famous name in Sri Lankan dynastic history. The

*Maṭṭakkalappu Mānmiyam* contains many references to Kalinga leaders, including the most famous one in the Batticaloa region, Kalinga Magha (*Mākōy*).

<sup>i</sup> *Vira Vēḷālār*. The title means "strong or heroic Velalar."

<sup>j</sup> *Ciṅkaḷa*. Literally "Sinhala" or "Sinhalese." The *Maṭṭakkalappu Mānmiyam* (Nadarajah 1962: 95) enumerates a number of "Sinhala kudi" subclans of which two, Miyangoda (*mikāy koṭai*) and *Kalmaṭu Mutali*, were cited in the Akkaraipattu household survey. The Miyangoda Kotagaha Valawwa was the Sinhalese feudal house that once controlled much of the land around Panama village and claimed jurisdiction over the pilgrimage center of Kataragama (Yalman 1967: 311). Further research also turned up a "Sinhala kudi" among the Blacksmiths and Goldsmiths, among the Washermen, and among the Paraiyar Drummers. Whitaker (1999) also found a "Sinhala kudi" among the Cirpatars and the Velalars of Mandur.

<sup>k</sup> *Kaṅṭan*. Warrior or hero, a Chola royal title (*Tamil Lexicon* 2:688). This is one of the two dominant matrilineals in Tambiluvil and Tirukkivil.

<sup>l</sup> *Ceṭṭi*. The Chetties (*Ceṭṭiyār*) are a merchant caste whose matrilineals or subsections are enumerated in the *Maṭṭakkalappu Manmiyam* but who seem to have vanished from the Batticaloa region. Nowadays, Chetty kudi is accorded nominal Velalar status in the Akkaraipattu area.

<sup>m</sup> There were twenty-one other matrilineal names which turned up on the household survey. Only five were familiar Velalar kudi names in the Batticaloa region.

*Note:* There were 157 individuals whose kudi affiliations were not known, 75 percent of whom were men, most commonly fathers of one of the spouses in the household. This reflects the matrilineal emphasis as well as the matrilineal residence pattern that sometimes draws bridegrooms from outside the immediate area.

belonged to recognized local matrilineal clans.<sup>5</sup> Two percent of the survey responses were unique, and many of these appended the prestigious generic Velalar suffix: *Vaṭantōṭṭa* Velalar kudi (northern plantation Velalar); *Caiva* Velalar kudi (Saivite Velalar); *Meñca* Velalar kudi (herding Velalar); *Paṇaṅkātṭu* Velalar kudi (Velalar of Panankadu village); *Pottanācci* kudi (old woman Pottanacci's kudi); *Pēñācci* kudi (old woman Penacci's kudi); and *Kurukkulattaracar* kudi ("king of the Kurukkulams," a Karaiyar caste title).

#### THE LEGEND OF A CROSS-CASTE ALLIANCE

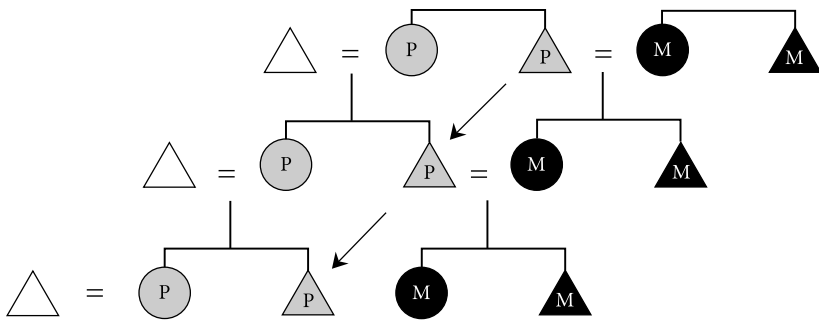
As predicted, the numerically largest matrilineal clans were Panikkana kudi and Maluvarasan kudi, accounting for 37 percent of the responses in the survey. These two matrilineal clans dominate the kudi system among the High Caste inhabitants of Akkaraipattu: they are the first clans to be cited in discussions of the kudi system, and they are accorded a special respect that is absent in the case of other matrilineal clans. If one asks whether certain kudis are "higher" or "better" or "more important" than others, invariably these two matrilineal clans will be cited. However, enumeration of Vedda Velalar kudi as the third largest clan came as a surprise, both to me and to my informants, many of whom assumed that one or more of the textually sanctioned "seven kudis" of the Mukkuvars would be more strongly represented in the local population. Later surveys in surrounding hamlets demonstrated highly localized variation in the distribution of specific matrilineal clans.<sup>6</sup>

Both Panikkana kudi and Maluvarasan kudi also play a central role in the legendary founding of Akkaraipattu. I was told that "in those days" there had been a Mukkuvar caste settlement here under the hereditary chiefship of Panikkana kudi. However, these early Mukkuvars had no domestic service castes (*kuṭimai*) such as Washermen, Barbers, or Paraiyar Drummers. The first service castes were brought, it is said, by an eminent Velalar caste man who settled with his entourage near Pattimedu, a fertile paddy tract south of Akkaraipattu (map 7). The popular legend holds that the local Mukkuvars were immediately desirous of having the services of the Velalar's domestic-caste servants for themselves, and they also were attracted by the Velalar leader's three beautiful, unmarried daughters. Eventually, one daughter was enticed into eloping with a local Mukkuvar man, but she was pursued by her family and was eventually excommunicated from the Velalar caste. After a while, the second Velalar daughter was also enticed into marriage with a Mukkuvar Panikkana kudi man from Akkaraipattu, and this time the girl's father was un-

able to trace her whereabouts until after she had become pregnant. The Velalar leader was unwilling to excommunicate his second daughter, particularly now that she was going to bear him a grandchild, so he decided to approve the marriage and to give his new son-in-law the traditional respect accorded to a bridegroom. Henceforth the Velalar leader granted the Mukkuvars the use of all the service castes, and he agreed to acknowledge his Panikkana kudi son-in-law as the Urpodiyar of the entire Akkaraipattu area, which meant that even the Velalars would submit to his authority. The third daughter of the Velalar leader was later married to a man of her own caste, and it is the matrilineal descendants of both the second and third daughters who are today known as Maluvarasan kudi.

This legend, which was known to a number of my older High Caste Tamil informants in Akkaraipattu, is a variant of an oral tradition found elsewhere in the Batticaloa District.<sup>7</sup> S. O. Canagaratnam (1921: 38) quotes the story of a domineering Velalar man named *Ottuvarākantan* (quarrelsome Kandan) who came to Batticaloa from Nagapattinam in South India accompanied by his domestic-caste servants (Barber and Washerman), whom the Mukkuvars at that time lacked. As the price for gaining the services of the Barber and Washerman, the Mukkuvars are said to have submitted to the political control of the prickly Velalar leader for a while. However, when he proved to be an insufferable tyrant, the Mukkuvars killed him while on a nighttime arrow-fishing expedition. Subsequently, when the Mukkuvars sought to take Kandan's two unmarried daughters as their brides, they committed suicide rather than endure the dishonor to their caste. The upshot of this story, with its dramatic concluding note of Velalar martyrdom, is quite the opposite of the legend that is recounted in Akkaraipattu, where intercaste marriage provides a charter for shared Mukkuvar-Velalar political condominium over the local caste hierarchy. However, the idea that the Velalars were the first to bring the *kuṭimai* castes into the east-coast region is shared in both versions, as is the obvious Mukkuvar determination to extend their political control and to enhance their chiefly honor through appropriation of these domestic servants.<sup>8</sup>

By all accounts, the office of the Akkaraipattu Urpodiyar was once charged with settling local disputes and regulating the observance of local caste honors, including control over the services of the *kuṭimai* castes mentioned in the legend. The Urpodiyar of Akkaraipattu must, by tradition, be a man of Panikkana kudi, and his wife must belong to Maluvarasan kudi. According to this ideal model, the successor to the Urpodiyar should be his sororal nephew, his



P = Panikkana kudi  
 M = Maluvarasan kudi

**FIGURE 13.** Ideal matrilineal and affinal qualifications of the Urpodiyaar of Akkaraipattu.

own sister's son, his closest matrilineal descendant within Panikkana kudi. In order to consolidate and validate his right to succession, the nephew in turn should be married to the daughter of his own maternal uncle, the Urpodiyaar, a girl of Maluvarasan kudi (figure 13).

Such a genealogically precise qualification for political office might be workable if there were always offspring of the correct age and gender, but the actual genealogies I recorded show that this pattern has not been followed very often within living memory. Indeed, there has rarely been an uncontested succession to the office of Urpodiyaar. One reason is obviously that factional interests are always present in matters of local power and prestige. A second reason is that the "perfect successor" in the form of a sister's son who is also a daughter's husband to the previous Urpodiyaar has rarely been biologically available in the last five generations. Failing a "perfect" candidate, local tradition dictates only that the successor be a *marumakan* (classificatory *zs* or *DN*) to the previous Urpodiyaar. Genealogical investigation showed that some of the past incumbents were related to their predecessors as sororal nephews (i.e., as a sister's son) and others were related as sons-in-law, but very few were simultaneously both.

Since there has rarely been an undisputed succession, it is evident that the concurrence of the High Caste community in general, and the membership of the two highest-ranking matrilineal clans in particular, has been necessary to select and legitimate a new Urpodiyaar. Mr. Sambunathapody, J.P., who held the office in the early 1970s, was the elder brother of his predecessor's son-in-law, a situation which came about, I was told, because the younger nominee

felt obliged to step aside in deference to his brother's age. The energetic new Urpodyar I met in 1993, a local schoolteacher named Mr. Sivagnanamoorthy ("Moorty Master"), is the late Sambunathapody's own sister's son. His wife, however, is not from Maluvarasan kudi, a technical flaw that several of my informants discreetly pointed out.

#### MARRIAGE STRATEGIES

The presence of a marriageable daughter in the household might prompt some upwardly mobile Tamil families to seek a strategic and prestigious alliance with an unrelated family of high status or wealth in another part of the island. However, I encountered few such elite marriages among Tamils in Akkarai-pattu in the 1970s. Most families looked for a local son-in-law whose status was commensurate with that of their daughter, who was "eligible" in terms of kudi exogamy and who was categorized (or could be plausibly recategorized) in Dravidian terminology as a male cross-cousin. Parallel-cousin marriage (to a mother's sister's child or a father's brother's child) is ruled out as incestuous, the union of a classificatory brother and sister. The idea of a sister's daughter (MB-eZD) marriage was a possibility not even remotely dreamt of, although it was, and is, widely practiced in Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh (Good 1980; Kodanda Rao 1973; Trautmann 1981: 206). The very idea was doubly preposterous because such a match would violate the matrilineal exogamy rule (a man and his ZD belong to the very same kudi) and it would offend the idea of respect (*mariyātai*) which should exist between a woman and her mother's brother (her potential father-in-law). The structure of the Dravidian kinship terminology itself logically ensures that kudi exogamy will result from any marriage between real or classificatory cross-cousins. No formal preference for MBD versus FZD marriage was ever enunciated by my informants, but the actual marriage data I collected in my survey seem to reveal a modest preference for the MBD.

The actual standards that are applied by Tamils to evaluate the suitability of prospective sons-in-law seem no different from those applied by the Muslims. Degree of education, type of occupation, wealth of the family, character or quality (*kuṇam*) of the family, physical attractiveness and horoscopic prognosis of the proposed partners, as well as the nature of the prior kinship link, if any, and the need to avoid kudi endogamy are all factors which are taken into consideration. By "character" and "quality" of the families is meant their reputations for honesty, fairness, generosity, kindness, and other such personal attributes. The ambition of the parents to gain wealth and prestige for



themselves and their children through “strategic” marriages also exposes the family to the risk of establishing a connection with “strangers,” that is, families who are known much less intimately. One advantage to marriages with cross-cousins or with local neighbors is that the spouses never have to leave their secure and close social network of kinsmen and friends.

I was told that marriage is “possible” between all High Caste kudis, in the sense that there exist no formal prohibitions on such marriages. The Velalar-Mukkuvar caste distinction, for example, was said to be no impediment to marriage in Akkaraipattu. Only the Kurukkals were found to have a stated preference for intermarriage between their own three matrilineal clans: Vira Sangamar Kurukkal, Tesantara Kurukkal, and Sanniyasi Kurukkal. However, it was admitted that when such marriages within the Kurukkal vamsam were inconvenient or impossible, they could marry other High Caste Tamils, and indeed the survey data show that they do so in a majority of their marriages.<sup>9</sup> A similar tendency is found among the hereditary *Kappukan* priests at Mandur, who are originally an elite matrilineage within the Cirpatar caste (Whitaker 1999: 63).

#### Isogamy rather than Hypergamy

In view of Yalman’s report of hypergamous marriage between ranked kudis in the nearby village of Tambiluvil (1967: 325), I made repeated inquiries concerning such hypergamous or otherwise prescriptive marriage patterns between Tamil kudis in Akkaraipattu. There turned out to be no colloquial Tamil word or phrase in the Batticaloa dialect that would gloss as *hypergamy* or *hypergamous*, so it required a good deal of creative circumlocution on my part just to describe the concept to my informants. When they finally understood what I meant, they unanimously agreed that it did not exist in Akkaraipattu, nor, to their knowledge, was it found in Tambiluvil.<sup>10</sup> Since it was impossible to elicit a systematic ranking of the High Caste kudis in Akkaraipattu apart from the obvious superiority of Panikkana kudi and Maluvarasan kudi and the three matrilineal clans of Kurukkals, no test for hypergamous marriage patterns could be applied to the High Caste marriage data collected in the household survey.<sup>11</sup> In short, the entire hypergamy hypothesis among the Tamils turned out to be a dead end.

Yet, although hypergamy was ruled out by informants, they did raise the issue of traditional marriage ties between particular pairs of kudis. Some of the Tamil expressions for a customary and enduring exchange of brides and grooms in both directions between two matrilineal clans are *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ*

(receiving and giving), *koṇṭāṇ mārrāṇ* (receiving and exchanging), *maccāṇ maccīṇaṇ* (“sister’s husband and wife’s brother,” that is, formal and informal terms for male cross-cousin, respectively), *macci matini* (“brother’s wife and husband’s sister,” that is, slightly more formal and informal terms for female cross-cousin, respectively, although the standard term is *maccāl*), and *cōṭi cōṭi* (paired up). These expressions all mean the same thing, namely, an acknowledged pattern of marriage exchange between two kudis. The opposite condition—an avoidance of marriage ties between two clans—is couched in hierarchical sibling metaphors: such matriclans are said to have a classificatory *aṇṇaṇ tampi* (elder brother–younger brother) or *akkā taṅkaicci* (elder sister–younger sister) relationship. Another local expression is to say there is “no [marriageable] relationship” (*murai illai*) between the two kudis. However, the existence of *aṇṇaṇ tampi* clan pairs is also the logical result of a situation in which two or more kudis have a well-established, ongoing marriage exchange relationship with a common (third) kudi. This follows from the fact that in Dravidian kinship terminology the cross-cousins (i.e., eligible marriage partners) of cross-cousins are logically classified as brothers and sisters to one another, as shown in figure 14.

If the logic of the kinship terminology is strictly followed, a pattern of consistent marriage exchange between certain kudis must also generate marriage avoidance relationships between other kudis. For example, if kudi A is *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* (reciprocally exchanging marriage partners) with kudi B, and if kudi B is likewise *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* with kudi C, then it follows that kudis A and C are *aṇṇaṇ tampi* (ineligible for marriage) with each other. This is seen from the fact that all the potential spouses in kudis A and C are logically rendered terminological siblings to one another by the innate structure of the Dravidian kinship categories. These two sorts of interkudi relationships are generated by marriage itself, the positive *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* marriage alliance being a logical corollary of the negative *aṇṇaṇ tampi* marriage avoidance relationship, and vice versa.

Obviously, it only makes sense to speak of *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* or *aṇṇaṇ tampi* kudis if there is a behavioral tendency or a cultural expectation that these marriage patterns will actually occur in real life. When hypothetical kinship structures were put to the side, I discovered that most High Caste Tamils in Akkaraipattu recognized only two matriclans as *cōṭi cōṭi*, reciprocally “paired up” in marriage: Panikkana kudi and Maluvarasan kudi. This was the only example of kudi marriage alliance that emerged with a distinct plurality (35 percent) of votes in my High Caste survey. All other examples of allegedly

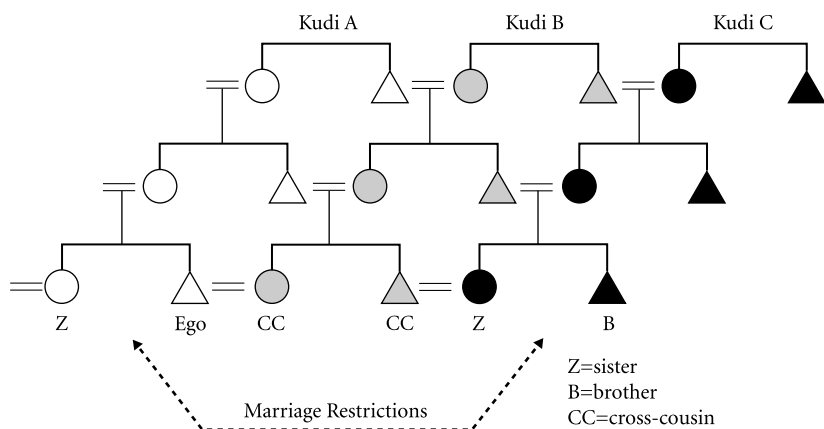


FIGURE 14. Structure of Dravidian cousin categories.

paired-up kudis accumulated six votes (7 percent) or less. Admittedly, even the Panikkana-Maluvarasan kudi pairing was unremarked by a majority of survey respondents. However, this alliance was corroborated through discussions with High Caste Tamil traditionalists, and it emerged strongly in the survey statistics showing the matrilineal affiliations of married couples. Not surprisingly, popular awareness of the Panikkana-Maluvarasan kudi marriage exchange relationship was strongest among the actual members of these two matrilineal groups. In fact, my local Tamil research assistant, a high-status man of Panikkana kudi, was totally astonished to learn while conducting the household survey that there were *any* Panikkana kudi marriages outside of Maluvarasan kudi, so strongly had this idealized picture of matrilineal alliance been instilled in him from childhood.

Empirically, the Panikkana-Maluvarasan kudi alliance pattern became visible when a matrix diagram of statistical data on High Caste kudi marriage choice was constructed.<sup>12</sup> The percentage of Panikkana kudi members (32 percent) who married spouses of Maluvarasan kudi was more than twice as large as the proportion of Maluvarasan kudi members in the total survey sample (13 percent). A similar disproportion was noted for Maluvarasan kudi members who married spouses of Panikkana kudi (53 percent vs. 23 percent, respectively). A similarly close marriage link was shown between Panikkana kudi and Vedda Velalar kudi, although my informants had given me no prior inkling of a *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* relationship between these two clans.

As the Dravidian kinship logic would predict, the third relationship within this triad of kudis—that is, between Vedda Velalar kudi and Maluvarasan kudi—turned out to be one of de facto marriage avoidance, an *aṇṇaṇ tampi*

relationship in local terminology, although no one had called it to our attention ahead of time. Only 4 percent of the Maluvarasan kudi members had spouses from Vedda Velalar kudi (which represented 11 percent of the total sample), and similarly only 5 percent of Vedda Velalar kudi members had spouses from Maluvarasan kudi (which represented 13 percent of the total sample). The remainder of the kudi pairings documented in the High Caste marriage survey were too widely scattered to permit much additional analysis. However, there is more to be said about one group, namely the Kurukkals. Among all Kurukkal men in the sample, 65 percent of them married Kurukkal women; and among all Kurukkal women in the sample, 41 percent of them married Kurukkal men. However, the survey sample size was too small to verify what was overwhelmingly evident in my detailed genealogies of members of the Kurukkal vamsam: that is, the existence of very close *koṭṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* (marriage exchange) relationships between Sangamar and Tesantara matrilineages, as well as between Tesantara and Sanniyasi matrilineages, accompanied by a corresponding marriage avoidance relationship between Sangamar and Sanniyasi matrilineages. In other words, the marriage alliance and avoidance patterns found among the three main High Caste matrilineages is replicated among the three matrilineages within the Kurukkal vamsam itself.

#### HIGH CASTE IDENTITY IN A MATRILINEAL SYSTEM

While both history and modern ethnography acknowledge two high-ranking agricultural castes in the Batticaloa region, the Mukkuvars and the Velalars, my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu quickly confirmed what Yalman had sensed earlier, that the structure of Hindu caste organization in the Batticaloa region does not wholly conform to the widespread South Asian model of territorially bounded and strictly endogamous subcastes (*jāti*). Nor is the regional caste hierarchy in Batticaloa expressed primarily in a Hindu religious idiom of “purity” or in a biomoral language of “blood.” Instead, there is a regional tradition, largely dealing with local chiefs and rulers, the twelfth-century conquest of the island by Kalinga Magha, and the establishment of local caste settlements under royal or chiefly patronage, that supplies the ideological charter for modern claims of Velalar and Mukkuvar caste identity. The entire system, both in the legendary past and in the ethnographic present, strongly supports the theory of Maurice Hocart (1950) that the caste hierarchy is, first and foremost, a dramaturgical production of kingly honor and political power, rather than primarily the outcome of Hindu purity and pollution rules or the

exchange of biomoral substances. This politically inflected Sri Lankan pattern cannot be dismissed as “quasi-caste rather than caste proper” (Dumont 1970: 216). Rather, it reflects one of the fundamental underpinnings of caste hierarchies throughout the South Asian world, and one that is especially well-supported by studies of the honorific symbolism (and political enforcement) of non-Brahmin caste dominance in the drier, less-irrigated “warrior zones” of Tamilnadu, such as Pudukkottai, Ramnad, and parts of western Tirunelveli (Dirks 1987; Price 1996; Mines 2005).

Since the late eighteenth century, the Mukkuvars in Akkaraipattu have gradually been losing their feudal caste hegemony (*vaṇṇimai*), and many of them are nowadays increasingly content to pass as “Velalars” in a vague but generically prestigious sense of the term.<sup>13</sup> This terminological shift has been easily accommodated at the apex of the High Caste social system in Akkaraipattu by referencing both caste categories within a single isogamous matrilineal marriage alliance. Thus, Panikkana kudi represents the heritage of Mukkuvar chiefship and Maluvarasan kudi represents the ritually skilled Velalars who brought the *kuṭimai* service castes. Members of these two matrilineal clans point to their historic association and intermarriage with pride: the Panikkana kudi people say they “always marry Velalars” (i.e., members of Maluvarasan kudi), and the Maluvarasan kudi people say they “always marry the Urpodiya’s group” (i.e., members of Panikkana kudi). It is interesting to note that the third largest matrilineal clan, Vedda Velalar kudi, has very few marriage ties with the resident “Velalars” of Maluvarasan kudi. Actually, the core identity asserted by Vedda Velalar kudi is not “Velalar” but Vedda (*vēṭar*), autochthonous forest hunters, whose antiquity lends respectability to their putative descendants. In other words, the three most heavily intermarried kudis are conceived as representing, in an idealized sense, three historically foundational castes in the Batticaloa region: Mukkuvar kings, Velalar ritualist-farmers, and Vedda hunters. Taken at face value, the situation implies that “caste” identity is unilineally transmitted in the female line, rather than bilaterally acquired from both parents, as is the norm in most of South Asia. This was Yalman’s own conclusion, based on fieldwork he conducted in Tambiluvil and Panama in the 1950s.

What becomes of all the arguments regarding endogamous castes? Are there merely hundreds of small *kudi*, each unique in status, mere fragments of caste? . . . Since ritual status is inherited in one line alone—the female line in the case of the Nayar groups and the east coast of Ceylon—unions

with other status groups become quite acceptable. These interconnections tend to blur the clear boundaries of caste which we are accustomed to see in endogamous systems elsewhere, but there is no contradiction in principle. When the system is bilateral, we find stricter methods to establish “boundaries”; when one or the other principle of unilineal descent is dominant, ritual status can be perpetuated without the strict boundaries of endogamy and we find ourselves in the Malabar or Ceylon east coast situation. (Yalman 1967: 328, 330).

My own research in Akkaraipattu has revealed, however, that the Tamil kudi system is neither truly hierarchical (in the sense of a clear and thorough ranking of all clans) nor is it in any way hypergamous. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between the High Castes and the lower castes in terms of how caste endogamy and marriage alliance is viewed. Every time I inquired about caste membership among the lower castes (specialists, artisans, and domestic servants, i.e., everyone *except* the High Caste stratum of Mukkuvars, Velalars, and Kurukkals), a familiar bilateral ideology of caste was evident. My informants, few of whom had ever been asked to enunciate the principles of caste, at first argued for matriliney (*ellām tāy valī tān*, “It is all mother-way, indeed”) as the first rule they could think of, probably prompted by my inquiries and hints about the matrilineal kudi system. However, when I tested this concept of *tāy valī* by proposing a hypothetical union between a High Caste woman and a lower-caste man, the response was always to retreat from matriliney. Both parents make a difference to the status of the children, I was told, so the offspring of such a union might be given relatively higher status, but only *within* the caste of the lowest-ranking parent, who in this case would be the father. The bilateral ideology of caste descent was evident, too, in the response of High Caste men to the question of whether they could consort freely with women from the Smith, Washerman, or Drummer castes. Such liaisons were viewed as wrong and degrading (even though several historical and contemporary examples were discreetly revealed to me). The offspring of such radically mixed unions would always be denied High Caste status regardless of the parent.

In these cases, the response of informants (and the empirical outcome of several lower mixed-caste unions I became aware of) conforms to an idea, widespread in South Asia, that women are more vulnerable to pollution through “wrong unions” than men (Yalman 1963; Yalman 1967: 141). There is a saying in Akkaraipattu: *cērril mitittu ārril kaḷuvār* (A man tramples in

the mud, but then he washes in the river). In other words, a man can have sexual relations that are wrong or dirty, but he is ultimately able to remove the external contamination by ablution. Because of the internal nature of sexual pollution for a woman, she cannot do the same thing. Thus, all women must be chaste before marriage and strictly faithful thereafter. Because of this, no principle of matrilineally transmitted caste membership could ever trump the cultural axiom that a woman should never “marry down” into an unambiguously lower caste.

This highlights a key question about which Tamil castes are seen as fundamentally inferior and which are ranked roughly on a par. In Akkaraipattu the three caste categories of Mukkuvar, Velalar, and Kurukkal are typically lumped together as “good” or “high” people, in other words as “Tamils” in the privileged and restricted sense of the word. By referring to them collectively as the High Castes, I have tried to convey a sense of the taken-for-granted elite status that all three share. It is the large size and geographical spread of this inclusive elite stratum that, in Akkaraipattu, permits a number of secondary matrilineal status markers to coexist along with a broad pattern of High Caste endogamy. When I asked whether a certain person was a Mukkuvar or not, many informants would respond with something like the following: “Well, let’s see, he belongs to Panikkana kudi, doesn’t he? That is one of the ‘seven-kudi Mukkuvar’ matriclans, so yes, he’s definitely a Mukkuvar.” Although there is no ideology of caste blood or bodily substance, this situation in Akkaraipattu bears at least a structural resemblance to the Sinhalese high-caste “unilineal pedigrees” which Yalman has described for the Kandyan Hills: “However, though the blood of caste is distinct, there can be *wamsa* or gradations of blood within the castes. . . . I would therefore make a distinction between caste descent that is bilateral (at least in Ceylon), and descent in terms of grades within the caste, which may be unilineal. . . . Going back to the Terutenne [Kandyan Sinhala] context, it is clear, first, that the descent of caste status is bilateral, and the castes are endogamous. In the larger castes, however, it becomes necessary to differentiate the various ranks within the caste, and here unilineal pedigrees become obviously useful as a way of determining further rank gradations” (1967: 140–41).

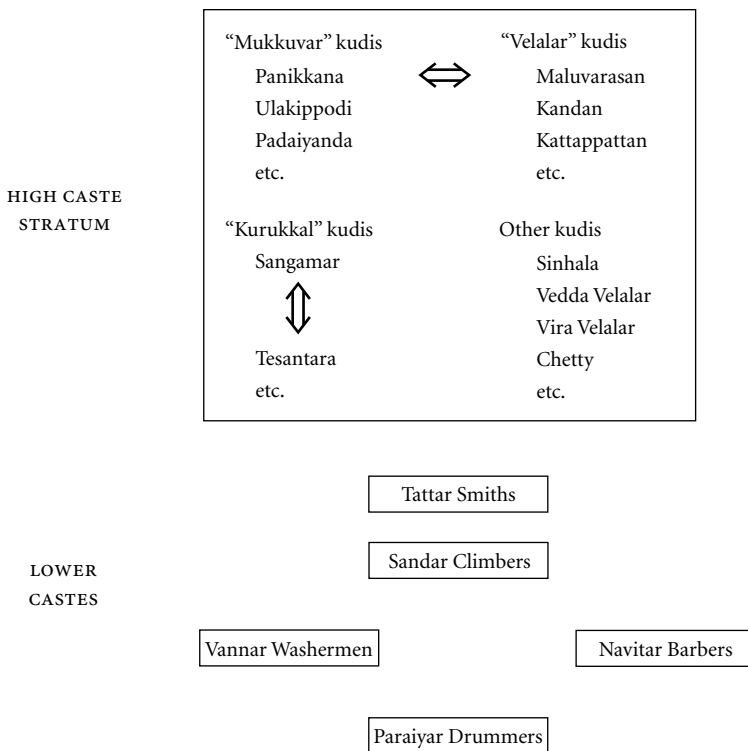
Applying Yalman’s Kandyan microcaste framework, rather than his model of an east coast “matrilineal hypergamous variant” (1967: chap. 15), to the Akkaraipattu data, the three groups at the top of the Tamil social scale—Mukkuvar, Velalar, and Kurukkal—can clearly be seen as comprising a single over-

arching, endogamous, bilaterally defined caste of “good,” “high,” “big” people. Within this large High Caste stratum, separate exogamous unilineal (in this case matrilineal) descent lines or kudis, many of them textually or metaphorically linked to nominal caste identities (Mukkuvar, Velalar, Kurukkal, Vedda, and the like), can be seen to further subdivide and segment the entire group. Practically speaking, however, these matrilineal clan identities validate and sustain formal “rank gradations” only for members of the highest-status kudis, the matriclans that control the local temples or regional chiefships. These tend to be the largest demographically, and they are often closely bound together in reciprocal-marriage-exchange alliances (figure 15).

Viewing local Tamil society in this way solves the apparent sociological anomaly that High Caste marriage preferences in Akkaraipattu do not differentiate, but instead blur, the endogamous caste boundaries between Mukkuvars, Velalars, and Kurukkals. Indeed, the only social formations resembling a quasi-endogamous “micro-caste” on the order of the Kandyan Sinhalese kindred or *pavula* (Yalman 1967), the Jaffna “*sondakkāra* caste” (Banks 1960), or the South Indian Kondai Katti Velalar *vakaiyāra* marriage circle (Barnett 1970) are the *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* marriage alliances between matrilineal clans, the leading example of which in Akkaraipattu merges, rather than separates, the putative caste identities of Mukkuvars and Velalars.

The Kurukkals were the only High Caste subgroup whose pattern of marriage choice revealed any significant endogamous microcaste tendency at all. According to my household-survey data, they chose their spouses from within the Kurukkal vamsam roughly 50 percent of the time. Anyone whose mother belonged to one of the three Kurukkal matriclans would usually self-identify as a member of “Kurukkal kudi,” and it was only through subsequent questioning that such a person might sometimes admit to not being a “full” or “complete” Kurukkal because his or her father belonged to a non-Kurukkal matriclan. A full Kurukkal pedigree, with each parent belonging to a recognized exogamous matriclan within the Kurukkal vamsam, is required to validate a strong claim to hereditary priestly status. Some Kurukkal priests told me it takes three generations of marriage within Kurukkal vamsam to erase the effects of a mixed marriage between a Kurukkal of either sex and a person of non-Kurukkal descent. This was the strictest formulation of the rule, of course, and in practice it appeared that compromises were sometimes made. Even so, I was able to detect the more familiar South Asian principle of endogamous bilateral caste membership among at least some of the ritually oriented Kuruk-





KEY: Boxes enclose endogamous groups.  
 ⇔ denotes marriage alliance between matrilineans.

FIGURE 15. Tamil caste and matrilineal marriage patterns in Akkaraipattu.

kals once I began to ask more focused questions. Both the oral traditions and the Kurukkal genealogies I collected indicated a strong tendency for reciprocal marriage alliance between the Sangamar and Tesantara Kurukkal matrilineans in earlier generations. For this reason, among the three High Caste groups in Akkaraipattu, it was only the Kurukkals who displayed any obvious tendency to form a semi-endogamous microcaste or kindred of the sort that Yalman discussed so insightfully in his book, *Under the Bo Tree* (1967).

**SUMMARY: HIERARCHY WITH A MATRILINEAL SLANT**

A close look at the High Caste Tamils in Akkaraipattu reveals that 75 percent of them make their living primarily from agriculture, either as paddy-field owners or as field laborers. Virtually none of the High Caste families engages in work that would be traditionally associated with a lower-caste profession.

In the Batticaloa region, however, brick masons and carpenters do not have a caste identity, so Sandars, High Castes, and Moors all engage in these trades. High Caste kinship categories—which are shared by all of the lower castes as well—follow a basic Dravidian model, with a strongly symmetrical terminology that designates cross-cousins on both sides of the family as equally eligible for marriage. Marriages between a mother’s brother and his elder sister’s daughter (MB-eZD), quite common in parts of patrilineal South India, are inconceivable in Akkaraipattu because of the matrilineal-clan exogamy rule. The leading High Caste matrilineal clans themselves are strongly linked by isogamous marriage alliances that share a legitimizing charter based on a local legend of Mukkuvar-Velalar political alliance, and this is expressed in hereditary succession to the office of the local Mukkuvar caste chief, the Urpodiyar. Because of the historical identification of specific matrilineal clans with the Mukkuvar and Velalar castes, the popular assignment of High Caste identities is matrilineally associated with matrilineal membership, thus blurring and overriding the underlying model of bilaterally acquired caste membership from both parents that is commonly found throughout South Asia.

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## **THE KUDI IN ACTION**

**M**atrilineal kudi organization in Akkaraipattu still helps to define the high-prestige marriage alliances of the leading High Caste Tamil families associated with the traditional office of Urpodyar. To what extent is the kudi system in Akkaraipattu typical of other parts of the Batticaloa region, and how does kudi membership influence the way Tamils conduct their lives in other respects? In this chapter I document the surprising variability of matrilineal clan rankings and intrakudi segmentary matrilineages across the Batticaloa region, and I also illustrate some of the political uses to which these segmentary sublineage rivalries can be put. Generally, however, High Caste Tamil marriages in Akkaraipattu strongly conform to the broad cultural rules of kudi exogamy and bilateral cross-cousin marriage, and local Hindu temples continue to dramatize the kudi structure of their congregations through formal hierarchies of ritual sponsorship.

### **LOCAL MATRICLAN VARIABILITY: TAMBILUVIL AND ELSEWHERE**

Yalman originally noted the strong Velalar ideology in nearby Tambiluvil, as did Lester Hiatt and I on

later visits. In Tambiluvil the kudis are stratified in much the same way they are in Akkaraipattu, with the two largest matrilineal clans, Kandan kudi and Kattappattan kudi, jointly claiming the highest prestige among all the matrilineal clans in the village. Whereas in Akkaraipattu it is common to hear references to the “seven-kudi Mukkuvar,” in Tambiluvil one is frequently given an impromptu recital of a specific fragment of the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Mānmiyam*. The verse begins, “*Kaṇṭaṇṇōṭu carukupilli kaṭṭappattan karutariya kavuttaṇum attiyāyaṇ maṇṭaḷattil poṇṇācci vayittiyēru*” (Nadarajah 1962: 70). These are the names of the seven canonical Velalar matrilineal clans, voiced in archaic prosody: Kandan, Sarivili, Kattappattan, Kavuttan, Attiya, Ponnacci, and Vaittiya kudis. As in the case of the “Mukkuvar kudis” in Akkaraipattu, one finds in Tambiluvil that several of the proper “Velalar kudis” are missing and others have taken their place, raising the total number of High Caste matrilineal clans from seven to twelve (Hiatt 1973: 237). Kurukkal vamsam, although respected, is not ranked highest among the matrilineal clans in Tambiluvil, as Yalman had been led to believe. The remaining kudis in Tambiluvil, like the remaining kudis in Akkaraipattu, are much smaller in number and size, and they are not clearly differentiated by rank or prestige. Many of them cannot claim to be “original” Velalar kudis, and in fact they constitute a residual population that seems no different from the High Caste population of Akkaraipattu.<sup>1</sup>

The two highest-ranking matrilineal clans in Tambiluvil exchange marriage partners in both directions, and this marriage alliance, like that between the two highest-ranking kudis in Akkaraipattu, is normatively prescribed: “Kandan or Kattappaththan parents would be ashamed if their child, male or female, married a person of any other clan, including Kurukkal. In the case of a woman who did marry down, the offspring would belong to her clan, but they would always bear a stigma. Concerning marriage arrangements between the remaining ten clans, I was unable to discover any prescriptions apart from the rule of exogamy” (Hiatt 1973: 238).

Although Hiatt felt that Kandan kudi and Kattappattan kudi marriages conformed poorly to this prescriptive model, a reexamination of his marriage data reveals a tendency toward marriage alliance linking the two matrilineal clans. Between 31 percent and 48 percent of all marriages in those two kudis were with members of the allied clan, far exceeding the random odds that this would happen in the Tambiluvil clan population sampled by Hiatt. Here, as in Akkaraipattu, an enduring marriage alliance between the two leading matrilineal clans is based not only on a system of “matrilineal descent” but also on the principle

that the highest social status is bilaterally acquired through both parents. Kandan kudi and Kattappattan kudi in Tambiluvil appear to offer a clearer case of a microcaste in Yalman's terms, because both of the allied matriclans claim super-elite status within a single caste category ("Velalar"). However, the observed rate of deviation from this idealized, high-status kudi marriage alliance in Tambiluvil is roughly the same as with the Panikkana kudi–Maluvarasan kudi alliance in Akkaraipattu. At best, only half of the members of these elite matriclans actually marry partners from their designated allied kudis. Privately, some informants acknowledged that certain kudis in Tambiluvil must be of Mukkuvar origin (L. R. Hiatt, personal communication), a finding that also appears to be true of several Cirpatar-caste kudis in Mandur (Whitaker 1999: 17). Nowadays, these outside kudis have become fully absorbed into the Velalar population. In this sense, everyone in Tambiluvil who is not a member of one of the service, artisan, or fishing castes is happy to accept the mantle of Velalar identity that is proclaimed on their behalf, so to speak, by the spokesmen for the two highest kudis.

#### Matriclan Patterns in Four Other High Caste Villages

With the help of two local Tamil research assistants, I was able to conduct household questionnaire surveys in four other High Caste villages in the Batticaloa region in the late 1970s. The first location was the hamlet of Kolavil South, located very close to Akkaraipattu on the Sagamam Road (map 7), which is said by its inhabitants to be a "Mukkuvar village." In a sample of 150 marriages I found that over 60 percent were between members of one of the three largest matriclans in the village: Kalinga, Padaiyanda, and Panikkana kudis. There was a slight tendency to avoid marriages between the latter two matriclans, as the Dravidian kinship logic would predict. As in Akkaraipattu, respondents stated their caste affiliation to be Mukkuvar (or *Murkukar*) when their own matriclan was one of the traditional seven "Mukkuvar kudis," and Velalar if their matriclan was locally identified with the Velalars. The Kolavil South survey also turned up an entirely new social species: a matriclan named *Yānaiḱaṭṭiya* (elephant-catching) Velalar.

A second survey location was Makiladittivu in Manmunai Pattu, a village on the west side of the lagoon south of Batticaloa, not far from Kokkadichchulai. This is a region of historic Mukkuvar caste dominance, and all seven of the leading kudis are locally associated with the Mukkuvar caste tradition. In a survey of 800 individuals, the kudis in descending order of size were

Kalinga (251), Koppi (220), Ulakippodi (146), Padaiyanda (93), Pettan (45), Kaccila (10), Catti (6), and Panikkana (2).<sup>2</sup> People in Makiladittivu chuckled and shook their heads when I said that in Akkaraipattu Panikkana kudi held hereditary rights to the office of Urpodiya.

A third survey location was Ambilanturai, a Mukkuvar settlement also on the western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon, south of Kokkadichcholai. In a sample of 104 marriages over 50 percent of all unions were between members of Kalinga kudi and Padaiyanda kudi. Quite unexpectedly, the questionnaire survey also indicated that 22 percent of marriages were *within* the same kudi (primarily Kalinga kudi). I was unable to double-check these responses, which were collected by a research assistant, so I cannot account for this seeming kinship anomaly.

The final household survey was conducted in Kokkadichcholai itself. Here, Kalinga kudi and Padaiyanda kudi are the most strongly allied matrilineals, accounting for over half of all marriages involving individuals from these two kudis. Members of the Kovilar Temple Servant community also reside in Kokkadichcholai, and they were found to be over 50 percent intermarried with Mukkuvars and 9 percent intermarried with other castes.<sup>3</sup> Among those Kovilars who married endogamously, there was a strong reciprocal marriage alliance between two pairs of kudis (*Ponṇācci* with *Vēta* kudi, and *Ponṇācci* with *Kaṅkāṇi Kūṭṭam* kudi) and a lack of any marriages between *Vēta* kudi and *Kaṅkāṇi Kūṭṭam* kudi, just as Dravidian kinship classification would predict.

### The Question of Sublineages

Christopher Brito remarked in his 1876 study of the Mukkuvar law that there was a term in addition to *kudi* that conveyed the idea of a matrilineal descent unit. “VAYITTU VAR is a term used in Batticaloa as a synonyme of KUDI, generally among the KARAIYAR and occasionally among the other classes also. VAYITTU VAR means *womb-tie*. It is derived from VAYIRU, *womb* and VAR, *Tie* or *Band*” (Brito 1876: 8). Yalman noted this word in his research in Tambiluvil dating back to the late 1950s, offering two spellings as well as two etymologies; he first rendered the term as *vaittu var* (“womb-tie” [1967: 314]) and then as *vahatta var* (“one vagina” [1967: 327–28]). As Brito noted, the first word is properly *vayirru vār* from *vayiru*, *womb* or *stomach*, plus *vār*, a *band* or *tie*, but there appears to be no plausible Tamil etymology that would generate Yalman’s second gloss. Nevertheless, Yalman was correct to record multiple versions, since there is disagreement on the proper meaning and pronunciation of the

term in Akkaraipattu. Informants in Tambiluvil told Yalman that each of the larger kudis was subdivided into segments or submatrilineages to which the term referred. For this reason, I was eager to explore the connotations of the word and the role of sublineages in the matrilineal organization of the High Castes in nearby Akkaraipattu.

My first discovery was that very few people in Akkaraipattu recognized the term at all. Those who did recognize it were often my oldest and—for lack of teeth and a fondness for chewing betel leaves—least-intelligible informants, but it did become clear that the most common form of the word among the Tamils was *vakuttavār*, derived (at least in folk etymology) from the verb *vakū*, “to divide into classes” (thus, *vakuttavār*, “the divided-up ones”). My Moorish acquaintances, likewise elderly, pronounced it *vakuttuvāy*. However, with the term recognizable to only a small minority of the population, I found it necessary to look for alternate Tamil words or phrases which could convey the same idea of a sublineage or a smaller matrilineal-descent segment within a larger kudi. The old-fashioned word *kattarai* was useful in some cases: it means essentially the same thing as *paramparai* or *cantati*, that is, a unilineal line of descent or succession. The term *kattarai* is found incorporated into a few kudi names, all of them Moorish (e.g., *Vaṭṭukkattarai*, “northern *kattarai*,” kudi). Finally, the term *tatti* was found to be in use as a vernacular word for “clique,” “social circle,” or “intimate group,” and a number of informants used this term to indicate their connections with eminent people, whether living or dead.

As part of the standard list of questions on my household sample survey, each respondent was asked to indicate whether he or she recognized membership in any sort of sub-unit (*vakuttavār*, *kattarai*, or *tatti*) within the kudi, and the same question was asked concerning his or her spouse. When informants failed to grasp the nature of my question, an ad hoc verbal circumlocution was offered. After all the data were in, it was obvious I would have been just as well off with my original intuitive impression that submatrilineages were not highly developed in Akkaraipattu. Symptomatically, there were virtually as many different “sublineages” as there were respondents in my survey.<sup>4</sup>

The number of people who claimed to have any awareness of a restricted *vakuttavār*, *kattarai*, or *tatti* amounted to only 40 percent of my survey informants, and I have to assume that quite a few of them invented some sort of kinship group simply to satisfy the anthropologist. Realistically, it was only within the two or three most numerically and socially dominant kudis that I



had any real hope of finding distinct sublineages, and even there the response was ambiguous. The Urpodiya is, by tradition, always a member of Panikkana kudi, yet only five specific references to former Urpodiya emerged in the data from Panikkana kudi respondents, a meager response from a sample of fifty-four members. Furthermore, there were several members of Maluvarasan kudi who gave “Urpodiya’s tatti” as their response, indicating a bilateral or affinal connection to the Mukkuvar headman, but certainly not a matrilineal one. In fact, the two most interesting things about the sublineage answers on the High Caste household survey were, first, that many cases of apparently diffuse bilateral kinship reasoning could be seen in the way informants connected themselves to illustrious forebears, and, second, that only *one* person out of ninety-one respondents to the question made any reference to a female relative or ancestress.<sup>5</sup> All the other putative submatrilineages were named after men. It is possible, of course, that some of these links to male ancestors were traced through matrilineal connections (e.g., through these men’s sisters’ descendants), but I was beginning to wonder whether the survey responses reflected any systematic descent-based reckoning at all.

If I had dropped the question of submatrilineage organization at that point, however, I would have come away with a seriously incomplete picture of matrilineal kinship in the Batticaloa region as a whole. The household surveys later conducted in Kolavil South, Makiladittivu, Ambilanturai, and Kokkadichcholaï revealed that the sublineage terms *vakuttavār* or *vayirruvār* did indeed have a clear meaning to many informants, and that it meant something different from a *tatti*.<sup>6</sup> In Kolavil South, immediately adjacent to Akkaraipattu, one of the two leading matrilineal clans, Padaiyanda kudi, had two clearly identified sublineage segments: *Pettāṇṭa* Padaiyanda kudi and *Vīriya* Padaiyanda kudi (“commander of the army who reigns with greatness” and “heroic commander of the army,” respectively).<sup>7</sup> Throughout the region, such political or military titles were uniquely associated with submatrilineages within Padaiyanda kudi; in all other kudis either geographical place names or the personal and ancestral names of well-known men were the sublineage norm. In Makiladittivu and Kokkadichcholaï, for example, Kalinga kudi is subdivided into sublineages toponymically named after the settlements of Satturukondan, Vavunativu, Eravur, and Vellaveli, presumably because the founders of matrilineal sublineage segments hailed from those places. In the same locality, Koppi kudi has one toponymic segment (Sammanturai *vakuttavār*) as well as a large number of smaller ancestral segments with male nicknames like

*Pokkanikkilavan* (old man with a big navel) or formal male names such as *Katirkāmappōṭiyār* (landowner Kataragamar). Quite unexpectedly, however, almost two-thirds (63 percent) of the members of Ulakippodi kudi, one of the largest matriclans in Makiladittivu and one of the three matriclans that traditionally control the historic Siva temple in Kokkadichcholai, were unable to identify any submatrilineage segments at all.

When asked whether even smaller divisions or subsegments existed below the level of the *vakuttavār*, 71 percent of the survey respondents in Makiladittivu and Kokkadichcholai, where the most detailed information was gathered, said yes. These shallow lineages, identified by the term *tatti*, were usually three, but occasionally two, four, or five generations in depth. In 77 percent of the cases recorded, the *tatti* commemorated a male ancestor on the mother's side, and in the remainder of cases it was named after a female ancestor on the mother's side. Most often, the founder of the *tatti* was said to be the person's maternal great-grandparent (MMF or MMM). Examples of such names are *Cembakkilavan's* *tatti* ("Old man Semban"), *Valāvīman Udaiyar's* *tatti* (an Udaiyar was a colonial-era police headman), and *Poṭṭukkilavi's* *tatti* ("Old lady with the *poṭṭu* forehead mark"). The kinship reckoning shown in these cases is ambilateral in the first generation, then matrilineal for the remainder of the generations down to the present. That is, daughters preserve and transmit the *tatti* group identity initially established by their mothers or their fathers. The Moors sometimes also recognize sublineages named after an ancestral woman's husband, but no examples of this came to my attention among the Tamils in Akkaraipattu.

Quite apart from my own laborious search for matrilineage segmentation, however, a study conducted by Mark Whitaker (1996) of temple politics in Mandur in the 1980s provides clear evidence that *vakuttavār* submatrilineages have remained a potentially important unit of descent reckoning and hereditary succession rights in some east-coast Tamil communities. One of the central arguments presented to the Mandur Kandaswamy temple commissions of inquiry in 1924 and 1930, and eventually to the courts, was that only the members of a specific submatrilineage ("Mandur *vakuttavār*") within the Periya Kavuttan kudi Velalars of this village were eligible to serve as chief trustee (*Vaṇṇakkar*) of the temple. This narrow genealogical qualification was contested by rival parties to the dispute, but the fact that it expressed a plausible claim to matrilineal succession rights showed that the concept of submatrilineages was very much alive in mid-twentieth-century Mandur. Even today, a

ranked set of four *vakuttavār* in the Karaiyar village of Koddai Kallar sponsors specific pujas and receives separate honors at the Mandur festival (Whitaker 1999: 76).

Overall, my evidence indicates that sublineage segmentation definitely exists in some kudis in some villages, but that it is generally very spotty and uneven throughout the Batticaloa region as a whole. As Brito noted back in 1876, membership in the “vayittu var” was at that time a key factor in the matrilineal Mukkuvar law of inheritance when land tenure and property disputes were adjudicated in the Batticaloa courts. With the Mukkuvar law in legal abeyance for the past 125 years, the *vakuttavār* is occasionally perpetuated in local memory as a source of pride and kinship identification—and in some polarized villages such as Mandur it is still used as a political resource—but for most people it embodies little symbolic or social capital today.

#### KINSHIP CATEGORIES AND ACTUAL MARRIAGE CHOICE

One of the questions raised by Thomas Trautmann in his magisterial study of the history and distribution of Dravidian kinship systems in South Asia is the degree to which actual marriage choice conforms to the prescriptive rules of cross-cousin marriage that are encoded in the terminology itself (1981: 216–28). Trautmann recognized that his analysis of Dravidian marriage choice among Kandyen Sinhalese, Tamilnadu Brahmins and non-Brahmins, Karnataka Brahmins and non-Brahmins, Maharashtrian high castes and Harijans, and the Madhya Pradesh tribal Hill Maria of Bastar was hindered by a lack of clarity in some of the published sources in differentiating marriages of genealogically “immediate cross-cousins” (i.e., first cousins) from those of nongenealogical (i.e., “classificatory”) cross-cousins. Thus, by his own admission, his comparative data on cross-cousin unions are wildly uneven, ranging from 4 percent of all marriages among Tanjore Brahmins (Gough 1956) to 41 percent of all marriages among Harijans in Poona (Orenstein 1965). Although I cannot provide the type of demographic data on the *availability* of eligible cross-cousins of the right age and gender that Trautmann calls for in order to measure the degree of behavioral conformity to what are ultimately the biological parameters of cross-cousin marriage in a given local population, I do have quantitative data on *actual marriage choice* which are more detailed than many of the sources he has consulted.

My data resemble the upper range of immediate cross-cousin–marriage

TABLE 10. Relationships between spouses in a combined sample of 410 High Caste marriages in Akkaraipattu, Kolavil South, Makiladittivu, Ambilanturai, and Kokkadicholai, 1970–1978

Unrelated	170 (41.5%)
Distantly related but cannot specify links	121 (29.5%)
Related by specified kinship links	119 (29.0%)
Immediate cross-cousins	77 (18.8%)
FZS married MBD	45 (11.0%)
MBS married FZD	32 (7.8%)
Other specified cross-cousins	30 (7.3%)
Anomalous relationships	12 (2.9%)
w is classified as D [4]	
w is classified as yz [4]	
w is classified as zD [2]	
w is classified as Fyz [1]	
w is classified as myz [1]	

frequencies on Trautmann’s list (1981: 218 fig. 3.34), and they are practically identical to Tambiah’s numbers for Kandyan Sinhalese cousin marriage in Pata Dumbara, Sri Lanka (Stanley J. Tambiah 1958). There is initial support in these data for Trautmann’s observation that where marriage between genealogically traceable cross-cousins occurs, there is a preference for immediate first cousins over more distantly related “classificatory” cousins (e.g., second cousins such as FFBDD or MMZSD). The ratio of such marriages in table 10 is more than 2:1 in favor of immediate cross-cousins. The number of marriages that are contracted between genealogically specifiable cross-cousins of any kind is roughly a quarter of the total.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, so-called exchange marriages (*mārrukkaliyāṇam*) between two pairs of brothers and sisters, while rare, are perfectly acceptable, and sometimes even advantageous in terms of canceling out dowry obligations and affinal inequalities between the two families.

However, this still leaves unclarified the 29.5 percent of marriages between “distantly related” partners who could not readily specify their exact prior kinship connection on my household questionnaire survey. If these marriages were sanctioned by family members in the belief that there was some kind of distant marriageable connection (*muṛai*) between the partners—and this was the general implication of the question itself—then the total percentage of “cross-cousin” marriages of all kinds suddenly jumps to over 55 percent. This is consonant with Yalman’s claim that the proportion of Kandyan Sinhalese marriages with terminological cross-cousins of any kind is “very high indeed”

(1967: 213n15), and it would undermine Trautmann's hunch that Dravidian marriage choice favors immediate cross-kin or none at all (1981: 220).

It is also possible, of course, that some of these "distant" marriages, if they were fully traced, would prove to be between terminologically incorrect partners. If such "wrong" marriages are not challenged or exposed at the outset, the logic of Dravidian kinship categories tends to privilege and legitimize the bond between wedded partners. In other words, all spouses are treated as terminological cross-cousins, retroactively if not before the marriage, and any prior "incorrect" kinship links require detailed genealogical research to uncover. In any case, the admitted "wrong marriages" in my household survey were less than 3 percent of the total, and my ethnographic intuition tells me that such marriages are quite rare in the Batticaloa region. Overall, less than half of all marriages (41.5 percent) are between unrelated partners, a statistic that suggests the strong force of Dravidian kinship categories in High Caste society generally.

#### CONFLICTS WITHIN THE KUDI

Although in Akkaraipattu town itself there is not a high degree of sublineage segmentation within the major matriclans, there is evidence indicating that hostile schisms have occasionally emerged within a kudi as a result of factional quarrels or disputes over succession to office. Aside from some disputes over succession to the office of Urpodiya that have occurred in Akkaraipattu over the past five generations, two examples of collectively organized intrakudi conflict were noted during my fieldwork. Both cases involved the management of Hindu temples, the only Tamil social institution that is still significantly governed by the matriclan system today.

The first case involves the small but old temple to Kaṇṇaki Amman (Sinhalese *Pattini* [see Obeyesekere 1984]) located on high ground near the fertile Pattimedu paddy tract six miles south of town on the inland side of the Periyakalappu Lagoon (map 7). The temple itself is endowed with about sixty-five acres of paddy land, and the association of the goddess with this locality (said by tradition to have been one of the earliest Kannaki shrines on the east coast) is so strong that the goddess is often referred to simply as Pattimedu Amman (mother-goddess of Pattimedu). A majority of the temple congregation reside in Panankadu, a High Caste village south of Akkaraipattu on Sagamam Road. Local sources say the administration of the temple, which is largely a seasonal shrine, had been in the hands of a hereditary High Caste matrilineal

Vannakkar from Maluvarasan kudi who, earlier in the century, also served as the temple priest (*kappukan*).

A legal dispute arose in 1969 when the trustee was accused of unilaterally appropriating the lands of the temple for his own use, rather than allowing the members of his kudi to cultivate shares of the temple lands annually as had been their traditional right. The Vannakkar's justification was that members of the kudi had for several years failed to contribute a share of their harvests to the temple fund as the required annual tithe. By not contributing each a portion on behalf of the mother-goddess (*ammāluṭaiya paṅku*, Ammāl's share), he contended they had forfeited their cultivation rights. Complicating matters was the fact that the principle parties to this dispute were two quarreling brothers, each of whom had a matrilineal claim to the trusteeship. The fraternal dispute had remained in desultory ferment for years, since the temple lands themselves were not well watered and the crop yields were abysmal in the dry years. However, when the Right Bank Channel of the Gal Oya irrigation project was finally completed in the late 1960s, it brought water to the temple lands, boosting their fertility enormously.

When a large enough group of disgruntled kudi members finally organized behind the younger brother to protest the older brother's peremptory action as temple trustee, they based their legal argument on the principle that their kudi was actually a more restricted matrilineal descent group than most people realized. It was properly called "*Maluvarāyan*" kudi, they said, whereas the larger matriclan with which they were incorrectly lumped is Maluvarasan kudi, that is, the high-status "Velalar" matriclan that is closely allied with the Urpodiya in Akkaraipattu. Although Maluvarayan and Maluvarasan both mean exactly the same thing (warrior-king), this minor difference in spelling and pronunciation was made the fulcrum of a political and legal argument for a separate matriclan, or subkudi, identity.<sup>9</sup> It was actually Maluvarayan kudi, not Maluvarasan kudi, they said, that first established the Kannaki Amman temple, and only members of Maluvarayan kudi had ever enjoyed hereditary cultivation rights to the temple lands.<sup>10</sup> However, most of my informants in Akkaraipattu town, particularly those who belonged to Maluvarasan kudi, contended these were not really separate clans, but were only different sub-lineages (*vakuttavār*, *kattarai*) of the same kudi. They pointed out that marriage was never permitted between these two allegedly separate "kudis" and that the two kudi names were so nearly identical that it was obvious they had originated from one group.

The discontented members of the Maluvarayan faction under the leadership of the trustee's younger brother pressed their case in the Kalmunai courts, and after several years of litigation the court ruled that indeed the members of the restricted group called "Maḷuvarāyan kudi" located in Panankadu village were entitled to the use of the temple lands. By this time the insurgent members had already taken back the temple paddy fields by main force and were cultivating them with the newly arrived Gal Oya irrigation water. For various reasons, both sides had emphasized the uniqueness of "Maḷuvarāyan kudi," but when the old Vannakkar lost in court, his viewpoint abruptly changed. In order to deny a total victory to his younger brother, he vainly pleaded for the creation of a regionally constituted board of trustees, modeled on the idea of a regional or "national" temple (*tēcattukkōvil*), rather than the hereditary single-trustee system he had formerly championed. When I finally lost touch with the quarrel around 1975, the younger brother had been recognized by the membership of the Maluvarayan group, and by the courts, as the legitimate temple trustee, and the deposed Vannakkar was hoping for relief through yet more litigation. Having received authentication in the Kalmunai courts, the distinction between Maluvarasan kudi and Maluvarayan kudi was, at last report, institutionalized in the village of Panankadu, where different Vannakkars representing the two separate matrilineal clans sit on the administrative board of the Siva temple. On a return trip in 1993, I learned that the new Urpodiya of Akkaraipattu had actively joined the Pattimedu temple debates in an effort to revitalize his moribund claim to be chief overseer of all major Hindu shrines in the district.

A second example of intrakudi schism or segmentary opposition was reported from Tirukkovil. While the details of this case were supplied by only one person, and while there is therefore a likelihood that the account is both biased and incomplete, the overall reliability of this individual seems high enough to merit a brief description of the case. It is said that when the chief Vannakkar of the historic Tirukkovil Kandaswamy temple died, the selection of his successor was complicated by considerations of submatrilineal rivalry. The deceased Vannakkar was, as required by tradition, a member of Kandan kudi. Under ideal conditions the office would have gone to his own sister's son, as the nearest matrilineal successor to the trusteeship. However, the deceased Vannakkar's actual sister's son was employed as an engineer in Colombo, and it was impossible for him to effectively oversee the affairs of the temple from such a distance. Consequently, he declined the post. This development opened

the way for a competition between two men of Kandan kudi, both related as classificatory *marumakan* (zs or son-in-law) to the deceased trustee.

Two factions then emerged within the matriclan: groups known informally by the binary terms *white* (*vellai*) Kandan kudi and *black* (*karuppu*) Kandan kudi. The deceased trustee had been a member of the “white” group, which considered itself superior. The outcome of this conflict was the victory of the “white Kandan kudi” group and the appointment of its candidate to the Vanakkarship. It was the opinion of my informant that the two groups represented the bifurcation of a common matriline at some point in the foggy past, but no specific genealogy could be cited to account for this. Several persons agreed that sublineages often split into antagonistic segments within a kudi as a result of the unequal or in some way stigmatized marriages of two or more sisters.

The two examples of intrakudi schism I have described, together with Whitaker’s (1999) well-documented account of a politically sensitive sublineage split in Mandur, provide evidence of matrilineage segmentation under special circumstances of pressing economic or political interest, but for the most part these cleavages today seem highly ephemeral and context-sensitive. The High Caste kudi system in Akkaraipattu has lost most of the rigid hierarchy that was dramatized in the past by the display of *varicai* marks of honor, both in temple and in domestic ritual. If the matriclans as a whole are losing their sense of ritual privilege, there is even less reason to uphold older and narrower sublineage distinctions within them, such as slightly different names or insignia, or different cattle brands (*virutu*). The consensus among my informants was that the potential for acrimony was quite high, and most people seemed relieved when these segmentary matrilineal claims were no longer put forward.

#### RITUAL ORGANIZATION OF HIGH CASTE TEMPLES

The main temple governed and supported by the High Castes in Akkaraipattu is dedicated to Lord Pillaiyar (*Pillaiyār*, the “great child,” also frequently known as Ganesha or Vinayakar), the elephant-headed first son of Siva, who is an extremely popular Hindu deity throughout the entire Batticaloa region, in the Tamil world, and beyond (Courtright 1985). As the remover of obstacles and the god of beginnings, Pillaiyar is a helpful and familiar deity to all Hindu Tamils, and there is certainly no sense—at least today—that the High Castes should enjoy a monopoly on his worship. In fact, there is a Pillaiyar temple



established by the Sandar Climber caste in the 1940s near the market area in Division 8 and two other Pillaiyar temples in nearby Kolavil (one run by the High Castes and one maintained by the Paraiyar Drummers). The more ferocious female deities such as Bhadrakali or Mariyamman enjoy general veneration as well, but the custody of shrines for these goddesses has generally been in the hands of the specialist castes, particularly the Smiths and the Drummers.

The High Caste temple, located in a large clearing toward the western edge of Division 7, sits adjacent to the residential neighborhood of the Washer-man caste and within direct sight of the small temple to the Washermen's patron deity, Periya Tambiran. Although the Pillaiyar temple is said to occupy the most ancient site of Hindu worship in Akkaraipattu, it had become so dilapidated in the 1970s that it was undergoing a slow but complete architectural reconstruction. Indeed, the temple was closed during all of my early fieldwork, and pujas were conducted in a temporary thatched hut to the side of the construction rubble. However, the fact that the annual High Caste temple festival had not been celebrated in a number of years was due not only to the reconstruction project but also to internal political dissension, and this forced me to look elsewhere for examples of Hindu shrines that were operating more or less "normally." However, when I visited the High Caste temple again in the 1990s, it had been totally enlarged and transformed into a gleaming shrine with freshly painted stripes on the outermost walls, and a new orphanage for children whose parents died in the Eelam Wars had been built next door. The grand consecration ceremony (*kumpāpishēkam*) for the renovated temple was held in early 1993, with special priests brought in from Jaffna, Tiruketisvaram, and Colombo. Like many churches and mosques as well, Hindu temples throughout the Batticaloa region have received renewed material support from worshipers in response to the heightened danger and suffering associated with the Tamil separatist conflict.

### Matrilineal Control of the Temple

In the 1970s the management of the Akkaraipattu temple was in the hands of a board of twelve matriclan trustees, eleven of whom represented kudis from the High Caste stratum and one of whom represented the leading matriclan within the Tattar Smith caste (Suriyadappan kudi). The Urpodiyar of Akkaraipattu also sat on the temple board as an ex officio member. Two decades later (1993) the temple committee consisted of two trustees from each of the

leading kudis, the new Urpodyar, a Tattar Smith caste representative, and also the headmen of the Barber and the Washerman castes. In addition, the offices of president, treasurer, and accountant had been grafted onto the older Vannakkar system. The priest was a younger brother of the temple Kurukkal I had known in the 1970s, who emigrated abroad. The board of Vannakkars meets periodically, usually after a noon puja on Friday, discussing financial and administrative affairs of the temple as the need arises. The temple priest, a man of the Kurukkal vamsam, receives a modest salary each month, which is augmented by donations from the general public at pujas and by occasional special collections made among the members of the various High Caste kudis. Any agricultural land the temple may once have owned has either been inundated by excess drainage from the Gal Oya Project or has been taken over by residential squatters, so the temple now relies entirely on donations from the worshippers. Aside from expenditures for daily supplies and the priest's salary, the trustees must raise money for annual festivals and ritual celebrations during the year. For these purposes, additional fundraising goals are set, and the burden is divided equitably among the members of the various participating matrilineal clans, who are then canvassed by their respective kudi Vannakkars. Although there are no special offices or titles reserved for the three largest matrilineal clans in the congregation (Panikkana, Maluvarasan, and Vedda Velalar kudis), these three kudis informally exercise the greatest influence in temple affairs because of their key role in the raising of funds.

It also seems likely that the formal composition of the temple board has changed over the last hundred years, although I am unable to document this historically. For one thing, the bitter and contentious withdrawal of the Sandar Climber caste from the rituals of the temple starting back in the 1930s would have ended any role they played in temple management as well. There also exist a number of smaller matrilineal clans whose members allow their interests to be represented on the temple board by the Vannakkars of other kudis. This is also true of persons who have matrilineal origins far removed from Akkaraipattu, who typically select a Vannakkar from another kudi to serve as their formal link to activities at the temple. The general rule is that one retains membership in the temple congregation of one's mother, despite local residence changes resulting from marriage or work opportunities. For this reason, there are a number of High Caste men in Akkaraipattu Division 7 whose primary Hindu temple activities are still associated with the smaller Pillaiyar temple in their natal place, the adjacent hamlet of Kolavil, which is now contiguous

with the southern edge of Akkaraipattu proper and is administered as a part of Akkaraipattu Division 8. The four kudis who control the Kolavil Pillaiyar temple are also found at the Akkaraipattu Pillaiyar temple, but the two congregations are totally distinct and are represented by different Vannakkars. The matriclans in Kolavil (Panikkana, Kalinga, Padaiyanda, and Velalar kudis) are not outwardly segmented or differentiated by name from the matriclans in Akkaraipattu, yet they maintain their own separate leadership structure and temple membership based on matrification. This clearly shows that the temple congregation defines the effective boundaries of local matriclan organization. Precisely the same pattern of matriclan affiliation is found in the congregations of the Muslim mosques that are located on the Moorish side of town.

### Ritual Shares in the Akkaraipattu Temple

I was told in the course of my fieldwork in the 1970s that the annual festival at the High Caste Pillaiyar temple had not been staged since 1966, when the old temple building was torn down to prepare for the reconstruction project. I saw a great many Hindu temple celebrations in nearby neighborhoods and in other parts of the Batticaloa region, but never the culminating event for High Caste Tamils in Akkaraipattu itself. Thus, although the temple was said to be the religious center of the High Caste community, and therefore also the symbolic focus for the entire Tamil caste hierarchy in Akkaraipattu, it was impossible for me to observe the actual participation of different groups in the ceremony. Informants described the festival as being based on the sponsorship of particular “shares” of the ritual by different kudis and castes. Although there was a general tendency among my High Caste informants to idealize the festival as a celebration in which all the castes in Akkaraipattu played an organically interdependent and historically sanctioned role, each making its own specialized contribution in cooperation with the others for the greater glory of the deity, in fact the situation that I encountered firsthand was one of ritual paralysis and considerable caste resentment. Even when rebuilt, it seemed uncertain that the temple would ever stage the annual rites outlined to me by temple officials, yet by the mid-1990s the newly expanded and reconsecrated Sri Sitti Vinayakar temple appeared to be functioning quite well indeed.

In the traditional scenario described to me in the 1970s, the festival would be preceded by twenty-one days of partial fasting (*nōṇpu*) by devotees who come and live at the temple itself. This fasting is begun immediately after the celebration known as *kārttikai vīlakku* on the full-moon day of the month of

Karttikai (November–December), the puja on that day having been sponsored by the Tattar Smith caste as their annual share of the rituals of the temple. To be precise, it was only one specific matriclan from within the Smith caste, Suriyadappan kudi, that sponsored the *kārttikai viḷakku* puja. The other Smith kudis, being of lesser status, played no formal role. In the earlier scheme of things, at least, it was also Suriyadappan kudi whose Vannakkar on the temple committee served as the sole representative of the Tattar caste as a whole.

After twenty-one days of fasting and singing of devotional songs at the temple, the nine-day festival (*tiruvilā*) would commence. It is the general pattern at Hindu temples in the Batticaloa region that the nightly celebrations, each sponsored by a different matriclan, or sometimes by an entire caste, increase in grandeur and magnitude as the festival moves toward its culmination, the *tīrttam* (sacred bathing) ceremony that occurs on the final morning. In order to stage this escalating series of pujas, sometimes smaller kudis join together to pool enough money and supplies to sponsor the rituals on certain nights, since individually each would lack the resources for a full evening's "share." Whether for this reason or some other, what informants said about the sequence of sponsorship of the nine nightly pujas was in some ways inconsistent with the prevailing ideas about kudi and caste ranking in Akkarai-pattu. Informants described the fixed order of festival sponsorship as shown in table 11.

No ritual template of this sort, least of all one fraught with the political and hierarchical significance of public temple honors, is ever stable or fixed. As the demographics of local castes and matriclans, as well as their political and economic status, shift over time, there are bound to be conflicts and ritual adjustments. One could also surmise that, in terms of the local caste and matriclan hierarchies, the two most symbolically important slots in a festival of this sort would be at the beginning and the end, while pujas held in the middle of the festival would be important but less critically ranked in terms of prestige. This helps to explain why the High Caste matriclans were found to sponsor the first four nights, as well as the seventh and eighth nights of the festival, and the lower-ranking Washermen and Barbers were given sponsorship slots at the midpoint of the nine-day festival (fifth and sixth nights, respectively). However, the placement of the Sandar Climber caste at the culmination of the festival, as sponsors of the final night prior to the *tīrttam*, was a very puzzling aspect of this ritual order. At other shrines in the Batticaloa region, the final night of the annual festival would be an occasion for the leading patrons and

protectors of the temple, usually the matriclan elders and leading office-holders of the dominant caste, to receive *munnītu* (foremost honors) in the form of the first returned offerings of the deity and possibly a sanctified garland or other ritual prerogatives as well.

I was repeatedly told that the Sandars, whose hereditary caste work includes tapping palm trees to make fermented alcoholic toddy (*ka!*), were traditionally accorded the task of supplying the sweet palm sap (*paṇi*), the coconut-frond decorations, and the coconut milk used in the preparation of the large pots of sweetened milk-rice (*pukkai*) which is offered to the deity on the final night of the festival. It is noteworthy that High Caste informants insisted on recounting the Sandars' role in the festival, despite the fact that they had ceased to participate in the High Caste temple decades earlier. Although the High Castes said that the traditional Sandar share would always be ready for them to take up again whenever they decided to rejoin the temple, my hunch is that the Sandar share was a rhetorical gesture by my elderly High Caste informants, not a ritual possibility after so many years of resentment.

When the Pillaiyar temple was finally renovated and reconsecrated in 1993, the printed flyer announcing the schedule of nightly pujas for the new annual festival—calendrically transposed to April–May—made no mention of the Sandars or the Barbers. However, most of the castes and kudis that had sponsored nightly shares of the nine-day festival according to my informants in 1970s were listed on the new program in 1993, although in somewhat different order and in new combinations over a ten-day period (table 11). The Smith caste, absent in 1971, was designated in 1993 to sponsor the flag-raising ritual (*koṭiyērram*) that inaugurates the festival process. The continuity of the ritual hierarchy is best seen in the fact that the Kurukkals remain as sponsors of the first night, and the two prestigious High Caste kudis—Maluvarasan and Panikkana—enjoy sponsorship honors on the two glorious final nights of the festival.

#### RITUAL SHARES IN THE KOLAVIL TEMPLE

At the Pillaiyar temple in the adjoining High Caste hamlet of Kolavil South, the annual festival is celebrated in the Tamil month of Āvaṇi (August–September) for four days, and the ritual constitution of this event is both simpler and more visible to an outside observer. Although members of the service castes participate in the Kolavil festival, they do so as servants rather than as shareholding sponsors. On each night of the festival one of the four leading kudis

TABLE 11. Order of annual festival sponsorship shares at the High Caste Pillaiyar temple in Akkaraipattu as described in 1971 and as listed on the 1993 printed festival schedule

	1971	1993
Flag-raising	—	Tattar Smith caste
1st night	Kurukkal vamsam Chetti Velalar	Kurukkal vamsam
2nd night	Sinhala Velalar Padaiyanda kudi Kalinga kudi	Chetti Velalar Cirpata Velalar <sup>a</sup>
3rd night	Vedda Velalar Vira Velalar kudis	Ulakipodi kudi
4th night	Kovil Velalar Paradesi Velalar Ulakippodi kudi Sankarappattan kudi	Padaiyanda kudi
5th night	Vannar Washerman caste	Sankarappattan kudi <sup>b</sup> Kovil Velalar
6th night	Navitar Barber caste	Vedda Velalar Vira Velalar <sup>c</sup>
7th night	Maluvarasan kudi	Vannar Washerman caste <sup>d</sup>
8th night	Panikkana kudi	Sinhala Velalar <sup>e</sup>
9th night	Sandar Climber caste	Maluvarasan kudi
10th night	—	Panikkana kudi

<sup>a</sup>The *Cirpātar* (Seerpadam) caste is concentrated in the vicinity of Mandur, where they have historically resisted Velalar caste encroachment in temple affairs (Whitaker 1999).

<sup>b</sup>The 1993 flyer lists the name as Sankarappattanraja kudi.

<sup>c</sup>The 1993 flyer lists the name as *Viraccōlai* Velalar.

<sup>d</sup>The 1993 flyer lists the caste as “seven kudis administering the Sri Periya Tambiran temple.”

<sup>e</sup>The 1993 flyer lists the name as Miyangoda (*Miyāñkoṭai*) Velalar, which is a common name for Sinhala kudi (see table 9, note j).

sponsors the temple puja and conducts the procession of the deity around the temple enclosure. The order of sponsorship is as follows: first night, Panikkana kudi; second night, Padaiyanda kudi; third night, Kalinga kudi; fourth night, Velalar kudi.

The Kolavil temple festival I witnessed in 1970 was embellished with the performance of a locally produced *nāṭṭu kūttu*, or dance-drama, which was sung in verses (Sarachchandra 1966: 116; Maunaguru 1998). Members of the sponsoring kudi each night carried the palanquin of the god’s image in procession around the temple (figure 16), but it seemed that the Kurukkal priest was left to do most of the ritual work each night. The four temple Vannakkars were conspicuously present every night, and they accompanied the procession of the god to the beach on the morning of the fifth day to celebrate the final



FIGURE 16. Decorated palanquin of Lord Pillaiyar during the annual festival at the Kolavil South temple (1975).

event, the *tīrtam* sea-bathing ceremony. At the puja that was conducted by the seashore just prior to the pouring of the sacralized water into the ocean, the four kudi Vannakkars were seated prominently in front of the Kurukkal and the decorated *kumpam* pot that was the ritual embodiment of the deity in this ceremony. It was obvious to everyone that they were the most prestigious and honored members of the temple congregation.

**SUMMARY: WHERE KUDI MEMBERSHIP  
MATTERS THE MOST**

A tendency toward the duopolistic dominance of pairs of highly ranked matrilineal clans is found in Akkaraipattu in the marriage alliance between Panikkana and Maluvarasan kudis, in Tambiluvil in the alliance between Kandan and Kattappattan kudis, and in Kokkadichcholai in the alliance between Kalinga and Padaiyanda kudis. The structural logic of the Dravidian kinship system reinforces this “pairing up” of isogamously allied matrilineal clans by simultaneously creating “non-marriageable” relations between other clans in the system. However, I discovered that the spatial distribution and local prestige of High Caste kudi names varies enormously across the entire Batticaloa region. For example, Panikkana kudi is the largest kudi in Akkaraipattu, the clan with

hereditary right to local village chiefship (Urpodiyar), whereas in the Kokkadichchulai area Panikkana kudi is so small it is the brunt of local jokes. The search for recognized sublineages (*vayirruvār*, *vakuttavār*, *kattarai*) within specific kudis proved to be a time-consuming, dead-end project in Akkaraipattu, but in other locations such as Kolavil, Panankadu, Kokkadichchulai, and Mandur these segmentary sublineages were found to have real vitality and substance, especially when they were politically mobilized in local fights over access to temple lands or temple leadership. In the great majority of High Caste families, the Dravidian preference for immediate bilateral cross-cousin marriages and the taboo on marriage within the same kudi were very strongly upheld in actual marriage data I collected in household surveys. Finally, in two local High Caste Pillaiyar temples I studied in Akkaraipattu and the nearby village of Kolavil South, the local kudi membership of the congregation was administratively reflected in the board of matrilineal trustees (Vannakkars) who manage the shrines, as well as ritually enacted as formal kudi sponsorship shares in the annual temple festivals.



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**A PROFILE OF THE TAMIL  
SPECIALIST CASTES**

**W**hile anthropologists studying the Hindu caste system in India have produced holistic ethnographic portraits of a number of lower-caste communities, there have not been many such studies in Sri Lanka. Brief descriptions and enumerations of the lower-ranking specialist castes among the Tamils are found in many colonial accounts of the island (e.g., Casie Chitty 1834), but the literature tends to be weighted toward historical reconstruction and folklore preservation (e.g., Cartman 1957; Raghavan 1962, 1971), rather than contemporary ethnography in specific low-caste Tamil communities. In this chapter I will provide data on comparative topics such as Dravidian marriage choice and internal caste-leadership structure, while at the same time showing how the Tamil specialist castes reflect many of the matrilineal kinship institutions that are associated with the dominant Mukkuvar and Velalar caste paradigm in the Batticaloa region.

**TATTAR GOLDSMITHS AND BLACKSMITHS**

In Akkaraipattu all of the blacksmiths and goldsmiths are Hindu Tamils, members of an undifferentiated

Smith caste known commonly as *Taṭṭār* (those who hammer or beat), most of whom live adjacent to the Ampara Road in Divisions 7 and 8, although a few families have also begun to settle in the outlying hamlet of Alaiyadivembu.<sup>1</sup> The term *kammālar* is recognized but not in common usage; knowledgeable informants agreed that it refers to the five traditional artisan castes considered as a group: carpenter, blacksmith, goldsmith, stone carver, and brass founder (see Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 3:106–40). There is no formal organization linking these five professions in the Batticaloa region, and in fact, the carpentry and masonry trades are no longer hereditary caste occupations at all. However, in other regions of the island and in South India, the artisan castes have historically formed a politically organized guild allied with the “left hand” bloc of Tamil castes (Beck 1972; Stein 1980) that has claimed the right to wear the sacred thread and to assert high status as “Visvakarma Brahmins,” descendants of Visvakarma, the architect of the gods (Brouwer 1995). The socioeconomic elites within this larger world of Tamil artisans are generally the goldsmiths and the temple architect-sculptors (*silpi*, or *silpāchārya*), the latter traveling widely throughout South India and Sri Lanka, as well as globally these days, to construct and renovate Dravidian-style Hindu shrines in preparation for consecration rites. These temple carvers are more urban-based, as are the wealthiest of the goldsmith families. The most conspicuously wealthy village of artisans in the Batticaloa region is Periya Porativu, an enclave of goldsmiths located inland from Kaluvanchchikudy with strong connections to the Sea Street jewelry traders in Colombo’s Pettah market.

In Akkaraipattu practically no Tattar works as a carpenter (*ōṭāvi*) or as a mason (*mēcan*, an English term), and those few engaged in brass work (*pittalai vēlai*) reside mainly in Ondachchimadam, a village just north of Kaluvanchchikudy on the main road to Batticaloa.<sup>2,3</sup>

Table 12 demonstrates that neither carpentry nor masonry work carries a low caste stigma in Akkaraipattu, although masonry does appear to be associated solely with the Tamils, and especially with the Sandar Climber caste. The results show that in 1970, within the canvassed divisions, 2.0 percent of Tamil men and 1.4 percent of Moorish men were engaged in carpentry, while 2.2 percent of Tamil men and only 0.1 percent of Moorish men were engaged in masonry. The English term *mason* is used locally to refer to bricklaying as well as to related work such as digging and setting stone foundations for buildings.

Occupational figures for the Tattar community in Akkaraipattu reveal that the great majority (78 percent) of men pursue the traditional occupations of

TABLE 12. Carpenters and masons in Akkaraipattu, 1970

Tamils in Divisions 7, 8, and 9 by caste <sup>a</sup>						
	High Caste	Tattar Smiths	Portuguese Burghers	Sandar Climbers	Navitar Barbers	Paraiyar Drummers
Carpenters	20	1	6	4	0	4
Masons	23	0	0	13	1	2

Moors in Divisions 2, 3, and 5 <sup>b</sup>	
Carpenters	16
Masons	1

<sup>a</sup>This represents a complete tabulation of the Tamil population of Akkaraipattu. There were no carpenters or masons recorded among the Vannar Washermen or Kadaiyar Limeburners.

<sup>b</sup>This represents a sample of the Muslim population of Akkaraipattu, consisting of data from three of the six Moorish divisions in the town.

blacksmithing and goldsmithing, although in many cases the family income is supplemented by paddy cultivation (table 13). A survey of twenty-one Tattar caste households indicated that 16 (76 percent) of these had access—whether by title, lease, or government permit—to some paddy land. Members of this caste did not make much effort to camouflage their traditional occupation in the householder lists, although circumlocutions like *irumpu vēlai* (iron work) and *āparaṇa vēlai* (jewelry work) often appeared. This reflects the relatively high place held by the Tattars in the local caste hierarchy and the nonpolluting nature of their work. When asked why the Tattars should be ranked lower in the caste hierarchy than the Velalars, Mukkuvars, and Kurukkals, my non-Tattar informants could only cite their stereotypic reputation for dishonesty in measuring gold, the venal betrayal of the hero Kovalan committed by the king’s goldsmith in the Tamil *Cilappatikāram* epic (Parthasarathy 1993), and the assertion that a smith’s work is inherently messy.

Leading members of the caste, on the other hand, were quick to voice the ideology promoted by caste associations such as the Ceylon Visvakarma Union to the effect that Tattars are actually Brahmins who have been deprived of their rightful status through the jealousy of the cultivating castes (Ratnawira 1909). The two Smith caste men who served as priests at the Bhadrakali temple were the only members of the caste locally who regularly wore a sacred thread, but others told me they had the right to do so if they chose. In the 1970s such issues of upward caste mobility seemed tangential to the ongoing life of the Tattar community in Akkaraipattu. More than three-quarters of the adult men

TABLE 13. Occupations of Tattar Smith caste men, 1970

Occupation	Total (%)
Blacksmith	65 (43%)
Goldsmith	52 (35%)
Office Worker <sup>a</sup>	7 (5%)
Merchant <sup>b</sup>	5 (3%)
Laborer	5 (3%)
Teacher	3 (2%)
Transportation <sup>c</sup>	2 (1%)
Other <sup>d</sup>	11 (7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>

<sup>a</sup> Includes government officers (forestry officer, agricultural instructor, land-development officer, Grama Sevaka), post-office employee, office clerk, and a cinema employee.

<sup>b</sup> Includes photographer, paddy dealer, jewelry-shop owner, and two unspecified businesses.

<sup>c</sup> Includes a government bus driver and a tractor driver.

<sup>d</sup> Includes students and retired people, plus one cultivator, one carpenter, and one fisherman.

Source: The 1970 householder lists. These are men twenty years of age or older.

of this caste were engaged primarily in metal working, and with the growing demand for farm tools and wedding jewelry from Muslim households, their services found a ready market both within and beyond Akkaraipattu itself.

Blacksmiths are employed by both Tamils and Moors to forge iron tires for the wooden wheels of bullock carts, to re-shoe working bullocks, and to provide utensils such as knives for the home. Goldsmiths make jewelry for Muslim as well as Tamil consumers, but only a few goldsmiths own retail establishments where their jewelry is sold. Most goldsmiths work at their homes, producing gold and silver articles that have been personally commissioned by local families or which are produced on consignment for independent jewelry-store owners, many of whom are Muslim. Retail jewelry outlets are known as either “Tamil” shops or as “Muslim” shops, and their clientele self-segregates in this manner. There are variations in jewelry patterns and styles between the Tamil and Moorish communities (for example, in the design of the wedding *tāli*), but the merchandise itself is all produced by Tamil goldsmiths.

Gold is considered to be a good medium of savings, and articles of jewelry themselves are sold on the basis of net weight plus a very modest mark-up for

labor and overhead. Occasionally, items of silver are produced, but these are felt to be poor substitutes for gold, regardless of their workmanship. In the traditional Tamil system, which was only optionally followed in the 1970s, a high-status family retained the services of a blacksmith and a goldsmith on a continuing basis, ordering articles to be produced as they were needed and paying the artisans for their raw materials plus an annual payment of paddy. A blacksmith might also advance his labor and materials to a customer prior to harvest time and expect to receive cash and paddy remuneration when the crop was in. While the blacksmith may still retain a set of traditional ties to certain customers whose ancestors may have done business with his ancestors over previous generations, the goldsmith now appears to have entered a more impersonal market system lacking any hereditary patronage relationships with local families.

It was said that in earlier times Tamil families would commission a wedding tali from a particular goldsmith, who would then visit the home of the groom's party on an appointed day. The groom's family would have purchased a small amount of gold from a gold merchant, and the goldsmith would be instructed to melt it in the presence of the bride's representatives and pour it into a small sand mold to harden. The bride's party would then carefully inspect the lump of gold to see if there were any irregularities or blemishes that could be taken as unfavorable signs for the proposed marriage. This *tāli ponṇurukkutal* (melting of the tali gold) was said to have once been an integral part of the wedding sequence for respected families in town. However, I never witnessed this ceremony while I was residing in Akkaraipattu, nor was such a traditional practice observed with Moorish wedding talis (for evidence from Jaffna, see Banks 1960: 74).

Occupational distinctions within the Smith caste do not appear to be correlated with any marriage barriers between goldsmiths and blacksmiths. I was told that interdining and intermarriage restrictions did exist in Jaffna between goldsmiths and other members of the Smith caste. In the Batticaloa region there was said to be no such distinction, and casual observation seemed to uphold this view. I knew several families in Akkaraipattu in which goldsmithing and blacksmithing were carried out by different individuals within the very same household. I did observe, however, that all of the goldsmithing households were located on the south side of the Ampara Road in Division 7, especially along "Goldsmith Street." No goldsmiths actually lived north of the road in Division 8, which is where all the blacksmithing shops were found.

## Matriclans and Leadership Structure

The most prestigious Smith caste matriclan in Akkaraipattu is Suriyadappan (*Cūriyatappan*) kudi. There was no disagreement on this point among any of the Smiths with whom I spoke. Suriyadappan kudi had once been accorded a number of ritual prerogatives (*varicai*) that were denied to other Smith kudis, and it was traditionally the Suriyadappan kudi Vannakkar who sat on the administrative board of the Division 7 Pillaiyar temple, representing the entire Smith community before the High Caste elders. In recent decades, however, the specific ritual privileges accorded to members of Suriyadappan kudi have not been rigorously upheld, and a desire has arisen to reduce the competitive aspects of the Smith matriclan system in the interests of greater caste cohesion and harmony. The present concern of many Smith caste members to soften the image of a matriclan hierarchy was no doubt partially responsible for the difficulty I experienced in eliciting information regarding the “earlier” pattern of kudi ranking. Practically everyone said the demographically significant matriclans within the Smith caste in Akkaraipattu were limited to three: Suriyadappan kudi, Velivalar kudi, and Sinhala kudi. Responses regarding the rank order of the latter two kudis were, however, frequently contradictory and occasionally revealed a glimpse of the intense conviction with which matriclan status markers were once felt.

On the whole, the Smiths seem to have a clearer cognitive map of the overall regional structure of their caste than do members of most of the intermediate and lower castes, and this would be consistent with the historic tendency for artisans in South India and Sri Lanka to exercise greater economic independence and to maintain wider geographical networks than agrarian laborers and domestic-service castes. Although there was some disagreement over the rank ordering of the matriclans, the total list of Smith caste kudi names I encountered in the Batticaloa region showed significant consistency. With a degree of poetic license, one can also discern the “seven kudis” of the artisan caste that appear in the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam* (Nadarajah 1962: 97). A household survey of Smith homes in Divisions 7 and 8 revealed only a small number of matriclan names not commonly associated with the caste (table 14).

The survey findings confirmed my informants’ statements regarding the local strength of the three major matriclans, which together accounted for 86 percent of the sample. The seven extremely small matriclans uncovered

TABLE 14. Matriclan membership of married adults in twenty-one Tattar Smith caste households in Divisions 7 & 8, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971

Kudi name	Men	Women	Total
Suriyadappan	21	25	46
Velivalar	17	18	34
Sinhala	16	13	29
Summadu Kattu	1	3	4
Appanacci	1	1	2
Kattadi	0	1	1
Saiventiram	1	1	2
Kadalarasan	2	0	2
Kuruttumuttan	1	0	1
Talaippa Kattu	1	0	1
Unknown	2	2	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>126</b>

Note: Households in the sample were selected partially from a set of known informants and partially by walking house-to-house along a typical section of “Goldsmith Street” (*taṭṭār teru*) in Division 7. In all but four households my questions were answered by male members of the family whose workshops were adjacent to their homes.

in the survey, together with five other Smith kudis I recorded on other occasions in the Batticaloa region, comprise a list with very little demographic strength in Akkaraipattu, although possibly some of these clans are larger elsewhere in the region. The name of the largest Smith matriclan, Suriyadappan (*cūriyaṭappan*) kudi, translates as “solar chief,” and the other two major clans, Velivalar (*vēlīvālar*) kudi and Sinhala (*ciṅkaḷa*) kudi, mean “ruler of the barricade or fence” and “Sinhalese,” respectively. Other matriclan names from the Smith caste are a mixture of the grand, the mundane, and the obscure: Kadalarasan (*kaṭalaracaṅ*, king of the sea), Saiventiram (*caivēntiram*, Saivite ruler), Vadaraman (*vaṭarāmaṅ*, northern Rama), Kamatchi (*kāmāṭci*, the “lustful-eyed” goddess Parvati), Patamsolli (*paṭamcolli*, reciter of poetic odes), Kattadi (*kaṭṭāṭi*, sorcerer, exorcist), Tachchan (*taccan*, carpenter), Talaippa Kattu (*talaippā kaṭṭu*, turban-tying), Summadu Kattu (*cummāṭu kaṭṭu*, tying a pad for carrying loads on the head), Appanachchi (*appanācci*, an old woman’s name), and Kuruttumuttan (*куруṭṭu muṭṭāṅ*, blind simpleton), which is perhaps a nickname.

My primary information regarding the earlier pattern of matriclan ranking within the Smith caste came from several Suriyadappan clan informants who, in hushed tones, claimed that the traditional system of ritual privileges



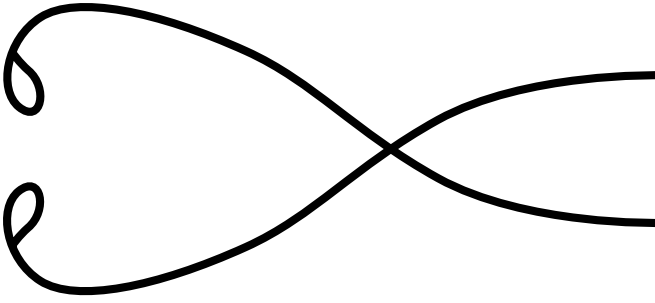


FIGURE 17. Cattle brand of the Tattar Smith caste: *kuṛaṭu* (tongs).

had permitted them to display a total of nine decorated *vīṭṭu muṭi* (house crown) water pots on the roof and to hang nine decorative *cīlai* saris flanking the doorway at weddings and rites of passage. Members of Sinhala kudi, by contrast, were allowed to hoist five pots and five saris, while Velivalar kudi was permitted to display only one of each. Furthermore, while the first two clans had the privilege of calling the Paraiyar Drummers to serve at their funerals and were allowed to have the Washermen spread honorific ground cloths (*nila pāvātai*) for a girl at her puberty ceremony, both of these prerogatives were previously denied to members of Velivalar kudi. All members of the Tattar caste, regardless of their matriclan or metalworking specialty, branded their livestock with the mark of the blacksmith's tongs (figure 17).

### Marriage Choice and Sublineage Organization

A survey of the matriclan affiliations in a sample of fifty-nine Tattar caste marriages revealed a strikingly coherent pattern of exogamous marriage alliances between members of three main clans (Suriyadappan, Velivalar, and Sinhala kudis) and no exceptions to clan exogamy. Almost identical numbers of men and women were found to have married in both directions between the three clans, ruling out any hypergamous tendency. As the logic of Dravidian kinship categories would predict, a strong isogamous *koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ* (receiving and giving) alliance was discovered between Suriyadappan and Velivalar clans, and between Suriyadappan and Sinhala clans, and a corresponding tendency for marriage avoidance (*aṇṇaṇ tampi*, elder brother–younger brother) was found between Velivalar and Sinhala clans.<sup>4</sup>

The kudi system of the Smiths was unique in one respect: they were the only caste in Akkaraipattu that had a clearly segmented sublineage organization, although my later household survey showed that this was true primarily for the

TABLE 15. Relationships between spouses in a sample of twenty Tattar Smith caste marriages in Akkaraipattu, Divisions 7 and 8, 1970–1971

Unrelated	2 (10%)
Distantly related but cannot specify links	3 (15%)
Related by specified kinship links	15 (75%)
Immediate cross-cousins	7 (35%)
FZS married MBD	3 (15%)
MBS married FZD	4 (20%)
Other specified cross-cousins	7 (35%)
Anomalous relationships	1 (5%)
W is classified as MBW or FZ ( <i>māmi</i> )	

largest and highest-ranking clan, Suriyadappan kudi. These submatrilineages (variously referred to by the terms *vakuttavār*, *kattarai*, or *tatti*) played no formal role in Smith caste affairs, but I found a reasonable consensus on the names of the sublineages and a definite sense of higher prestige accorded to the largest sublineage within the largest clan, Mutallicci vakuttavār (“first woman’s” sublineage). The Suriyadappan matriclan trustee, who was also one of the chief priests at the Bhadrakali temple, made a point of telling me that he belonged to this prestigious sublineage. Other Smith caste sublineage titles were a mixture of male and female nicknames, and a few geographical place names, much the same as I found among the High Castes (McGilvray 1974: 172; chap. 6 herein).

### The Tattar Caste Temple to Goddess Bhadrakali

Until the land was officially condemned in the late 1950s to construct the rural-court building, a very modest Bhadrakali (*Pattirakāli*) temple belonging to the Smith caste had stood on the south side of Pottuvil Road in Division 8. In 1958, with the spiritual guidance of Mr. Adiyar, a holy man who had lived at the temple for many years, the site for a new temple was chosen on a vacant parcel of coconut plantation north of the road and closer to the beach, adjacent to the growing Muslim residential neighborhood of Division 1. When I first saw the temple in 1969, it had basic brick walls and a tile roof, but much additional architectural work was carried out in subsequent decades. Even in its unfinished form, however, the temple was not only the most important collective possession of the Smith caste, but it had also become a highly visible center for ecstatic Hindu *sakti* (primordial feminine energy) worship in Akkaraipattu. The Bhadrakali temple festival was an event I heard about from Tamils of all castes, and it provided my best opportunity to study a major community

temple festival in the absence of ritual activity at the largely moribund High Caste Pillaiyar temple. I documented the Bhadrakali festival first in 1970 and again in 1975, and each time I had an opportunity to inquire about Smith caste social organization as well.

In Akkaraipattu there is no designated leader for the Smith caste such as the *Nāṭṭānmaikkārar* headman described by Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari (1909, 3:108–9) for the Kammalar artisans of South India. Formerly, leadership of the local Smiths was placed in the collective hands of the leading kudi Vannakkars, with the Suriyadappan kudi elder exercising the foremost role in representing the Smiths to the larger Tamil community. Management of the Bhadrakali temple was once virtually a monopoly of the leaders of Suriyadappan kudi, I was told, but a more democratic style of administration had gradually been adopted that allowed all of the Smith matriclans to play a more active role in temple affairs. In fact, several people alluded to bitter quarrels between matriclan factions in years past, but by the 1970s, the temple festival was administered by a committee of officers elected at a meeting of the Smith caste each year. Each of the three main kudi Vannakkars still retained a seat on the temple board, but elected officers and board members now enjoyed the balance of power.

Unlike the pattern at other major east-coast temples, the Bhadrakali temple festival was not parceled into ritual shares sponsored by separate matriclans. Instead, overall responsibility for conducting the festival was borne by the Smith kudis working together, with certain nights of the festival being sponsored by other castes entirely. There was variation from year to year, but often the Barber caste would help to sponsor the second or third night of the festival, while the Sandar Climbers would sponsor the fourth night and the Washermen would cover the expenses of the fifth night. The annual festival, however, was attended by Tamils from all parts of town, including some High Caste members who saw the Smiths' stewardship of this hot, fierce, "lower" form of the goddess to be appropriate in light of their position in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

While the leaders of the Smith community were pleased to sponsor an event that had become increasingly central to Akkaraipattu's Hindu religious life, they also used the annual festival as an arena in which to demonstrate their independence from the authority of the High Caste chief, the Urpodiyar. Although this particular goddess is the special tutelary deity (*kula teyvam*) of the Tattar caste, celebration of her annual festival was performed in earlier

decades only by formal permission of the Urpodiyar, who also controlled access to the *kuṭimai* service castes (Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers). The Smiths, who had already won the right to summon Paraiyar Drummers to their private funerals, wanted the right to employ Drummers at their public Bhadrakali festival as well. Until the late 1960s the Urpodiyar had denied this key *varicai* status marker to the Smiths, and the local Paraiyars obeyed High Caste orders not to serve at the Smith temple festival. Finally, in 1969, the Smith caste elders privately arranged with an outside group of Paraiyar Drummers from the village of Kalutavalai north of Kalmunai to come in a hiring car and provide drumming for the temple festival. The Urpodiyar was unable to take countermeasures, since the Kalutavalai Drummers were outside of his jurisdiction. In the following year, 1970, the Urpodiyar granted the Akkarai-pattu Smiths the use of local Drummers for their temple festival, reasoning that at least it would be better to employ local Paraiyars than to give the work to scab drummers from out of town.

Each year in October, a large crowd of onlookers and devotees (including quite a few Muslim women and children peeking over their backyard fences) would gather on the final morning of the festival to witness the sacrifice of chickens (figure 18), the offering of arrack and ganja to the goddess, the trance-possession of oracles, and the vow fulfillment of Tamil men (and a few women) who walked across the glowing embers of Bhadrakali's firepit, protected, it was said, by the end of her invisible sari (McGilvray 1998b: 68–69). A total of seventeen individuals, well over half of the twenty-seven firewalkers in 1970, were members of the Smith caste. Five were members of the High Caste stratum, three were Sandar Climbers, one was a Washerman, and one was a Muslim man from Irakkamam.

Despite this ecumenical turnout, however, the special Smith caste connection with the goddess Bhadrakali was never forgotten.<sup>5</sup> Placed at the very base of the framework upon which the goddess's metal face image (*tirumukam*) was temporarily erected in the temple was always a goldsmith's hardwood anvil (*aṭaiyal*), carried to the temple as part of the processions from the Tattar neighborhood during the first evenings of the festival. Most of the trance-mediums and all of the temple priests were Smiths, although they made the public gesture in 1970 of bringing in the High Caste Kurukkal from the Division 7 Pillaiyar temple to perform a lofty (also acrid and stifling) Vedic-style *homa* fire sacrifice during a slack period in the festival. Contingents of Smith caste members from other parts of the Batticaloa region were often present,



**FIGURE 18.** Two Tattar Smith priests prepare to sacrifice a rooster at the annual festival to their caste deity, the goddess Bhadrakali (1970).

including a Tattar contingent from nearby Tambiluvil who sometimes sponsored special parts of the ceremony. The religious popularity of this fierce but powerful goddess with many High Caste devotees was in simultaneous tension with the political and social control of the temple by a caste those devotees considered to be of lower rank, although this was openly stated to me only by High Caste members who refused to attend the festival. Interestingly enough, when the Bhadrakali temple was utterly demolished in 1990 as a result of ethnic mob violence at the outset of Eelam War II, a group of High Caste worshipers seized the opportunity to erect an independent shrine to Bhadrakali in the western hamlet of Alaiyadivembu, beyond the control of the Tattar Smith temple committee entirely (McGilvray 1997; epilogue herein).

#### **SANDAR CLIMBERS**

The Sandar (pron. *Cāṇṭār*, lit. *Cāṇrār* or *Cāṇār*) community is located in Division 8 in one of the more clearly defined of the caste neighborhoods in Akka-

raipattu (map 10). The Sandars are generally placed in the lower-middle echelon of castes, ranked just beneath the Tattar Smiths but definitely above the *kuṭimai* domestic-service castes. They were traditionally thought of as palm-tree harvesters and toddy tappers, although a few persons maintained that the “authentic” toddy-tapping caste, chiefly found in Jaffna, was called Nalavar.<sup>6</sup> These few informants claimed that the Sandars are supposed to harvest all products of the coconut and palmyra palm *except* for toddy (*kaḷ*), a naturally fermented liquor made from sweet sap which is tapped daily from an incision in the flower or spathe at the top of the tree. This appeared to be a minority viewpoint intended to improve the public image of the Sandars, a strategy that in South India has successfully raised this caste, who have adopted the title of Nadar, to a position of considerable prominence (Hardgrave 1969). In Jaffna the Sandars are prominently engaged in sesame (*gingelly*) cultivation and oil pressing, and toddy tapping is done by the lower-ranking Nalavars (Raghavan 1962: 229–35; 1971: 162–65).

Although it has been well-publicized in twentieth-century Tamilnadu, the title Nadar (*Nāṭār*, lords of the land) was recognized by only one Sandar informant as being an alternative name for his caste. Most people in Akkaraipattu associate the term *Nadar* with itinerant entrepreneurs of relatively recent Indian or Estate Tamil extraction who specialize in reclaiming gunnysacks and other recyclable materials, or who travel the island selling gold to local jewelers. The stereotypic Nadar is seen as a highly motivated merchant who cleverly exploits marginal or low-status commercial opportunities. The only Indian Nadar I knew of in Akkaraipattu in the 1970s worked diligently recycling old gunnysacks, and with his earnings he had just constructed a shiny new Pillaiyar temple alongside the seashore road near Tambiluvil, six miles south of town. The temple was a personal monument to his success in Akkaraipattu, and its location was dictated in a dream he once had. After the temple was consecrated, he planned to retire with his relations in South India. In 2004 his temple, sheltered somewhat by a sand dune, was damaged but not destroyed by the tsunami.

I gathered occupational information on all of the 116 adult male members of the Sandar community aged twenty or older using data from the 1970 householder list and the personal knowledge of the divisional Grama Sevaka (table 16). While the local Sandars were unable to shed their long-standing reputation as toddy tappers, they were no longer free to pursue this line of work in Akkaraipattu because, with the exception of the government rest

TABLE 16. Occupations of Sandar Caste men, 1970

Occupation	Total (%)
Wage Labor <sup>a</sup>	57 (49%)
Cultivator <sup>a</sup>	25 (22%)
Mason <sup>b</sup>	13 (11%)
Carpenter	4 (3%)
Driver	3 (3%)
Labor foreman ( <i>kaṅkāṇi</i> )	2 (2%)
Anti-malaria sprayer	2 (2%)
Traditional curer <sup>c</sup>	2 (2%)
Other <sup>d</sup>	8 (7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>

<sup>a</sup>The categories may be ambiguous or overlapping, since "wage labor" is primarily agricultural and "cultivation" (*kamam, kama toḷil*) does not necessarily imply ownership of land.

<sup>b</sup>The English word *mason* (*mēcaṇ*) is commonly used here to mean any kind of brick-laying, stonework, or concrete construction. The Sandars are strongly represented in this trade in Akkaraipattu.

<sup>c</sup>Includes an Ayurvedic practitioner and a "boil doctor."

<sup>d</sup>Includes a rice-mill operator, a gunnysack merchant, a mechanic, a wood cutter, a printer's assistant, a watchman, a herdsman, and a foundation-stone supplier.

Source: The 1970 householder lists plus information from the Grama Sevaka. These are men twenty years of age or older.

house, the local area had become officially "dry" as a concession to local Muslim sensibilities. Only one Sandar man in Akkaraipattu worked regularly as a toddy tapper for the nearest licensed toddy tavern in the Tamil village of Kaluvanchikudy, twenty-five miles to the north. In Akkaraipattu the cancellation of government liquor franchises had the chief effect of creating a thriving trade in illicit alcohol, which was ferried in by couriers via the local bus system from legal outlets further north, as well as promoting the local production of moonshine (*vati*). Only the wealthy (and the anthropologist, in the interest of discretion) would pay the high prices for beer or arrack at the government rest house.

As professional tree climbers, some Sandars continue to practice part of their traditional caste occupation by harvesting ripe coconuts from the trees growing in private compounds in all parts of town. A Sandar is called to the house, climbs and harvests the trees, and receives either a share of the coconuts or a cash payment per tree. Local coconut plantations, too, have employed Sandars, but this sector is being displaced by the expansion of residential house plots. Harvesting coconuts as an occupation was insufficient to fully support

many Sandars in Akkaraipattu. In fact, the householder list contained not a single reference to climbing as an occupation, since this work is considered demeaning and tinged with the pollution of alcohol. Those Sandars who do practice climbing prefer to list their occupation simply as “laborer,” and many of these in Akkaraipattu were young men, often teenagers, which suggests that climbing work is considered to be temporary employment for youths until better opportunities arise. In addition to performing wage labor and construction jobs, Sandars have tended to seek entry-level employment with local government enterprises, such as the Ceylon Transportation Board (bus system) or the River Valleys Development Board (irrigation and resettlement). Roughly 50 percent of the Sandar households I surveyed in Akkaraipattu had access to some paddy land through ownership, lease, or government cultivation permits (the latter representing 69 percent of the total). Although Sandars have benefited from government land-distribution programs, landholding of any kind has been a recent phenomenon for most Sandars.

The strong interest of the Sandars in obtaining nontraditional, salaried employment as an alternative to agricultural labor, climbing, or marginal cultivation was apparent early in my fieldwork during the national parliamentary election of June 1970. The Sandar voters in Akkaraipattu were divided over whether to support the local challenger and remain on good terms with most of the other townfolk, or to support the unpopular incumbent member of parliament from another town who promised more jobs for Sandars on the Ceylon Transportation Board and in other government agencies. This division, probably hardened by some personal rivalries, created a factional split which resulted in 30 percent of the Sandar vote going to the unpopular incumbent, enough to tip the election in his favor. His narrow victory resulted in a brief Washermen’s boycott of the “disloyal” Sandars that was carried out under pressure from the losing candidate’s High Caste supporters. The two Sandar caste factions were still quarrelling four months later, during the annual festival at the Bhadrakali temple, making the Sandars’ caste sponsorship of a share of the celebration impossible to carry out. My non-Sandar friends attributed the entire squabble to the susceptibility of the Sandars to politicians’ blandishments of government employment.

### **Matriclans and Leadership Structure**

Although matriclans have been reported among the Sandars of Puttalam (Raghavan 1962: 229), the literature on the Batticaloa region has given no at-



TABLE 17. Matrilineal membership of married adults in eighteen Sandar Climb caste households in Division 8, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971

Kudi name	Men	Women	Total
Kaluvattampani	10	16	26
Periya Karuttakanni	15	11	26
Cinna Karuttakanni	6	12	18
Mukkaracci	8	8	16
Pattinacci	4	5	9
Velappanikkan	2	0	2
Palappanikkan	0	0	0
Karuppattinacci	0	0	0
Non-Sandar kudis	3	2	5
Kudi unknown	7	0	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>109</b>

attention to kudi organization within this caste. Many local High Caste informants seemed totally unfamiliar with internal Sandar social structure, and it was only after meeting members of the Sandar community that I was able to verify the existence of matrilineal kudis within this caste (table 17). While Sandars agreed that the matrilineal clans had once been traditionally ranked from high to low, this hierarchical aspect was not emphasized in their conversations with me. I eventually arrived at a tentative ranking that reflected the views of the officials in charge of the Sandar caste temple, but my hunch is that everyone wanted to downplay a source of previous tension within the caste. The familiar ideal of seven Sandar matrilineal clans was taken to be the “correct” number, but nine different kudis were eventually identified by the informants with whom I spoke. Everyone seemed to agree that one of the largest clans, Kaluvattampani kudi, was the leading clan, but the second- and third-ranked clans (Velappanikkan and Pattinacci) were actually quite small in my Akkaraipattu sample. Two kudis identified by members of the Sandar community did not turn up at all in my Akkaraipattu household survey.

The Sandar matrilineal names are difficult to interpret: the name of the leading kudi, Kaluvattampani, for example, appears to have an obscure connection with *kaluvērram* (impalement). Velappanikkan (lancer) and Palappanikkan (spearman, guardian) both have military connotations and possible Kerala roots (*paṇikkan*, or “master,” is a Malayali honorific). Clan names such as Periya/Cinna Karuttakanni (greater/lesser dark virgin) and Pattinacci (the

name of an “old woman,” *ācci*) clearly indicate descent from founding ancestresses. A secondary nickname for Cinna Karuttakanni kudi is *koṭimaram curri* kudi (circumambulating the [temple] flagpole clan), suggesting a role in Hindu temple rituals.

No formal office of Sandar caste headman was found to exist, and no other political organization was encountered apart from the board of matrilineal Vannakkars who supervise the Sandar caste temple. When I inquired about a traditional Sandar cattle brand, a couple of informants proposed the lotus flower (*tāmaraippū*), but most people felt the caste did not have one. The Sandars are the only caste in the Akkaraipattu Tamil social hierarchy without any recognized cattle brand or collective insignia.<sup>7</sup>

### Marriage Choice and Sublineage Organization

Because nearly 20 percent of my survey sample of Sandar marriages either could not be fully documented or were found to involve non-Sandar partners, the extent of marriage alliance between pairs of matriclans was not entirely clear. However, a general tendency to form isogamous-marriage-exchange relationships between several of the largest kudis seemed evident, and no sign of matriclan hypergamy was found.<sup>8</sup> Information supplied in the householder list and by local informants revealed a surprisingly high incidence of marriage between Sandars and members of other castes and ethnic groups. A total of twenty-five non-endogamous marriages were verified, and with only one exception, all such marriages were between local Sandar women and men of other groups. There were nine cases of Sandar women marrying Sinhala or part-Sinhala men, and also nine cases of Sandar women marrying Estate Tamil or “Indian” men. The remaining seven Sandar women were married, respectively, to a Jaffna Tamil (caste unknown), a Panikkana kudi Mukkuvar soft-drink-bottling entrepreneur, a man from Kerala said to be a Nayar, and one Tamil man of unknown origin. The only Sandar man I found to have married outside of his caste was married to a woman of High Caste (Velalar or Mukkuvar) origin.

Like Tamils of other castes, the Sandars did not always grasp my questions about sublineage organization, nor were their answers unequivocal. The term *tatti* seemed more familiar than *vakuttuvār*, but 41 percent of Sandar informants could not identify any sublineages at all. The *tatti* names I gathered always referred to men, many of whom had a status title such as Podiyar (landlord) or *aṇṇāviyār* (dance master). Moreover, the fact that of the ten sub-

TABLE 18. Relationships between spouses in nineteen Sandar Climber marriages in Division 8, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971

Unrelated <sup>a</sup>	6 (32%)
Distantly related but cannot specify links	5 (26%)
Related by specified kinship links	8 (42%)
Immediate cross-cousins	5 (26%)
FZS married MBD	4 (21%)
MBS married FZD	1 (5%)
Other specified cross-cousins	1 (5%)
Anomalous relationships	2 (11%)
w is classified as MBW or FZ ( <i>māmi</i> )	
w is classified as daughter-in-law ( <i>marumaka!</i> )	

<sup>a</sup> Includes only marriages in which both partners belonged to the Sandar caste. A total of twenty-five additional marriages were documented in which one partner belonged to a different caste or ethnic group.

lineages reported to me, six had only one member certainly suggests I may have been chasing an illusory topic. It was interesting, though, to discover that many (four out of ten) of the alleged sublineages were named after male curing specialists (*parisari*, lit. *parikāri*), the most famous of whom was the late Mr. Vairan (Vairamuttu) Parisari, a wealthy Sandar folk-medicine practitioner who built the Pillaiyar temple just east of the Akkaraipattu junction that is now the focus of worship for members of the caste. He belonged to Kaluvattampani kudi, and it was among members of this matriclan that his *tatti* was most often identified. I asked whether the Sandar community had a long-standing reputation for folk medicine, but I was told of only three current practitioners: an Ayurvedic specialist, a “boil doctor,” and a part-time *man-tiravathi* (sorcerer, exorcist). In general, sublineages seem to be unimportant and undifferentiated among the Sandars, except for the matrilineal descendants of Vairan Parisari, whose prominence in the community is still felt long after his death.

### The Sandar Caste Temple to Lord Pillaiyar

The Sandar caste is most visibly associated with the Pillaiyar temple, located directly across from the Buddhist vihara on Pottuvil Road, that was built in the 1930s or 1940s through the efforts of Vairan Parisari. After the Sandar caste as a whole angrily withdrew from participation in the rituals of the High Caste temple in Division 7 in a dispute over their demand to share ritual privileges, such as Paraiyar drumming, enjoyed by the higher castes, Vairan Parisari bought land and donated most of the money to build an alternative temple,

which bears the official name Sri Marattaṭi Māṇikka Piḷḷaiyār Kōvil (Lord Ruby at the Foot of the Tree Pillaiyar Temple).

During my fieldwork in the 1970s, the temple priest was not a Sandar, but the son of a well-known Vira Sangamar Kurukkal married to a High Caste (Padaiyanda kudi) woman in Division 7. He also officiated at a small Naga Tambiran shrine near the Government Paddy Stores. All other officials of the temple were Sandars, and the temple itself was often referred to as “the Sandar *kōvil*.” The temple committee consisted of nine Vannakkars representing five different matrilineal clans, two trustees per kudi except for the smallest, which had only one. The board of Vannakkars had the responsibility of paying the monthly salary of the temple priest as well as the general expenses of the temple. Since the temple’s own endowment of fourteen acres of paddy land had fallen into the clutches of recalcitrant parties who refused to remit any revenue to the temple, it was necessary for the matrilineal trustees to raise the funds entirely through collections from their respective matrilineal members. Although I did not closely document the rituals at the Sandar temple, I was told that sponsorship of specific calendrical celebrations, such as Siva Ratri and Tai Pongal was allocated to specific kudis, while all the clans worked together to sponsor the major annual festival in the month of Mārkaḷi (December–January).

The founding of this temple seems to have been a major mid-twentieth-century accomplishment for the Sandars. According to informants both within the caste and outside of it, the Sandars did not have their own separate Pillaiyar temple until sometime before World War II, and whether they maintained any smaller neighborhood Hindu shrines before then is not known. It seems clear that one of the goals of Vairan Parisari in leading the Sandar caste toward greater independence from the Mukkuvar Urpodiyar and away from a subservient role in the High Caste temple rituals was to establish for the Sandar community a respectable, fully functioning Hindu temple that shared all the traditional features, such as a system of matrilineal clan management, commonly observed by High Castes in the Akkaraipattu area and in the Batticaloa region more generally.

#### VANNAR WASHERMEN

Members of the Tamil Washerman caste, known as *Vaṇṇār* (from Skt. *varna*, color), provide laundry services as well as perform special domestic ritual service roles for both the Tamils and the Moors in Akkaraipattu. In the view of most persons, they are closely associated with the Barber caste in terms of their

caste rank and the general nature of their hereditary occupation. The Vannar neighborhood is located in Division 7 at the western extremity of the settled area, directly adjacent to a shallow irrigation pond known as *Vaṇṇāṅkuḷam* (Washermen's Tank) in which the laundry for practically the entire population of Akkaraipattu is washed. The only Vannars who live outside this caste neighborhood are found in small, isolated household clusters near outlying Tamil or Moorish settlements, where they can more conveniently serve their patrons.

The total adult population of the Vannar caste in Akkaraipattu was listed in the 1970 householder list as 154, which included twenty-two persons living at the southern edge of Kolavil, a suburban village on the Sagamam Road. From the distribution of occupations among adult Vannar men shown in table 19, it can be seen that a total of seventy-seven (84 percent) of them indicated their job was washing clothes (*calavaittolil*, bleaching work). Evidence I gathered from a survey of twenty Vannar households points to the likelihood that many Washerman families conducted some part-time paddy cultivation in addition to their laundry work. Thirteen (65 percent) of the households in my sample were said to possess some amount of agricultural land either through ownership, lease, or annual government permit, although the quality of their land varied greatly with location. Informal occupations I encountered in the Washerman community were chiefly related to minor curing practices, midwifery, and occasional sub rosa commerce in liquor. In none of these fields, however, did the Vannars occupy a position of particular preeminence.

The laundry services provided by the Vannar caste are viewed as indispensable by most Tamils and Muslims, although in the interest of convenience and economy they are not employed for all household laundry needs. Everyday clothing such as sarongs, underwear, and work shirts are often laundered at home by members of the family, but among the High Castes and the Moors virtually all special items of clothing (particularly fancy saris for women and *vēttis* and other white garments for men) are given to the family Vannar (who is sometimes also referred to by the colonial Anglo-Hindi term *dhoby*). From the Muslim standpoint, the Tamil Washerman is the one member of the Hindu community whose service remains essential, despite recent calls for the Muslims to exercise greater communal self-sufficiency. In the wake of localized Tamil-Moor communal conflicts in several parts of the Batticaloa region, I was told that Tamil caste groups living within predominantly Moorish settlements were often forced to flee, with the exception of the Tamil Washermen. The Muslims also continue to rely on Tamil Blacksmiths, Barbers, Limeburners,

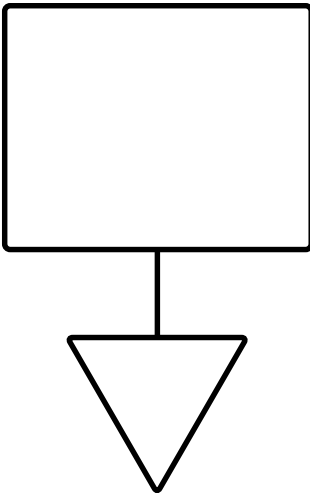


FIGURE 19. Cattle brand of the Vannar Washerman caste: *kal* (washing stone).

and occasionally even Paraiyar Drummers, but in these cases the Muslims can easily travel some distance if necessary to obtain their services. Washermen, on the other hand, are needed close at hand, in order to pick up and deliver laundry directly from Moorish households. Everyone I spoke with in Akkaraipattu recognized the cattle brand of the Vannar caste as the washing stone (figure 19) upon which laundry is assiduously beaten while wet (frequently, in my experience, pulverizing all buttons in the process).

Traditional expectations regarding the domestic duties performed by members of the Washermen caste are similar to those for the Barbers, both of which are classified as hereditary *kuṭimai* household-service castes. Washermen and Barbers are generally equal in caste status; they perform laundry and tonsorial services for each other, and they are served meals alongside each other in the same *panti* (dining row) at High Caste domestic feasts. In earlier generations each High Caste Tamil family would have a Washerman who washed all the clothes for the household and was paid annually (usually at the Cittirai New Year in April–May) in sacks of raw paddy from the family fields. A colloquial expression for this household Washerman is “*kuṭiyūṭṭu vanṇan*” (from *kuṭi vīṭu*, dwelling house). While such a nonmonetary arrangement had already become rare in the case of the Barbers’ services by the time I arrived in the 1970s, it was still honored in many households with respect to the services of the Washermen. However, in some households a cash payment had already been introduced in place of the raw paddy.

Today one sees a number of Vannar laundry stalls operating on an entre-



FIGURE 20. Local Tamil Washermen beating laundry at a riverbank a few miles north of Akkaraipattu (1975).

preneurial business model, particularly in the Moorish sections of town. These laundry stalls accept soiled clothes brought to the shop by customers at large, and they endeavor to have the clean laundry returned to the stall by a specific date, at which time the customer calls for it and either pays an itemized bill or a fixed monthly rate for laundry services. These commercial laundry stalls attract business from members of the professional elite, particularly unmarried male schoolteachers and government-service trainees, who like the “modern” aura of the enterprise and who indirectly derive a bit of social status from the transaction. For the Moors, the ritual role of the Vannar has become less important at the present time, although Washermen are still sometimes called to erect *pandals* (*pantal*, temporary cloth enclosure) for Muslim weddings and circumcisions and occasionally for mosque festivals. In fact, the commercial-laundry model appeals to many Muslim families because it eliminates the need for the Tamil Washerman to physically enter the household compound and collect or deliver the clothes, thereby further insulating the Muslim home from direct contact with Tamils, which is a goal for some exclusionist members of the Moorish community. The majority of the Tamil laundry stalls appear to be located along major lanes within the Muslim headmen’s divisions and along the main road in Akkaraipattu leading north toward Kalmunai.

Even within the Moorish neighborhoods, however, and certainly within

**TABLE 19.** Occupations of adult Vannar Washerman caste men in Akkaraipattu, 1970

Occupation	Total (%)
Laundryman	77 (84%)
Laborer	8 (9%)
Cultivator	3 (3%)
Government employee <sup>a</sup>	2 (2%)
Broker <sup>b</sup>	1 (1%)
Retired	1 (1%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>

<sup>a</sup>Includes a road-department employee and a government building supervisor.

<sup>b</sup>This term was used by local informants to describe the man's work, which combined being a middleman in business deals and serving as an agent for local lawyers.

Source: The 1970 householder lists. These are men twenty years of age or older.

the High Caste Tamil neighborhood, the most common pattern is still the employment of a hereditary Vannar man who calls at the house once or twice a week to collect dirty clothing to be washed and returned personally at a later, somewhat approximate, date. For some High Caste Tamils in particular, the overtones of traditional servitude on the part of the Washerman remains an important caste status symbol. In most Tamil families the Washerman is not allowed to enter the house when he calls to pick up or deliver laundry; he will be expected instead to stand patiently in the open yard beyond the threshold. If the wait is lengthy, he will be expected to sit on the ground with no mat or chair. Any shift toward commercial laundry stalls would eliminate this visible status-enactment, which occurs each time the Vannar visits a High Caste household. Quite possibly for this reason, as well as for reasons of convenience, the laundry stalls have not proliferated in the High Caste Tamil neighborhoods.

However, the laundry stalls on the main road do attract new customers from the lowest castes such as the Barbers, Limeburners, and Drummers. Since the traditional system of caste prerogatives forbids Vannars from serving these castes, and the Vannars themselves maintain that they would not serve such households even if permission were granted, it is only by means of the new commercial laundry stalls that members of the lowest castes nowadays obtain Vannar laundry services. In such cases, the Vannar does not visit the customers' homes, and no Vannar ritual duties at life-cycle celebrations are de-



manded, so the entire transaction is removed from the context of hierarchical service between castes.

However, the subordinate ritual duties of the Washerman continue to be important to many higher-caste Tamil residents of Akkaraipattu. The Vannar supplies clean white cloths, for example, which are necessary in constructing a temporary canopied *pandal* for domestic rituals and in hanging cloths from the ceiling of the sanctuary during temple ceremonies. When the level of ostentation is great enough at a funeral or a girl's puberty ceremony to require a *nila pāvātai* (cloths, usually an assortment of other customers' saris, laid on the ground for the procession to walk upon), it is the Washermen who are summoned to provide this traditional service. The Vannar also has a ritual role to play in Tamil birth, wedding, and funeral ceremonies, as well as in other minor rituals conducted at home.

#### A Traditional Variant: Washerman in Kokkadichcholai

In the 1970s Vannars who served Mukkuvar and Velalar caste families in villages west of the Batticaloa Lagoon still performed a complex series of ritual duties at High Caste life-cycle ceremonies, for which they were compensated in a series of fixed customary prestations. I assume that similarly detailed service-caste rules were once observed in Akkaraipattu, but by the late twentieth century many of them were in abeyance. A summary of the Vannar's customary rewards and perquisites in the village of Munaikkadu near Kokkadichcholai gives a glimpse of how precise and detailed these ritual payments were.

**CHILDBIRTH.** In return for special duties at childbirth, the Washerman received a box of cooked rice and curry (*per̄ra cōru*, birth rice) on the day the baby was delivered, as well as on the fifth and twelfth days following. The Washerman was also given the clothing worn by a woman during her first childbirth. For every new child in the family the Washerman also received four or five *marakkāls* of raw paddy as childbirth wages (*pillai per̄ra kūli*).

**FIRST MENSTRUATION.** There was extra importance given to the Vannar's service during female puberty rites. At the onset of a girl's first menstruation, the household Washerman would be summoned to mark the house with white cloth, decorated brass pots of water (*niṟai kuṭam*), and oil lamps. He would also decorate the side room in which the girl was confined following her first ritual bath. In return, the Washerman would be given the clothing the girl was wearing at the time and the cloth that was hung to construct the bathing

pandal. Throughout her “polluted” seclusion period, the Washerman would supply sets of clean clothing for the girl. On the final day he would set up the correct number of honorific “roof crown” brass pots (*kūrai muṭi*) on the roof, hang the correct number of ceremonial cloths (*cilai*) to flank the doorway into the house, and erect a ceremonial pandal enclosure for the final bathing rite. For putting up these decorations, or similar decorations at other household ceremonies, he would receive the standard *kūrai muṭi celavu* (roof-crown expense) of one marakkāl of paddy and five *kottus* of rice, plus a payment of one coconut and three rupees for each pot on the roof (a number which varies depending on the matriclan of the girl). As a special gift which was first waved three times around his head, the Washerman also received a series of containers with betel leaf, water, steamed *piṭṭu*, *kālī* porridge, flour balls, oil cakes, cooked rice, and curries. Finally, he was given six maraikkals of paddy as ritual wages and was served a full noon meal, including liquor, to which the Vannar caste headman and other Washermen were also invited.

**MARRIAGE.** At weddings, the Washerman’s special role was to temporarily block the progress of the groom’s procession at specific points until someone stepped forward with a small payment (e.g., five rupees) to induce him to move aside. These ritualized blockings (*marippu*) occurred at the groom’s gate and at the bride’s gate, and the household Washermen from each family played a role at different points in the ceremony. The Washerman would also put up the ceremonial roof-crown pots and doorway cloths as well as erect a temporary wedding pandal. In addition to receiving the standard *kūrai muṭi celavu* for the decorating services and a separate cash payment for the pandal, the household Washerman joined with the Washerman and Barber caste headmen to receive three *kottus* of raw rice, assorted raw vegetables, coconuts, and spices, plus a large noon meal as part of the wedding festivities, plus a take-home box of rice and curries.

**DEATH.** The household Washerman was expected to put up the traditional roof-crown pots and doorway cloths at the house of the deceased, and to erect a temporary funeral pandal. He was customarily given the clothing the person was wearing when he or she died, as well as a special shawl later placed over the corpse. The family of the deceased would also distribute two cubits (*muḷam*) of new, white cotton cloth plus a few coins (*paṭṭu kācu*, silk money) to every regular Washerman, Barber, and Drummer man who attended the funeral, and four cubits of cloth to the headmen of the Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers. This cloth was to be worn as a turban during the funeral pro-

cession, in which the Paraiyar Drummers played the central role. However, any of the three service castes might temporarily “block” the progress of the cortege until they were paid a small amount of money by the family members. After the burial, each of the service-caste members received a small monetary gift (e.g., one rupee) as *kai valakkam* (hand custom). The final duty of the Vannar Washermen, however, was to provide a change of garments and to conduct the formal “changing” ritual for members of the funeral party that took place on return to the outskirts of the village. On the third day after the funeral the household Washerman received the milk-rice (*pukkai*) that was set out as an offering to the departed soul. On the eighth day he was given the special *kallai* food offerings arrayed for the spirit of the dead person, as well as a fully cooked meal of rice and curry. On the thirty-first day, which concludes the mourning and pollution period, a large *amutu* food offering would be made for the soul, and all of the household caste servants plus the Washerman headman, Barber headman, and Drummer headman (and sometimes additional members of these three castes) were invited for a large cooked meal. The Washermen and Barbers would eat together in one line (*panti*), while the Drummers ate separately, and each person took home an additional box of rice and curry.

#### Matriclans and Leadership Structure

Although my Washerman acquaintances had compiled a list of fifteen matriclans for the Vannar caste throughout the Batticaloa region, a firsthand survey of twenty Vannar households in Akkaraipattu (N = 120) revealed that the great majority of persons (eighty-eight, or 73 percent) belonged to only two kudis, Talankudah kudi and Mutalaikkudah kudi, each sharing the highest level of prestige. Although the term *kudi* was perfectly intelligible to them, most Vannars simply identified themselves as “Talankudah Vannar” or “Mutalaikkudah Vannar,” dispensing with the word for matriclan itself. Like many other Washerman matriclan names, these are toponymic (geographical place name) titles referring to specific ancestral villages located mainly north of Akkaraipattu in the central Batticaloa District.<sup>9</sup> Six individuals (5 percent of those surveyed) identified themselves as belonging to the “Sinhala” kudi, which was similar to a response found in the High Caste matriclan survey, and the remaining eight individuals listed Munkamurai and Panikkana as their matriclans (table 20).

Other names I had been told to expect, but which never turned up in my household survey, were *Oluṅku* (orderly, ranked) Vannar, *Calavai* (bleach-

TABLE 20. Matriclan membership of married adults in twenty Vannar Washerman caste households in Division 7, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971

Kudi	Men	Women	Total
Mutalaikkudah	24	20	44
Talankudah	20	24	44
Sinhala	4	2	6
Munkamurai <sup>a</sup>	1	2	3
Mandur	1	0	1
Non-Vannar kudi <sup>b</sup>	1	3	4
Kudi unknown	9	9	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>120</b>

<sup>a</sup>The word *munkāmurai* would mean “not plunging into water” (*Tamil Lexicon* 6:3232) as a way of doing things. Perhaps it signifies a repudiation of normal laundry work.

<sup>b</sup>The specific matriclan was Panikkana, a prominent High Caste kudi.

ing) Vannar, *Pāvāṭai* (skirt, ground cloth) Vannar, *Karaiyāṭa* (Karaiyar fishing caste’s) Vannar, and *Turumba* Vannar. Some of these—especially the last two, which are Washermen who serve specific lower-ranked castes—might refer to endogamous subcastes no longer found in Akkaraipattu, rather than exogamous matriclans. The Turumbar (possibly from Malayalam, *tirumbuka*, “to wash,” or Tamil *turumpu*, “straw” [see Rev. Miron Winslow 1862: 606]) are well-documented as an “unseeable” caste who once did laundry for the Paraiyar Drummers (Banks 1960: 64–66; Raghavan 1971: 193). I was told the last Turumbar family left Kolavil hamlet several years before I arrived. When I met the Vannar caste headman in Munnaikkadu near Kokkaticcolai, thirty miles to the north, he verified the existence of *Pāvāṭai* kudi, Karaiyar kudi, and several other exogamous matriclans not found in Akkaraipattu. The title of *Parivaṭṭa* (ritual cloths, divine vestments) Vannar is accorded to the temple Washerman who marches near the front of the annual festival procession at Mandur (Whitaker 1999: 154). Sorting out the various levels of Vannar caste organization in different parts of the Batticaloa region is an ethnographic task that remains unfinished.

The political organization of the Washerman caste centers mainly around the office of the caste headman or Tandakkaran (*Taṇṭakkāraṇ*, from *taṇṭam*, “cudgel, punishment”) and only secondarily around the committee of matrilineal temple Vannakkars who represent the local Washerman kudis at their Hindu caste shrine to Lord Periya Tambiran. Like the Barber caste headman, the Washerman Tandakkaran is an office that must have had greater influence in the days when High Caste dominance was more absolute, and hence any

delegated powers were also more credible. The eighteenth-century observer Jacob Burnand reported two chief regional Tandakkaran, one for the four northern districts and one for the four southern districts of Dutch Batticaloa (1794: 16).

My informants said, however, that the Tandakkaran's leadership within the Washerman community was still considered to be quite important and that his permission had to be obtained before a Washerman could attend any important ceremony in a ritual capacity. According to the more traditional view, the Tandakkaran is not only the leader of the Washermen; he also metonymically stands for the entire Washerman community in the eyes of the High Caste Tamils. For example, at the High Caste temple festival the Tandakkaran would act as the representative Vannar who performs the roles allocated to the Vannar caste, dramatically enacting the Washerman share of the communal ritual by serving as the village Washerman for the deity of the temple. Because the High Caste temple festival was not celebrated during my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu, I never witnessed the Tandakkaran actually performing these duties. However, prominent High Caste families still expected the Tandakkaran to attend their major life-crisis ceremonies and carry out the traditional roles assigned to him. Sometimes the Tandakkaran was replaced by the household's hereditary Washerman, but the idea that the public-ritual specialist among the Washermen should be the Tandakkaran himself was still widespread in the 1970s.

The office of Washerman caste headman was said by some persons to have been traditionally filled by a man of Mutalaikkudah kudi, but others disagreed, pointing to the fact that, of the last four headmen, two had been from Mutalaikkudah kudi and two from Talankudah kudi. In the 1970s the leadership seemed divided, with the senior Tandakkaran, a man of Mutalaikkudah kudi, in bad health and his own sister's husband, a true cross-cousin (FZs) belonging to Talankudah kudi, serving as the acting headman. No clear rule of succession emerged in conversations, and I did not pursue the subject further. However, in the Kokkadichcholai region to the north, I was told that choosing a new Washerman headman would be a joint decision involving both the Vannar community and the local High Caste Mukkuvar leaders.

### **Marriage Choice and Sublineage Organization**

With practically three quarters of all the Washermen in Akkaraipattu belonging to only two kudis there is not a great deal of marriage flexibility possible while still conforming to the rule of matrilineal exogamy. The overwhelming

pattern was one of isogamous-marriage-exchange alliance between Mutalaik-kudah kudi and Talankudah kudi. However, according to my tabulations of matrilineal affiliations in the forty-six Vannar marriages I documented during my household survey, twelve of these marriages (27 percent of the sample) were kudi-endogamous, a rate of same-clan marriage second only to that of the Navitar Barbers (table 21).<sup>10</sup> My Vannar respondents acknowledged these endogamous matches to be lapses of the recognized kudi exogamy rule, but they justified them in terms of the Washermen's difficult circumstances in life. A lack of suitable marriage partners from other kudis was not specifically mentioned as a factor. They simply contended that people engaged in such a humble line of work, and who were so impoverished, could not always afford to observe all the social proprieties, an explanation I heard as well from Vannar informants in the Kakkadichchulai region. There is also remarkably little evidence of sublineage segmentation within the matrilineals I recorded in my survey of twenty Vannar households. Only 20 percent of respondents were able to identify a sublineage (*tatti*) of their own or for their spouse, and often they turned out to be the only member of that *tatti* recorded in the survey sample.

### The Vannar Caste Temple to Lord Periya Tambiran

A committee of temple trustees, or Vannakkars, helps the Washerman headman in overseeing the rituals at the Vannar caste temple for the Hindu deity Periya Tambiran. The temple construction was started in the 1960s and was still partially unfinished in the early 1970s, although it is a solid and substantial shrine today. The god Periya Tambiran (Great Lord), a manifestation of Siva, is said by the Washerman to be their *kula teyvam* or tutelary caste deity. The temple is located only about a hundred feet in a direct line of sight from the High Caste Pillaiyar temple in Division 7, just at the edge of the Washerman neighborhood. In 2001 I also noticed that a striking four-foot-high Nagatambiran (cobra deity) icon had been installed at the base of a large banyan tree directly in front of the temple.

The Periya Tambiran shrine had been built as a result of a dispute between the Washermen and the High Caste trustees of the Pillaiyar temple, similar to the way the Sandar Climbers had broken away to build their own caste temple several decades earlier. Details of the quarrel were never made clear to me, except that the Washermen had become fed up with the manner in which their activities were dictated by the High Caste temple Vannakkars and the Urpodi-  
yar. The close proximity and visibility of the Washerman temple site obviously

TABLE 21. Relationships between spouses in twenty-one Vannar Washerman caste marriages in Division 7, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971

Unrelated	9 (43%)
Distantly related but cannot specify links	2 (9%)
Related by specified kinship links	10 (48%)
Immediate cross-cousins	7 (33%)
FZS married MBD	5 (24%)
MBS married FZD	2 (9%)
Other specified cross-cousins	3 (15%)

served to flaunt the authority of the High Caste temple establishment, but after the dispute began to cool down, the new project lost some of its initial fervor. When I first saw it in the early 1970s, the Periya Tambiran shrine seemed to be the lonely artifact of a forgotten dispute. Nonetheless, a board consisting of seven Vannakkars (mainly representing the two biggest matrilineal clans) plus the Tandakkaran was formally in charge of the temple. Matrilineal representation on the temple committee did not seem to be highly formalized, and there was no evidence of strict matrilineal succession to office. In fact, well over half of the respondents to my Washerman household survey could not identify their own kudi Vannakkars on the temple board. The entire organizational structure of the temple is probably a recent borrowing, since the Vannar caste itself was said not to have possessed a separate temple prior to the dispute with the High Castes. The temple lacks a full time priest, so several devout Washerman men take turns officiating at the pujas that take place on various occasions during the year.

#### NAVITAR BARBERS

The Tamil Barber caste in Akkaraipattu is known as Navitar (*Nāvitar*), a community that is residentially distributed across two separate neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> It is the only caste to be geographically divided in this manner, and no particular explanation could be provided for this state of affairs except economic pressure and a shortage of residential land. The larger settlement of Barbers is in Division 8 along an east-west lane that has come to be known as “Barber Street.” The Navitar homes on this lane, like the homes of all the Tamil castes except for the Paraiyar Drummers and the Kadaiyar Limeburners, directly abut the homes of other castes, so that the visual delineation of a distinct Barber neighborhood is almost impossible to discern. The situation is the same in the smaller of the two Navitar areas, also within Division 8, but located southeast of the central junction near the Sinhalese Buddhist vihara. There is

no difference in the socioeconomic profile of the Barbers in these two separate neighborhoods, nor is there any evidence of a status distinction between them. My firsthand survey of twenty Barber households revealed close connections between several Akkaraipattu families and caste members in Polonnaruwa and Ambalantota, both of which are predominantly Sinhala towns outside the Batticaloa region entirely.

The total population of the Navitar community, counting adults included in the householder list for 1970, was 164. The traditional work of members of this caste is cutting hair and shaving the men of the town, but the Navitar also perform a number of important ritual duties during Hindu life-crisis ceremonies. Thurston referred to them as a caste of “barbers and barber-surgeons” and said they were “the recognized midwives of the Hindu community in the Tamil country” (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 1:32). In Akkaraipattu the Barbers occasionally engage in folk medicine and midwifery, but they are not particularly dominant in either activity. The great majority of Navitars (76 percent) are simply barbers, an activity identified in the householder list as *cavarattolil* (shaving work) or as *calūṇ vēlai* ([barber] saloon work). Four Barber men listed their occupation as *maruttuvar*, which could mean a male midwife, but in this instance refers to practitioners of folk medicine (table 22).

Before the advent of the present-day Western-style “barber saloons,” barbering was done on individual summons at the home of the client, with each family relying on its hereditary household Barber, who served in both secular and ritual capacities whenever needed. Among the Tamils, the Barber still performs important ritual duties, particularly at childbirth and death. It is the family Barber who pierces the infant’s ears and shaves the infant’s hair on the thirty-first day after birth, thus ending the period of childbirth pollution, and it is a Barber who must shave the dead body if it is a man, remove the earrings, and perform a central role in the rituals of burial.<sup>12</sup> By the 1970s, the practice of calling a Barber to perform ordinary tonsorial duties had already lost much ground to the commercial barber saloons located along the main roads in Akkaraipattu. As with a similar trend among the Washermen, this shift to a commercial mode of operation mitigates the aura of domestic-caste servitude inherent in the former system. In any case, the saloons now serve as the prime source of barbering services in town, particularly for the younger generation of Muslims.<sup>13</sup> The saloons also draw some customers from the lowest castes, such as the Drummers, who are traditionally denied the domestic services of the Barber caste. It is nowadays tacitly recognized that a Drummer can



TABLE 22. Occupations of adult Navitar Barber caste men in Akkaraipattu, 1970

Occupation	Number (%)
Barber	65 (76%)
Laborer	6 (7%)
Curing Practitioner	5 (6%)
Business	3 (3%)
Cultivator	3 (3%)
Other <sup>a</sup>	4 (5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>

<sup>a</sup>Includes bus driver, mason, blacksmith, and “retired” man.

Source: The 1970 householder lists. These are men twenty years of age or older. Data from both of the Barber neighborhoods are aggregated here.

anonymously get a haircut or a shave from an unknowing, or even a secretly sympathetic, saloon Barber.

The work of the Barber, in both mundane and ceremonial contexts, is viewed as dirty and polluting in the eyes of the higher castes. Hair, a treasured adornment of the body when it grows in place, becomes ritually unclean as soon as it is cut, and anyone who touches these loose strands of hair becomes contaminated, that is, both the barber and his customer. It is therefore customary to take a full “head-bath” and to change into clean clothes following a haircut or shave. A more perfect illustration of Mary Douglas’s (1966) theory of dirt as “matter out of place” would be hard to find. Despite the low status of their work, most Navitars remain in barbering, and a few have acquired some wealth as owners of multiple saloons in different towns. In addition, 60 percent of my sample of twenty Navitar households were found to possess, or have access to, some paddy land which was cultivated for supplemental income.

Perhaps as a result of the nature of their livelihood, their low caste rank, and their residential proximity to the central market junction, the Barbers have acquired an adverse stereotype in the eyes of some people in Akkaraipattu. Rumors periodically circulate around town about alleged traffic in liquor or women that is conducted through certain barber saloons, suspicions that are occasionally directed toward members of the Washerman caste as well. The opportunity for easy illicit contacts between Barbers or Washermen and men of other castes was remarked on by several informants, and one must always keep in mind the vulnerability of Barbers and Washermen to pressure, both

physical and economic, from wealthy or powerful individuals seeking to extort special favors. In one famous instance, which was retold to me, a powerful High Caste man of an earlier generation forced a married Barber woman to supply sexual favors and then expected her to raise his multiple offspring as members of her own family. His Barber progeny later enjoyed teasing their High Caste relatives by calling them “cousin” (*maccāṇ*). Muslims are also said occasionally to demand illicit favors from the Tamil service castes, and in terms of financial incentives, they can often exert more persuasion than most Tamils.

In addition, members of the Navitar, Vannar, and Tattar castes are often exposed to Moorish pressure to surrender their residential land. My own house in Akkaraipattu in 1970 had been newly erected by a Moorish shopkeeper on a piece of property recently purchased from a Barber family, my immediate neighbors to the rear. Even back then the residential frontier between the Moors and the Tamils was clearly in the process of moving southward toward the Ampara Road as additional Tamils, mainly Barbers and Smiths, accepted handsome financial offers from the Moors to acquire their residential properties. Aerial photographs taken by the Survey Department in 1956 show that a small zone of uninhabited land once separated the Moors and the Barbers in some places. Now, however, growth in the Moorish population has resulted in a demand for house sites, particularly in the area close to the center of town, and the relatively impoverished Barbers have found these Muslim offers impossible to resist. Apparently the Navitar settlement near the Buddhist vihara has expanded as the Barbers along “Barber Street” have relinquished their property and have moved to new residences on the southern, or Tamil, side of town.

Although relatively few Navitar caste members in town seemed to own cattle, it was occasionally possible to find such animals grazing at the outskirts of town. Cattle owned by Barber families are customarily recognized by the cattle brand associated with their caste, namely, the scissors insignia shown in figure 21.

### Matriclans and Leadership Structure

The Barbers are the only caste in Akkaraipattu who do not maintain a separate Hindu temple of their own. On a formal level, the only time I observed the Barbers participating as a group in the sponsorship of any temple ritual was during the annual Bhadrakali temple festival, which is directed by the

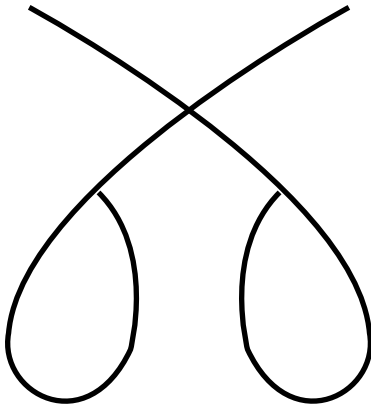


FIGURE 21. Cattle brand of the Navitar Barber caste: *kattari* (scissors).

Tattar Smith caste; during that festival, one of the nightly processions from the residential areas to the temple was conducted by members of the Barber community, who contributed a share of the ritual supplies needed for the ceremonies. The fact that there is no separate Barber caste temple in town eliminates the functional need for a committee of temple trustees to carry out administrative responsibilities, and it also eliminates the most common focus of matrilineal clan activity: the mobilization of contributions for the support of temple rituals.

In fact, the Navitar caste does not seem to have any *kudi Vannakkars* at all. Instead, there has simply been a single caste headman who is called the *Mullaikkaran*. This title is apparently borrowed from an earlier pattern of agricultural management in which the landlord delegated supervision of his paddy fields to a powerful factotum known as the *mullaikkāraṇ*.<sup>14</sup> The term continues to have connotations of power and influence despite its obsolescence, and this was the only reason cited as an explanation of its use as a title for the Barber headman. The *Mullaikkaran*'s office does not appear to be strictly hereditary, although there is a tendency in that direction, because successors have often been chosen from a group of relatively close kinsmen of the previous incumbent.

The *Mullaikkaran* would act as the spokesman and metonymic representative of the Barbers in matters affecting the entire caste, but in the 1970s his degree of authority within the caste itself was no longer firmly supported by the system of High Caste dominance that once delegated authority to the headmen of the lower castes. The *Mullaikkaran* was still an important figure, however, and his leadership was respected, a situation that has changed radically

in the twenty-first century. He was both the chief of the Barbers and the key ritual specialist at funerals for all of the higher castes. When a death occurred, the family of the deceased would immediately notify the High Caste Urpodi-  
yar, the Washerman Tandakkaran, and the Barber Mullaikkaran. Usually the Mullaikkaran was assisted by the hereditary household Barber of the bereaved family, but it was the Mullaikkaran who would play the major ritual role in the preparation of the corpse and in the rites of burial (figure 22).

When I inquired about matrilineal kudis among the Barbers of Akkaraipattu, I was told that they indeed existed, but when I asked who the specific matrilineal leaders were, few people could point to anyone apart from the Mullaikkaran himself. It gradually became apparent that the Navitars' concepts of matrilineality were much less well defined than those of most Tamils in Akkaraipattu, and they were certainly a matter of little concern. I elicited kudi affiliations for 120 individuals in a survey of twenty Navitar households, and the pattern of responses is shown in table 23. As in the case of the Washermen and the Drummers, the Barbers tended to drop the suffix *kudi* when discussing their specific matrilineal groups. Instead, they appended the colloquial name of their caste to the toponymic place-name of each descent group, as in “*Ṣaḷalavāy Nācuvan*” or “*Maṇṇmunai Nācuvan*.”

The survey data shown in table 23 reflect the essentially dichotomous pattern of matrilineal affiliations within the Barber caste community. The two main kudis are named after locations in the Batticaloa region—the first nearby and the other thirty miles away—from which, it is said, families migrated to settle in Akkaraipattu. Other responses indicated a lack of awareness of matrilineal membership or were tacit claims to a non-Barber caste identity of some kind. One couple originally from Kandy identified themselves as being of *Koṭikkāl* (betel-growing) Velalar and *Maḷavar* (warrior) caste origins, but the fact that their children have married local spouses from the Barber community indicates their assimilation into this group. The husband in another family was said to have been originally a member of the Cirpatar caste from the Mandur region, but he has adopted his Barber wife's caste occupation in Akkaraipattu.

In striking contrast to the Washermen and other castes in Akkaraipattu, the Barbers expressed no interest whatsoever in the question of matrilineal hierarchy. No claims to special clan status were voiced; no traditional kudi prerogatives were described. This lack of expressed kudi hierarchy, and the essentially dichotomous pattern of clan affiliations among the Barbers of Akkaraipattu, obviously rule out the possibility of a hypergamous marriage system. It



**FIGURE 22.** The Mullaikkaran, headman of the Barber Caste, decorating a Hindu funeral palanquin prior to leading the procession to the Tamil cemetery (1975). This duty has ceased in recent years.

is perhaps not entirely coincidental that the present Barber Mullaikkaran is a man of Valalayay kudi, numerically the largest kudi in the survey sample and the clan which has the closest legendary and geographical associations with Akkaraipattu. However, when I asked for opinions regarding the relative status of the Valalayay and Manmunai clans, there was remarkably little interest in the comparison. None of my Navitar informants mentioned any ideal number of historic Barber kudis (for example, seven), as had the informants from other castes. All evidence suggests that the Barbers have less concern with matrilineal organization than any other Tamil caste in Akkaraipattu, apart from the Kadaiyar Limeburners who have no kudis at all. However, like the Barbers, roughly 20 percent of High Caste members surveyed were also incapable of identifying their own matrilineal clan.

#### **Marriage Choice and Sublineage Organization**

A very high rate of same-kudi marriage also underscored the weakness of the exogamous matrilineal concept among the Barbers. Of the thirty-eight Navitar

TABLE 23. Matrilineal membership of married adults in twenty Navitar Barber caste households in Divisions 7 and 8, Akkaraipattu, 1971

Kudi name	Men	Women	Total
Valalavay <sup>a</sup>	21	23	44
Manmunai <sup>b</sup>	18	22	40
Non-Navitar kudi <sup>c</sup>	5	4	9
Kudi unknown	16	11	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>120</b>

<sup>a</sup> *Valalavay* is a famous paddy-cultivation tract northwest of Akkaraipattu.

<sup>b</sup> Twelve individuals identified their matrilineal either as Manmunai Makiladittivu kudi or simply as Makiladittivu kudi, referring to a particular village within the Manmunai district just south of Batticaloa town.

<sup>c</sup> All of these respondents offered non-Barber caste names rather than recognizable matrilineals: *Cirpāta* Karaiyar (3), *Kotikkal* Velalar (3), and *Maḷavar* (3).

caste-endogamous marriages in my survey, a majority of these (twenty-three, or 61 percent) were between members of the same matrilineal.<sup>15</sup> This is more than twice the proportion of same-clan marriages in the Washerman caste (27 percent) and triple the proportion of same-clan marriages in the Drummer caste (19 percent), based on the samples I recorded. Navitars with whom I spoke acknowledged that other castes enforced the clan exogamy rule more strictly, but they did not treat it as a major concern, nor even as a source of minor chagrin. Looking at the relationships between a sample of husbands and wives in the Barber caste, however, one can clearly see that the Dravidian kinship categories continue to be honored for the most part, despite the violations of clan exogamy (table 24). The percentage of “correct” Barber marriages between immediate or classificatory cross-cousins in my household survey (63 percent) was exceeded by only two other castes in Akkaraipattu, the Drummers (67 percent) and the Smiths (70 percent). The clan exogamy rule and the Dravidian prescriptive-marriage categories are usually mutually reinforcing, but among the Barbers these two conceptual systems are no longer in a congruent relationship. However, even when intraclan marriages begin to occur, and the exogamy rule is weakened, the logic of the Dravidian cross-cousin-marriage categories continues to exert a strong influence, because the kinship classification can be applied “retroactively” to redefine marriages that might initially have been viewed as anomalous.

Questions about the existence of sublineage segmentation among the Barbers bore little fruit. Over two-thirds of the responses to my household survey were blank on the subject of their sublineage (*tatti*, *vakuttavār* or *kattarai*), and the remainder indicated links to individuals presumed to have been former

TABLE 2.4. Relationships between spouses in nineteen Navitar Barber marriages in Divisions 7 and 8, Akkaraipattu, 1971

Unrelated	3 (16%)
Distantly related but cannot specify links	2 (10%)
Related by specified kinship links	14 (74%)
Immediate cross-cousins	8 (42%)
FZS married MBD	3 (16%)
MBS married FZD	5 (26%)
Other specified cross-cousins	4 (21%)
Anomalous relationships	2 (10%)
W is classified as daughter ( <i>maka!</i> )	
W is classified as grand daughter ( <i>pētti</i> )	

caste headmen, either in Akkaraipattu or in other villages. Only one response in forty suggested anything but the diffuse bilateral kindred of a past or present Mullaikkaran. The one exception was “*Antōni kattarai*” within Valalavay kudi, which could have been a sort of genealogical fossil originating from a cross-caste marriage between a Barber and a Portuguese Burgher. The name *Antōni* (Anthony) is common among east-coast Burghers, and Barber-Burgher inter-marriages are recognized as a common occurrence in the region. In general, however, matrilineal sublineages are virtually absent in the Barber caste.

#### PARAIYAR DRUMMERS

The Paraiyars are the indigenous ceremonial drummers and musicians in Akkaraipattu’s Tamil caste hierarchy, as they are throughout the Batticaloa region more generally. They have sometimes been employed as criers to make public announcements in the major streets of the town as well. The name of the caste derives from the word, *parai*, a one-sided, calfskin-headed drum that is found in South India (Moffatt 1979b: 112; Mahar 1972: xxxiii). Ironically, the authentic *parai* drum is not found in the Batticaloa region, and Ron Walcott, an ethnomusicology student from UCLA who worked in many parts of Sri Lanka, never encountered one in the entire island (1975, personal communication). Instead of using the drum that is their caste namesake, the Paraiyars exclusively play the *tavil* (a double-headed cylindrical drum played with one stick and one hand), the *tampaṭṭam* (a single-headed, bowl-shaped drum played with two bent reed sticks [see figure 23]), and the *kuḷal* (“flute,” here a short double-reed shawm).

Because they are the only musician caste indigenous to the Batticaloa region, the Paraiyars traditionally have been hired not only as funeral drummers



**FIGURE 23.** Drummer from Kolavil playing the *tampaṭṭam* (1975). Contemporary members of the caste no longer perform music of any kind.

but also to provide auspicious music at weddings, domestic puberty rituals, and local Hindu temple festivals, even if they have not been allowed to enter the innermost precincts of the home or temple itself.<sup>16</sup> Whitaker reports that in the 1980s the Paraiyars still led the temple processions at the Mandur Kandaswamy temple (1999: 154). The Paraiyars are also regarded as the only musicians capable of producing the particular rhythms necessary to please certain fierce Hindu goddesses such as Bhadrakali and Mariyamman. Nevertheless, their most distinguishing role is specifically that of funeral drummers. In this latter capacity they serve only the higher-caste Hindu population, and never the Muslims. (Muslim funerals do not involve musical performance at all.) Two other Paraiyar caste roles commonly noted in South Indian ethnographies—scavenging dead cattle and serving as village watchmen—are underplayed or nonexistent in the Batticaloa region. The office of village watchman does not exist here, but cattle scavenging is more difficult to judge. No one mentioned it to me specifically, but it might have been an unofficial sideline



for some families. Paraiyars with whom I spoke said that beef eating was widespread in the caste, but the source of the beef was not made clear to me.<sup>17</sup>

Along with the Vannar Washermen and the Navitar Barbers, the Paraiyar Drummers complete the triad of *kuṭimai*, or household service, castes whose attendance at domestic life-crisis rituals is a coveted symbol of honor for the higher castes. The rank of the Paraiyars is the lowest among the regular shareholding castes in the Akkaraipattu hierarchy, but higher than that of the Kadaiyar Limeburners and the Kuravar Gypsies, who are viewed as marginal to the traditional social system. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the higher-caste Tamil community as a whole, the Drummers have traditionally served to define the lower extreme of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Although I almost never heard the term “untouchable caste” (*tīṇṭāccāti*) applied to the Paraiyars, their structural position in the caste hierarchy and the range of ritual prohibitions against direct interaction with them historically would place them in this sociological category.

In the Batticaloa region most of the main Paraiyar settlements are well known: Kolavil, Pandiruppu, Kalutavalai, Ambilanturai, Kattankudy, Batticaloa, and Valaichchenai. Smaller groups of Paraiyars have resided in Saintamaruthu and Kalmunai, although many were displaced by the communal disturbances between Muslims and Tamils in 1958. Some of these, in fact, resettled in the Drummer community located at Kolavil on the southern outskirts of Akkaraipattu proper, while others are reported to be living in new colonization areas under the Gal Oya Project. Kolavil itself is divided between Paraiyars in the northern half and High Caste Mukkuvars and Velalars in the southern half of the village. In the 1970s the Drummer neighborhood of Kolavil was visually separated from Akkaraipattu town by a short stretch of open fields, but this separation has since been erased by the expansion of Tamil residential construction.

Outwardly, there is no obvious indication that Kolavil North is a Paraiyar settlement; the houses are modest, but no more so than in many other outlying Tamil areas of Akkaraipattu. They are set out along unpaved lanes in a grid pattern identical to that of the other castes, and the settlement as a whole is not referred to as a *cheri* (*cēri*) as it often is in South India. In fact, there was no special word for it at all. I only occasionally heard people refer to *paraiyan vaṭṭai* (Paraiyars’ field) to refer to the Kolavil Drummer settlement.

The householder list for 1970 showed a total of 103 Paraiyar households in Kolavil, with a male population twenty years of age or older of 126. Although

drumming has historically been the signature occupation of this caste, only one man openly listed this as his occupation in the householder list, using the term *piracittam* (public announcement) rather than an expression for ceremonial drumming or musical entertainment (table 25). Even the formal leader of the Paraiyar drumming troupe, the Muppan, listed his work as “cultivation,” which suggests how strongly the current generation wishes to distance itself from this stigmatizing social role. In fact, in the 1970s the entire leadership structure of the caste was shifting away from the office of the Muppan (*Mūppan*, senior or elder one), the traditional Paraiyar caste headman and chief drummer, toward a new political organization centered around several new Hindu temples then under construction.

The types of work that were most difficult to detect from the official statistics, however, were curing, fortunetelling, and the occult arts of magic and sorcery. The Paraiyars are quite famous for their curing and magical powers, and there are alleged to be many who practice these skills as a part-time occupation. The most famous Paraiyar curer during the period of my fieldwork was a woman named Karani, a full-time snakebite specialist whose fame was widespread throughout the Batticaloa region and as far away as Jaffna. Karani had learned the art of *visha vaittiyam* (poison medicine) from her father, Velan Parisari, who was also a renowned expert. There was only one other snakebite doctor of repute in Akkaraipattu, a High Caste man with less experience. Karani’s clients included Muslims as well as High Caste Tamils, and during the harvest season I found her compound full of snakebite victims who had encamped there with their kinsmen to receive emergency treatment. These were often laborers who had been bitten while working in the paddy fields, to which snakes were attracted by the large rodent population that fed on the ripening grain.

Most of the curing and occult specialists about whom I obtained information also held Gal Oya Project land-use permits which enabled them to undertake some paddy cultivation, and a few of these same persons were also professional funeral or public-announcement drummers in their spare time. Aside from Karani the snakebite specialist, there were only a few Paraiyars who devoted full time to their curing or magical work. One man was a specialist in treating madness (*paittiyam*), and his clientele, too, was drawn from a wide area that included Jaffna. Another man was a very businesslike astrologer and mantiravati with offices in Kolavil and Jaffna who seemed well on his way to financial success at the age of thirty or so. He was also among the most articulate critics of High Caste discrimination against the Paraiyars.

TABLE 25. Occupations of adult Paraiyar Drummer caste men in Kolavil, Akkaraipattu, 1970

Occupation	Number (%)
Cultivation <sup>a</sup>	82 (65%)
Laborer	26 (21%)
Drumming	7 (5%)
Carpentry	4 (3%)
Curing Practitioner	3 (2%)
Mason	2 (2%)
Other <sup>b</sup>	2 (2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>

<sup>a</sup>The householder list indicated ninety-two men were engaged in "cultivation" (*kamam*), but cross-checking revealed some who were working as agricultural wage laborers rather than cultivating their own fields.

<sup>b</sup>Includes one *mantiravāti* fortuneteller/sorcerer and one Land Development Officer.

Source: The 1970 householder lists. These are men twenty years of age or older.

My High Caste acquaintances generally assumed that most Paraiyars would have at least some knowledge of magic and sorcery. This was a collective impression that the Paraiyars themselves might have wished to foster, as it afforded them some degree of power and influence in spite of their low position in the caste hierarchy. My High Caste Tamil assistant warned me as we entered the Drummer settlement one day that a Paraiyar could easily glean fingernail clippings or a bit of soil from under your footprint (*kalaṭi maṇ*) or take a few threads from your garment, to use in sorcery against you. Yet the stereotypic Paraiyar connections with drumming, healing, and sorcery cannot conceal the fact that the overwhelming majority of Drummers in Akkaraipattu are agricultural workers, many of whom now also have at least three acres of Gal Oya Project land that they work on annual permit. Of the twenty-one Paraiyar households I visited in my survey, only five possessed permanently deeded paddy land, and in two of these families the land was largely unworkable because of salt or excess drainage water. Only four Paraiyar households, however, lacked any land whatsoever. The remaining seventeen households (81 percent of my sample) claimed to have some paddy land available to cultivate on long-term land-use permits. Such access to government land has surely been a positive development in the Drummer community since independence as a result of the Gal Oya irrigation project.

Another factor that has influenced the economic position of the Paraiyar

caste in Akkaraipattu has been the decision taken by the leaders of the Moorish community to discourage the hiring of Paraiyar Drummers at Muslim weddings, circumcisions, and mosque festivals. Each of these celebrations involves processions to the wedding house and to the mosque, and since the bearing of gifts is an important element of all such rituals, the Drummers would traditionally have accompanied each procession to provide an extra degree of pomp and festivity. At a mosque kandoori festival, for example, the delegations from each Moorish matriclan would bring food and supplies in procession to the pandals erected in the mosque compound for the occasion. I was told that the Paraiyar musicians would sometimes also be asked to stage a public-drumming and dance exhibition at the mosque, for which they received additional remuneration. Since approximately 1955, such practices have been actively discouraged by reformist Islamic religious experts, the *ālims* and *maulavis*, who have increasingly received their education in madrassas and Muslim seminaries, and who have become a strong force for “purifying” popular Muslim religious behavior throughout the island. Needless to say, the steady deepening of ethnic tensions between the Tamils and the Moors since the 1980s has further reinforced the trend to exclude the Paraiyars from Moorish celebrations. However, some of the old customs, such as Paraiyar drumming at Muslim circumcisions, which had been discontinued in Akkaraipattu, were still being followed in the 1970s in other Moorish settlements to the north, such as Maruthamunai and Kattankudy.

There is an additional economic factor at work as well: the arrival from outside the region of a higher-status caste of professional Tamil musicians called *Naṭṭuvar* or *Mēḷakkārar*, who have settled in Batticaloa town and who provide music only for auspicious events such as weddings, puberty celebrations, and Hindu festivals. The Melakkarars, who are often employed as musicians in the major Colombo and Jaffna temples, play the *mēḷam*, a heavier double-headed drum, as well as the *nākacuram*, which is the ebony double-reed wind instrument of South Indian classical temple music. The Melakkarars are able to command higher fees than the Paraiyars, even though there are additional expenses of transporting these musicians to and from Batticaloa, usually by hiring car. Nevertheless, the Melakkarars are now preferred at the household ceremonies of wealthy Tamils, and the local Paraiyar Drummers are losing another customary market for their services. At the Mandur temple festival, the Melakkarars now march behind the Paraiyars, and it may not be long before the Paraiyars are entirely displaced.

Apart from ceremonial drumming, a few Paraiyars in the 1970s were also

employed as public announcers. For example, a paddy-cultivation committee (either Tamil or Muslim) might hire a Drummer to walk through the streets beating his drum and announcing an upcoming date for the commencement of plowing. The only permanent salaried job of this kind was for the drummer who served as the official crier for the local courts and for government administrators at the subdistrict level. Since Kolavil was the only Drummer settlement in the southernmost part of the Eastern Province, the official criers for both Akkaraipattu and Pottuvil subdistricts were resident there. However, such government work employed only two Paraiyars out of roughly 120 adult men in Kolavil during my early fieldwork.

As a consequence of all these factors, there has been a marked decline in the interest of Paraiyar men in pursuing the art of drumming. In the 1970s the number of men who participated in drumming in any way, including even part-time or occasional “extra” drumming, was probably no more than fifteen. I was told that practically none of the younger men were taking up the drum and flute, and it was predicted by some elders that the musical traditions of the caste might be extinct within a generation. This would signal a watershed in the history of the caste system of Akkaraipattu, for the service of Drummers at funerals has long been regarded as a key symbolic prerogative of higher-caste rank. Whenever a High Caste family required Drummers for, say, a funeral, the customary procedure was to submit a request to the High Caste chief, the Urpodiya, who was the sole person with authority to summon the Paraiyars. It was the Urpodiya, and only the Urpodiya, who could formally authorize the Drummers to perform their duties, and it was traditionally the Paraiyar Muppan, chief of the drumming troupe and metonymic representative of the entire Drummer caste, to whom the Urpodiya would transmit his order. By the 1970s, in an effort to ensure that all directives were genuine, and not spurious ploys to legitimize claims to higher social rank, the Muppan had begun to insist that all orders be delivered in writing from the Urpodiya. Obviously, another purpose was to inject an element of bureaucratic dignity into the Muppan’s relationship of abject subordination. In a conversation with me in 1971 the Urpodiya characterized his traditional command as a polite request, a request that would always be cordially followed. However, he also casually mentioned that an older Tamil expression for Paraiyar drumming is *cēvaṇai*, a term I later discovered means, in addition to musical performance, “service to a master” (Rev. Miron Winslow 1862: 515).

Although the Muppan was the representative with whom the High Castes continued to interact, by the 1970s this office was no longer regarded by the

Drummers as the key leadership role within their caste, matriclan, or temple administration system. My Drummer informants insisted that if anyone was the leader of the entire Paraiyar caste in Akkaraipattu, it was Mr. Kalikutti, who was both the head of the temple board and *pusari* (ritual officiant) at the two temples owned by the Drummer caste. He was referred to as the *talaivar* (headman), or sometimes as the *periya talaivar* (big headman), although it appears it was a position that was filled on a fairly ad hoc basis.

Clearly, there was a time when the Muppan exercised much greater authority and leadership within the Paraiyar community. In fact, in my conversations with him, the Urpodiya still preferred to see it that way, speaking of the Muppan as the “leader of the Paraiyars,” although most Paraiyars themselves no longer acknowledged this chain of command. With obligatory drumming service seen as a humiliation to be avoided, the Paraiyars were steadily downgrading the importance of the post of Muppan and were elaborating their matrilineal *kudi* and temple administration system in a way that reflected their collective desire to emulate or “replicate” the higher-caste pattern (Moffatt 1979b; McGilvray 1983; Deliège 1999). The term *Muppan*, however, was by no means extinct in the 1970s; it still remained one of the informal nicknames by which all Paraiyar Drummers were known to the general public in Akkaraipattu.

### Matriclans and Leadership Structure

The term *kudi* was clearly recognized when I asked Paraiyars about the matrilineal organization within their caste, but they spoke as if it were a High Caste term. Following a pattern I had already encountered among the Washermen and the Barbers, the Drummers more commonly substituted their caste name where higher castes would have employed the term *kudi*. So, instead of speaking of Pattimedu *kudi*, they frequently just said “Pattimedu Paraiyan.”<sup>18</sup> In Akkaraipattu there were five recognized *kudis* among the Paraiyars that were ranked in the same order by all informants. This matriclan rank order is presented in table 26, even though it does not scale perfectly with the demographic size of the clans in my sample.

Four of the Paraiyar clan names are of the geographical or toponymic sort found also among the Barbers and Washermen, denoting specific villages or places of origin in the Batticaloa region. Conventionally, the rank order of these matriclans was said to correspond to the chronological order in which they came to settle in Akkaraipattu, with the earliest group ranked highest. Legendary details of the arrival of the later Paraiyar groups were not preserved,

TABLE 26. Matrilineal membership of married adults in twenty Paraiyar Drummer caste households in Kolavil North, Akkaraipattu, 1971

Kudi name	Men	Women	Total
Pattimedu	9	17	26
Karavaku	18	16	34
Kalutavalai	23	18	41
Sinhala	8	9	17
Navalur	0	0	0
Kudi unknown	2	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>120</b>

nor was there any thought given to the hypothetical problems of marriage and exogamy for the solitary matrilineal clan that allegedly arrived first, Pattimedu kudi. This matrilineal clan is named after the historic Pattimedu cultivation tract fed by the Sagamam Tank, located six miles south of town on the eastern shore of the Periya Kalappu lagoon (map 7). There has been no population at Pattimedu recently except for the LTTE guerrillas who infest the surrounding jungles, but it is a site strongly associated with oral traditions regarding the founding of Akkaraipattu. It is also said to be the most fertile tract of wet paddy land in the region. People explained that Pattimedu kudi Paraiyars were descendants of the first Drummers to be brought into this area by the Velalars as part of their formulaic “eighteen slave” caste retinue. The name of the second-ranked matrilineal clan, Karavaku kudi, refers to the subdistrict that includes present day Karaitivu, Saintamaruthu, Kalmunai, and Pandiruppu, located about fifteen to twenty miles north of Akkaraipattu.<sup>19</sup> The third clan, Kalutavalai kudi, refers to a Tamil village on the coastal road toward Batticaloa, approximately thirty miles north of Akkaraipattu. The last “geographical” clan, Navalur kudi (identified sometimes as “Vannan kudi”) derives its name from the village where the daughter of a Sinhala mantiravati allegedly was raised by a Tamil Washerman (Vannan) family before she was given in marriage to a Paraiyar man from Kolavil.<sup>20</sup> No one I spoke to knew the location of this village. My informants said this clan was of more recent origin, but it was also so small that it did not turn up in my household survey. The remaining group, Sinhala kudi, resembles the “Sinhala” clans previously noted among the High Castes, the Smiths, and the Washermen.

The cattle brand most commonly associated with the Paraiyars is a mark called *tampattam*, referring to the drum. The brand itself, however, depicts not the drum but the pair of bent sticks with which it is played (figure 24). I noted a

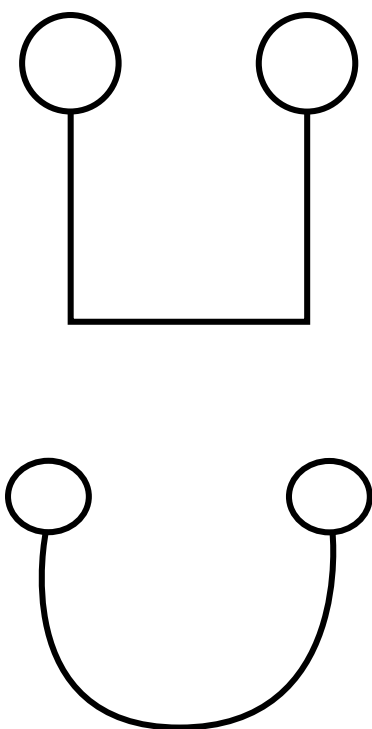


FIGURE 24. Cattle brand of the Paraiyar Drummer caste: drumsticks for the *tampattam* drum (two designs).

minor disagreement over the exact shape of the brand, perhaps reflecting that Drummers do not possess much livestock. In the light of twenty-first-century upward mobility involving the cessation of all musical service to the higher castes, the drumstick cattle brand is obviously a caste icon that will be swiftly eliminated.

### Marriage Choice and Sublineage Organization

Information I gathered in a sample of fifty-eight Drummer marriages in Kovalil North revealed that exogamy was strongly maintained in all but one matriline, Kalutavalai kudi, which was also the largest clan represented in my sample. Ten of twenty-six, or 38 percent, of Kalutavalai kudi marriages were with a member of the same matriline. When I raised the issue with my Drummer informants, they expressed little concern, acknowledging it as a laxness, but one that should be forgiven. I also considered the possibility that there might be several exogamous sublineages within Kalutavalai kudi, but I found no evidence of this. The strongest sign of a reciprocal marriage alliance was between the two highest-ranking matrilineages, Pattimedu kudi and Karavaku



kudi, and there was also some tendency for marriage avoidance between the second- and third-ranked clans. However, the larger size of Kalutavalai kudi and its high incidence of endogamous marriage make it difficult to see a clear pattern of Dravidian marriage alliances within the Drummer community as a whole.

In a smaller, more detailed sample of twenty-one Drummer couples (table 27), the percentage of marriages between immediate or classificatory cross-cousins was 66 percent, more than double the rate of cross-cousin marriages among the High Castes and second only to that of the Tattar Smiths (70 percent). Based on this small survey, the Drummers also have the highest rate of immediate first cross-cousin marriages of any caste or ethnic group in Akkaraipattu (52 percent), and their clear tendency is to favor marriage with the mother's brother's daughter. My inquiries regarding possible sublineages (*vakuttavār*, *kattarai*, or *tatti*) among the Drummers, however, drew practically no spark of recognition. A total of 85 percent of the Paraiyar respondents professed ignorance of any sublineage segmentation whatsoever.

#### Paraiyar Drummer Temples and Caste Mobility

By the 1970s, a movement toward social transformation and upward mobility was visibly underway among the Drummers of Kolavil, and new Hindu temples were a crucial public arena to demonstrate this change. Although the veneration of the goddess Mariyamman as a tutelary household deity is quite common in Akkaraipattu, her public temple cult is less widespread here than in other parts of the Batticaloa region. In fact, the only public festival in Akkaraipattu to Mariyamman is conducted by the Paraiyars of Kolavil North, and as a corollary of this fact, the goddess is sometimes said to have a special relationship with the Paraiyars. A visit to the Kolavil North Mariyamman shrine outside of the festival season would have revealed practically nothing, however, for only a temporary bamboo and cloth pandal was erected for the goddess each year during the celebration. As with the Bhadrakali cult of the Goldsmiths and Blacksmiths, her principal image was a small silver face (*tirumukam*) that was packed away for most of the year.<sup>21</sup> What I found most conspicuous, however, was the handsome new brick temple for the universally popular elephant god of good luck, Lord Pillaiyar, that the Paraiyars had recently built adjacent to the site of the modest Mariyamman pandal. All the architectural evidence would have pointed to Pillaiyar as the central deity in the Drummer pantheon, yet the emotional focus of their religious devotion has

TABLE 27. Relationships between spouses in a sample of twenty-one Paraiyar Drummer marriages in Kolavil North, Akkaraipattu, 1970–1971

Unrelated	4 (19%)
Distantly related but cannot specify links	1 (5%)
Related by specified kinship links	16 (76%)
Immediate cross-cousins	11 (52%)
FZS married MBD	8 (38%)
MBS married FZD	3 (14%)
Other specified cross-cousins	3 (14%)
Anomalous relationships	2 (10%)
W is classified as daughter ( <i>makaḷ</i> )	1 (5%)
W is classified as mother's younger sister ( <i>cinnammā</i> )	1 (5%)

been, and remains, Mariyamman. In fact, through the astute public-relations efforts of a local Paraiyar astrologer, the dates of the annual Kolavil North Mariyamman festival were being published in the annual editions of a Tamil almanac (*pañcaṅkam*) distributed islandwide, a listing that might lead a naïve reader to visualize a temple of substantial size, certainly not one that is dismantled and stored away in a wooden chest for most of the year.

With the gradually increasing prosperity of the Kolavil Paraiyars, and their loosening bonds of hereditary service to the Mukkuvar Urpodiyar and his High Caste adherents, the Mariyamman festival and other religious undertakings of this formerly untouchable community were taking on a new significance and a new organizational structure modeled directly on the higher castes. Where once the drumming-troupe leader, the Muppan, was the only leadership office of significance, a whole new scheme of internal caste-leadership roles had been instituted by the Paraiyars, although the aloof Mukkuvars and Velalars remained largely unaware of it. In big drumming processions the Kolavil Muppan was still the custodian of the collective emblem of his caste, the “royal drum” (*rācā mēḷam*, which in Akkaraipattu was usually a miniature drum carried on a special palanquin), and he continued to personify the duties of his caste in the eyes of the Mukkuvars and Velalars. But in reality, among the Paraiyars themselves, the Muppan no longer occupied such a prestigious or authoritative position.

Residents of Kolavil North were eager to point out to me that a more modern system of caste leadership had come into operation, a system that turned out to be an interesting reformulation of the standard High Caste pattern of representation by matriclans. In an effort to broaden the participation of younger men in caste affairs and forestall their dissatisfaction with gerontocracy (and perhaps also to give them responsibility for the more onerous tasks),

two separate categories of matrilineal representatives had been created: one to actively manage the affairs of the Paraiyar temples and religious festivals, and the other to exercise the more senior duties of clan elder and adjudicator of disputes. With the exception of Navalur kudi, which was too small to participate equally with the others, each Paraiyar matrilineal nominated two men to serve as temple trustees (Vannakkars) and one man to serve as the matrilineal headman (Talaivar). Fundraising was the responsibility of the Vannakkars, since the principal need for public donations would arise in sponsoring the annual Mariyamman festival and in funding capital improvements such as the new Pillaiyar temple building. I observed in the mid-1970s that the foundations were being laid for a permanent Mariyamman temple, as well.

The overall leadership of the Paraiyar community in Kolavil North was vested in a "chief headman" (*periya talaivar*), an office that appeared to have been instituted fairly recently. However, at the time of my 1970s fieldwork, this incumbent headman was simultaneously also a temple trustee, the chairman of the temple-trustee committee, and the chief priest (*pusari*) for all the local Mariyamman rituals. A different young man served as custodian of the Pillaiyar temple, but it appeared that the chief headman oversaw the rituals there as well. A strongly overlapping, multiplex leadership structure was evidently in operation, with the chief headman involved in everything *except* the hereditary profession associated with his caste, drumming.

Finally, this sketch of Kolavil North would not be complete without an assessment of Paraiyar attitudes toward the higher castes and their own upward mobility in the local social hierarchy. While the more downtrodden Paraiyars living elsewhere in the Batticaloa region were caught up in a system of economic dependence and ritual subordination that gave them little opportunity to maneuver for higher status, the relatively more autonomous and affluent Paraiyars of Kolavil North actively resisted upper-caste attitudes of privilege and superiority. Their first goal had been to acquire some of the household and civic amenities found in higher-caste neighborhoods, and by the 1970s they had been surprisingly successful in acquiring brick and tile houses, private wells and latrines, a school, several professional offices (curing, astrology), a new temple structure, and electricity. Except for the few men who continued to perform traditional drumming services, personal dress and adornment among the Paraiyars of Kolavil was no different from that of the higher castes, although older people freely recalled the earlier violence over Drummers' sumptuary rights to enjoy shoes, shirts, umbrellas, and bicycles.

I could only explore Paraiyar attitudes toward caste-endogamy rules

through hypothetical questioning, but the general response indicated that they would gladly “marry up” if the higher castes would have them. This conforms to Dumont’s theory that Hindu caste endogamy is ultimately caused by barriers to up-marriage enforced from above (Dumont 1970: 123), and contrasts with the self-professed abhorrence of any cross-caste marriage Michael Moffatt reported among South Indian Harijans in Chingleput, Tamilnadu (Moffatt 1979b: 108). Residents of Kolavil North sought to puncture higher-caste prejudice whenever it was convenient and tactically effective to do so, particularly when the anthropologist was present to record the precedent in his notebook. On several occasions my High Caste research assistants were invited to drink “pure” beverages such as green coconut water from “polluted” Paraiyar glass tumblers, entrapment I unwittingly aided by chugging thirstily myself. All in all, the appearance, manners, and behavior of the Paraiyars of Kolavil North were so similar to those of the High Castes that my college-educated Mukkuvar research assistant, who had grown up near Kokkadichcholai, was at first completely fooled. After a few pleasant hours at the home of a Paraiyar carpenter who was making some new furniture for me, my assistant was incredulous to learn that we had just visited the heart of an ostensibly “untouchable” hamlet.

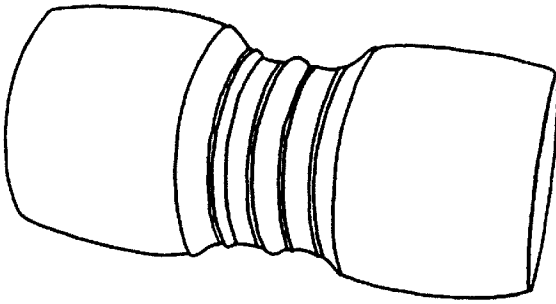
#### **Tivukkudi: A Paraiyar Hamlet near Kokkadichcholai**

The degree of social development that has occurred among the Drummers of Kolavil became much more obvious to me when I visited the poorer and more traditional Paraiyar hamlet of Tivukkudi located near Ambilanturai and not far from Kokkadichcholai, on the isolated western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon. There, in 1975, I encountered the strongest cultural vestiges of the “Mukkuvar chiefship” and the most rigid maintenance of ancient intercaste privileges and duties of any locality in the region. Paraiyars here provided ritual services solely for the dominant Mukkuvar caste and no others. There were nineteen predominantly Mukkuvar villages served by the Tivukkudi Paraiyars on a regular basis, and the territorial limits of other Drummer “service districts” were similarly well defined. A single unpaved lane shaded by dense coconut trees, flanked on both sides with palm-thatched mud huts, led from the cluster of eleven Paraiyar families at the west end of Tivukkudi to a separate Mukkuvar neighborhood at the east end. The absence of any substantial brick and tile-roofed houses in the Paraiyar side of the hamlet served to distinguish it from the Mukkuvar neighborhood, but there was no precise,

ritually charged boundary line, such as the one circumscribing Moffatt's well-documented Harijan colony in Tamilnadu (1979b).

The history of this Paraiyar hamlet apparently goes back about 150 years, to a time when four major Mukkuvar Podiyars donated a total of 7.3 hectares of paddy land on perpetual service-tenure to a group of Paraiyar families recruited from already established Paraiyar villages elsewhere in the Batticaloa region. This land is still in the possession of the Tivukkudi Paraiyars, who lease it to other cultivators and share the cash rent they receive. Although the Paraiyars engaged in agricultural wage labor for local Mukkuvar farmers whenever they could, their traditional drumming duties appeared to take precedence over other forms of employment.<sup>22</sup> I did not collect detailed information on family income, but it appeared in the mid-1970s that the Paraiyars got by on the share of rent collected from their caste service-tenure lands (with a double share going to the Muppan), on the wages they earned as intermittent agricultural laborers, on the cash payments they received for drumming at homes and temples, and on a variety of archaic payments in kind, including annual donations of paddy from Mukkuvar landowning households and small but frequent gifts of coins, cooked food, and cloth at high-caste ceremonies. The annual Paraiyar performance of *cevvāṭṭu*, a drumming and dance routine conducted at the gateway to high-caste domestic compounds to commemorate the Cittirai New Year (April–May), was another occasion for patronly donations to support local Paraiyar families.

In addition to the endowment of Paraiyar service-tenure paddy lands in Tivukkudi, the original Mukkuvar dignitaries who founded the settlement bestowed on the first Muppan, or leader of the local Paraiyars, a remarkably fine double-headed brass drum, popularly called the *rācā mēḷam* (royal drum), which still serves as the Muppan's insignia of office and as a sort of heraldic symbol of the Drummer caste as a whole (see figure 25). The instrument bears an inscription in Tamil indicating that it was presented in the year 1839 as the *potuvāna mēḷam* (general drum) of the Manmunai subdistrict. It is carried to all public ceremonies where the Paraiyars provide drumming service, as well as to Mukkuvar funeral houses. High Caste patrons are expected to provide new white cloth for the drummers' turbans, plus several yards of the same material with which to wrap the royal drum and a new reed mat on which to place it during the performance. Significantly, however, mats are never provided for the Paraiyar musicians themselves. Thus, the tradition of the royal drum mediates the contradiction between the two principles of symbolic degradation



**FIGURE 25.** The royal drum (*rācā mēlam*) of the Tivukkudi Paraiyars. Approximately 28 inches in length by 10 inches in diameter (after a 1971 photo).

and societal holism. That is, while the high-caste Mukkuvars stigmatize the Paraiyars at the level of face-to-face interaction, they abstractly honor—in the form of the emblematic “king drum”—the vision of an organic social order in which a royal division of labor and an ancient allocation of sacred duties gives meaning to even the lowliest of caste occupations. The Paraiyars themselves take pride in the honor accorded to their caste symbol, particularly because it reinforces their generalized caste identity as musicians and criers, rather than their specifically polluted role as funeral workers.

Although notable change had occurred within living memory, the Paraiyars of Tivukkudi in 1975 were still constrained by rigid deference rules and sumptuary restrictions in the presence of the higher castes. Paraiyar women were wearing sari blouses, but the men had not yet begun to wear shirts or long vettis when interacting with Mukkuvars. Local battles over the use of bicycles and umbrellas seemed yet to come, as few Drummers in Tivukkudi possessed the money to purchase such high-status items. Paraiyar children were just beginning to attend school in this area.

Virtually every adult male Paraiyar in Tivukkudi was an accomplished drummer or flute (shawm) player. The demand for drumming services at Mukkuvar temple festivals, exorcisms, domestic rituals, and funerals was sufficient to employ several different Tivukkudi drumming troupes simultaneously during certain seasons of the year. There are over eighteen distinctive drumming rhythms (*tālam*) in the Paraiyar repertoire, only two of which are inauspicious and are associated with funeral rituals. The remaining rhythms are auspicious and varied; they are used in pujas, exorcisms, processions, and for public entertainment. Whether at auspicious events or at elaborate funerals, the Tivukkudi drummers were frequently expected to perform customary dance routines in conjunction with their music. The *tampaṭṭam* and *kulal* players would remain

stationary while the *tavil* drummers executed a coordinated sequence of spins, leaps, and quicksteps similar in some ways to choreography observed in the Kandy Perahera (Seneviratne 1978). Although such drumming is seen as their distinctive duty and profession (*tolil*), it is specifically not one of the Paraiyars' own hereditary caste honors; therefore, in Tivukkudi as in Kolavil, the High Castes never permitted the Paraiyars to drum for their own funerals.

The internal organization of the caste in Tivukkudi was quite simple. The only designated authority was the Muppan, who served as a local headman for the Paraiyars of Tivukkudi and as their symbolic representative in Mukkuvar domestic and communal ceremonies. I was told the Muppan served for an indefinite term with the consent of his caste peers, but that his appointment was subject to ratification and veto by the Mukkuvar leadership, who often took a direct hand in the selection process. No clear principle of succession to the office of Muppan could be discerned, but I was told there had been instances of succession from father to son as well as from a man to his cross-cousin.

It was the Muppan who had to be notified when Mukkuvar households needed drumming services, and it was the Muppan who assigned particular musicians to each event. I occasionally saw the Muppan himself playing the shawm, but his basic function was symbolic. At the Kokkadichcholai temple he received the annual pot of rice gruel on behalf of the Paraiyar caste, and his visible presence at major temple and domestic ceremonies signified acceptance of the "share" (*pañku*) of civic rights and duties allocated to the Paraiyars under the prevailing Mukkuvar chiefship. It was also by summoning the Muppan that Mukkuvar leaders conveyed their instructions and reprimands to the Paraiyars as a group. In other words, the Muppan in Tivukkudi still exercised the kind of metonymic ritual duties and subordinated leadership role on behalf of his caste that by 1975 in Akkaraipattu was still retained only by the headmen of the Barbers and the Washermen.

The kinship pattern of the Tivukkudi Drummers, as revealed in my survey of marriage choice in all eleven households, suggests that the incidence of normative Dravidian bilateral cross-cousin marriage (i.e., matches with immediate cross-cousins or with more distantly related classificatory cross-cousins) was somewhat low for the Batticaloa region (two of eleven, or 18 percent), and the frequency of anomalous or "incorrect" marriages with other categories of kin was relatively high (four of eleven, or 36 percent). Paraiyars in Tivukkudi with whom I discussed the matter acknowledged this tendency and attributed it to the difficulty of arranging categorically proper matches within such a small marriage pool. About 27 percent of the marriages had been contracted

with spouses from other Paraiyar settlements, but the relatively greater poverty of the Tivukkudi families put them at a grave disadvantage in the dowry competition for unrelated sons-in-law. As for kudis or other matrilineal descent units, the Tivukkudi Paraiyars turned out to have none at all. In fact, a lack of familiarity with “matrilineal reasoning” was apparent in many things they said. This absence of any matrilineal kinship organization among the Tivukkudi Drummers made them stand out as different not only from the Drummers in Kolavil but from almost every other Hindu caste or Muslim community in the Batticaloa region.<sup>23</sup> On the whole, however, their attitude toward kinship was simple, down-to-earth, and pragmatic: the Tivukkudi Paraiyars were simply trying to meet their family needs as best they could.

The religious organization of the Tivukkudi Paraiyars was similarly minimal to nonexistent, although there was some indication of slightly greater activity in the past. A conspicuous contrast with the South Indian ethnography was immediately apparent in the lack of any well-defined village and hamlet boundary lines to delimit the strict territorial jurisdictions of local goddesses and guardian deities (cf. Moffatt 1979b; Beck 1972). There was also no clearly segmented hierarchy of personal, family, lineage, hamlet, and village gods as described by Moffatt (1979a: 250), although most Tivukkudi families followed the general Batticaloa pattern of propitiating a tutelary household goddess annually.

The larger Mukkuvar village cluster of Ambilanturai, of which Tivukkudi is a part, maintains a permanent Mariyamman temple that, in the manner of similar temples elsewhere, requires the drumming services of Tivukkudi Paraiyars from time to time, especially during the annual festival. However, the Paraiyars are not permitted to enter the immediate precincts of the temple compound. Instead, they are ensconced in a designated area just outside the temple premises, where their music can be audible to the goddess as well as to the upper-caste worshipers and devotees inside. Both the drumming rhythms and the wailing melody of the shawm provided by the Paraiyar musicians, as well as the devotional hymns sung to the accompaniment of hourglass-shaped *uṭukkai* drums by High Caste devotees, are essential to achieving the trance and possession states that are central to the cult of the goddess in all of her forms. However, there was also a temporary Mariyamman goddess pandal shrine in the Paraiyar neighborhood of Tivukkudi itself, where the Paraiyars celebrated their own rituals following the larger festival conducted by the Mukkuvars. Together with small icons to Pillaiyar and Vairavan, a fierce guardian form of Siva, these represent the core deities of a Paraiyar religious



tradition that, in the more liberal economic and political environment of Kovalil, has led to functional and fully independent Paraiyar caste temples.

**SUMMARY: REPLICATION OF THE MUKKUVAR MODEL**

Three of the specialist castes in Akkaraipattu—Tattar Smiths, Vannar Washermen, and Navitar Barbers—continue to depend quite heavily on their hereditary professions for their economic livelihood, while the remaining castes—Sandar Climbers and Paraiyar Drummers—have switched to different lines of work in order to escape the stigma of their traditional occupations. All of the specialist castes in Akkaraipattu have some degree of matrilineal clan (*kudi*) organization, and all have a Dravidian kinship terminology that they share with the High Castes throughout the Batticaloa region. Indeed, the percentages of marriages with immediate or classificatory cross-cousins among the specialist castes (Sandar, 31 percent; Washerman, 48 percent; Barber, 63 percent; Drummer, 66 percent; Smith, 70 percent) is in most cases far higher than it is among the High Castes (26 percent). The extent and complexity of specialist-caste matrilineal *kudi* organization, however, varies considerably, with the Tattar Smiths having the most elaborate matriclan structure and the strongest evidence of a ranked system of *kudi* honorifics and ritual privileges in the recent past. The Sandars have a full-fledged *kudi* system but no titled caste headman. The three *kuṭimai* castes—Washerman, Barber, and Drummer—have all had traditional headman until very recently, and their *kudis* mostly carry toponymic place-names indicating an earlier village of origin.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of social organization among the specialist castes is that—with the exception of the Barbers—each group now supports its own caste temple managed by a board of matrilineal clan trustees, replicating the temple paradigm of the High Castes supervised by the Mukkuvar Urpodyar. The extent to which this pattern may have emerged during the colonial and postcolonial period as a subaltern strategy to gain respectability and influence while Mukkuvar caste hegemony was eroding is an issue deserving of historical research. It was surprising to discover that the Drummers of Tivukkudi, dominated by Mukkuvar Podiyars on the western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon, had no matrilineal clans or temple organization in 1975.<sup>24</sup> However, the key fact is that the Mukkuvar model of matrilineal clans and temple administration serves as the sociopolitical paradigm for practically all of the lower-ranking share-holding castes in Akkaraipattu, and this seems to point again to the distinctive historical and cultural identity of the Batticaloa region more generally.

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**THE MOORS: MATRILINEAL MUSLIMS**

The Moors of the eastern region of Sri Lanka are among the relatively small number of Muslim societies in the world who trace descent in the female line and who establish postmarital residence in the home of the wife. Geographically, the closest comparable examples would be the Mappila Muslims of North Kerala (Gough 1961; Miller 1976) and the Minangkabau Muslims of western Sumatra (Blackwood 2000; Sanday 2002).<sup>1</sup> The formal matrilineal descent structure of Moorish society in Akkaraipattu, like that of the neighboring Tamils, is nowadays seen primarily in the politics of mosque administration by male kudi trustees (Maraikkars), who also oversee some historic Sufi tomb-shrines that still attract popular veneration. The rule of kudi exogamy reinforces the preference for cross-cousin marriage within a somewhat distinctive Moorish system of Dravidian kinship terms. Perhaps the most unexpected discovery is that some prestigious Moorish kudis appear to have a greater degree of matrilineal branching and internal segmentation than do the High Caste Tamil kudis in Akkaraipattu.

## A PROFILE OF THE MOORS OF AKKARAIPATTU

The Moors of Akkaraipattu live in the neighborhoods north of the Ampara and Pottuvil Roads, an area corresponding to roughly two-thirds of the entire town (map 9). Officially, this Muslim zone has been recognized as a separate unit of municipal government (the Akkaraipattu Pradeshya Sabha) since the ethnic clashes of the late 1980s, when the new Alaiyadivembu Pradeshya Sabha was created for the Tamils living on the south side of town. Within Grama Sevaka Divisions 1–6 the Moors constitute a virtually homogeneous residential community, with only a few small pockets of Tamil Smiths and Barbers still living just north of the Ampara Road. Even before the outbreak of the Eelam Wars, the policy of the local government had been to adjust the boundaries of the Tamil and Moorish divisions whenever necessary to maintain a strict separation in local administration between Tamil and Moorish wards.

There has been a strong demand for additional house sites at the margins of the Moorish neighborhoods, and this has resulted in the steady expansion of Muslim residential development into former seashore coconut plantations stretching northward toward Addalachchenai and into satellite villages such as Mallikaittivu and Pallikudiyiruppu on the western edge of town. A Moorish desire for contiguous building lots prompted the Tamil Kadaiyar Limeburner caste in the 1960s to sell their property within Division 4 to the Muslims who surrounded them on three sides and to move to a new seashore colony on the Tirukkivil Road. There are indications that the destruction of the Hindu Bhadrakali temple at the southern edge of Moorish Division 1 at the height of ethnic violence in 1990 had an underlying motive of Muslim residential land-hunger (McGilvray 1997).

Like the Tamil neighborhoods, the Moorish parts of town are organized into headman divisions demarcated by the major roads and unpaved lanes which divide the entire town into a more or less rectilinear grid. Unlike the Tamils, however, the residential patterns of the Moors are not significantly determined by caste or caste-like identities of any kind. As with the Tamil areas, the Moorish neighborhoods show greater evidence of wealth and age as one moves closer to the market area and the main road junction that marks the center of town. Homes in the oldest Moorish neighborhoods are generally constructed of brick, often have prestigious red-tile roofs, and have especially formidable fences of cadjan and barbed wire, or walls of brick and mortar, to separate the often densely packed structures. Because of the matrilineal house-

hold pattern, many of the older lots have been “built-out” to the limit with clustered homes for married daughters, forcing some Moorish parents to acquire suburban building lots to construct dowry-houses for their youngest daughters. It is conventionally said of the Muslims that they tolerate—perhaps even prefer—a more dense residential pattern than the Tamils, and my own impressions support that view. As one moves north, east, or west away from the oldest residential areas, homes become less assuming and somewhat more widely spaced until the outer edge of the settled area is reached and the houses have become, for the most part, humble thatched huts with just a few coconut trees mature enough to provide shade from the tropical sun.

Contrary to the widespread Sri Lankan stereotype of the Muslims as a business community, the Moors in Akkaraipattu and throughout most of the east-coast region support themselves primarily through paddy cultivation, just like the Tamils. The occupational data shown in table 28 show that 66 percent of the Muslims are cultivators (versus 54 percent of the High Caste Tamils), while the Muslim category of “laborer” (2 percent) is much smaller than among the Tamils (20 percent). This could well be an artifact of different recordkeeping practices by the divisional headmen who maintain the householder lists, in which case combining “cultivator” with “laborer” would yield a rough indication of the equivalent size of the agricultural sector in both communities (74 percent of Tamils, 68 percent of Moors). Smaller surveys I conducted in 130 High Caste Tamil households and 174 Moorish households revealed that landlessness was nearly the same in both communities (41 percent of Tamils, 38 percent of Moors).<sup>2</sup> Certain paddy-cultivation tracts are farmed chiefly by Moors, others chiefly by Tamils, while some exhibit mixed tenancy. The methods of cultivation are exactly the same for both groups, although a popular stereotype is that the Muslim cultivator is more energetic than the Tamil.

The Moors in my occupational sampling from the householder lists are twice as often engaged in business as the High Caste Tamils (Moors, 8 percent; Tamils, 4 percent), and table 28 also shows that Muslim merchants tend to live, naturally enough, in neighborhoods closer to the commercial center of Akkaraipattu, rather than in the parts of town nearest to paddy fields or to the seashore. Fishermen are also more likely to be Muslims than Tamils, particularly ocean fishermen as opposed to lagoon fishermen. Actual involvement in fishing is probably higher than indicated in the householder list for both communities, since fishing (*mīṇ piṭittal*, *vīccu vēlai*) is a stigmatized occupational category that tends to be disguised in public documents. However, it is

TABLE 28. Occupations of Moorish adult men, 1970

Occupation	Div. 2	Div. 3	Div. 5	Total	(%)
Cultivator <sup>a</sup>	261	128	362	751	(66%)
Merchant <sup>b</sup>	38	45	4	87	(8%)
Teacher	40	17	20	77	(7%)
Student	24	19	24	67	(6%)
Office Worker <sup>c</sup>	21	10	3	34	(3%)
Transportation <sup>d</sup>	9	21	4	34	(3%)
Laborer <sup>a</sup>	7	11	4	22	(2%)
Building Trades <sup>e</sup>	1	13	3	17	(1%)
Other <sup>f</sup>	11	33	8	52	(5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>1,141</b>	

<sup>a</sup>The usual entries for “farming” or “cultivation” are the high-status words *kamam* and *vivacāyam*, but these terms do not reveal whether an individual is farming his own land, sharecropping, or working for another landlord. The typical term for “wage labor” is *kūli vēlai*, the most common form of which is agricultural field labor, but there are also manual jobs in public works such as road repair and irrigation construction. The striking thing here is that the Moorish laborer category was so small (2 percent) compared to the Tamils (20 percent).

<sup>b</sup>Included in the “merchant” category (*vīyāpāram*) was one individual who was a sales representative for a Colombo tractor distributor.

<sup>c</sup>Combined under this heading were government civil servants and technical officers (18), clerks (6), Multipurpose Cooperative-Society managers (5), post-office employees (4), and one lawyer.

<sup>d</sup>Moors who worked in the transportation sector were primarily car and tractor drivers (26). There were also seven bullock-cart operators and one bus conductor.

<sup>e</sup>Moorish members of the building trades were almost entirely carpenters (16). There was only one Moorish mason.

<sup>f</sup>These Moorish professions were more diverse than among the Tamils. They included fishermen (12), tailors (11), curing specialists (6), barber-circumcisers (6), Islamic teachers (*maulavi*) (3), watchmen (3), tinsmiths (3), policemen (2), printers (2), Bawa faqirs (2), lebbe mosque officiant (1), baker (1), and beedi cigarette wrapper (1).

the Moors who are clearly predominant in commercial ocean fishing, and if detailed rechecking were possible it is certain that additional fishermen would emerge from a firsthand census of the Moorish neighborhoods. Muslim deep-sea fishermen seem to do fairly well in terms of earnings, except during the monsoon months, when their outrigger boats are beached. However, unlike Muslim fishermen in the major maritime villages near Kalmunai, the Muslim fishermen of Akkaraipattu remain overshadowed by the local prestige of paddy cultivation.

Older leaders of the Moorish community in the Batticaloa region asserted to me that Muslims had been receiving a proportionate share of prized governmental positions only since the late 1960s. They said that during most of the British period, Eastern Province Muslims shunned opportunities for education in English-language schools and therefore failed to acquire the specialized training necessary for civil-service positions, teaching posts, legal careers, and jobs in technical fields. Moorish historians have made the same argument for

the island as a whole (McGilvray 1998a: 446–49). According to this popular historical narrative, it is only since independence that Moors from the east coast have overcome the influence of conservative Muslim religious leaders and have begun to enter the modern professions in significant numbers.

I was surprised, then, when my own data on Moorish involvement in governmental, technical, clerical, and professional careers showed no marked under-representation in Akkaraipattu. The percentage of employees who could be classified as professional or paraprofessional was actually slightly greater for Moors (10 percent) than for High Caste Tamils (8 percent).<sup>3</sup> However, such small degrees of difference might dissolve if the entire Moorish population of Akkaraipattu were to be polled, since the educated sector of the Moorish community is more heavily concentrated in the wealthier central neighborhoods of the town. I did notice that the bulk of the Akkaraipattu post-office staff remained overwhelmingly Tamil, with only a few Muslim assistant postmasters, as if perhaps the job of house-to-house mail delivery was unappealing to the Moors.

One Moorish profession that has no exact parallel in the Tamil community is that of the traditional Quranic teacher (*maulavi*, *ālim*). Such men fall into two categories nowadays: certified instructors of Islamic religion who teach as regular faculty members at all government schools in the Muslim neighborhoods and independent religious experts who also conduct private classes for Muslim children in which memorization of prayers and passages from the Quran plays a central role. These private Quranic tutories (*ōtuppallikūtam*, recitation school) can be a source of income for both regular school *maulavis* and independent instructors alike, since they are conducted after school hours. Attendance is considered to be part of a proper education for all Moorish children, both boys and girls, and although the curriculum is mainly Arabic memorization, much of which is subsequently forgotten, most children between the ages of six and ten are enrolled by their parents. The seminary-trained *maulavis* who teach in the Muslim government schools nowadays present a more uniform and “modern” approach to Islam using textbooks written in Tamil and Arabic, and they have become a voice of orthodoxy undermining the authority of the older independent Quranic teachers. They are often involved in efforts to reform local Muslim religious practices and customs they perceive as out of step with an increased pan-Islamic consciousness and the need for Muslims to abandon practices that smack of Tamil Hindu cultural influence. In the 1970s, as these influences were starting to be

felt locally in Akkaraipattu, these men were sometimes wryly referred to as the “revolutionary *ālims*,” because they put pressure on local Moorish leaders to boycott various “un-Islamic” practices like flag-raising festivals at mosques and ecstatic exhibitions of faith by local Bawa Sufi mystics.

### THREE MOSQUES

There are three major Muslim mosque congregations in Akkaraipattu, each associated with a mosque located in one of the established Moorish neighborhoods of the town. The oldest and largest mosque (*palli* or *pallivācal*) is located in Division 4 near the main road to Ampara and is referred to as the Grand Mosque (*Periyappalli*). The physical structure of the Grand Mosque—associated with the founding legends of the Moorish community in Akkaraipattu—was probably no more than fifty or a hundred years old when I first saw it in 1970, but it was by far the most charming of the local mosques in terms of architecture: pale blue-washed brick arches enclosing parallel verandahs ran the length of the building while the prayer hall itself featured graceful turned wooden pillars supporting a sloping tile roof. Since then the building has been drastically remodeled on the outside in conformity with new ideas of Islamic architecture, featuring a lot of “modern” concrete styling as well as neo-Arabian domes and minarets. The inner architecture of the prayer hall, however, has been preserved, despite the fact that it has witnessed two murderous attacks by Tamil militants on Moorish men at prayer, the most recent in November 2005. The Town Mosque (widely known as Small Mosque, *Sinnappalli*), located in Division 2, the second-oldest Muslim house of worship in town, had already fallen victim to this reconstructive enthusiasm and was in the process of being architecturally Islamified while my early fieldwork was underway. The third mosque, located in Division 5 and referred to as New Mosque (*Putuppalli*), was spared the ordeal of restyling because it was still under construction. In broader perspective, the redesign of these mosques is part of a late-twentieth-century effort by the Muslim community to project a more distinctive cultural and religious identity vis à vis the Hindu Tamils, whose temple architecture, with its striking Dravidian-style *gopuram* towers, is one of the most visible cultural icons of their ethnic group.

All three are *jummā* mosques; that is, they are used for community-wide Friday prayers, with the services rotating to a different mosque each week. Each mosque has a staff of paid employees, including one or more *Lebbes* (*ilavvai*, the local term for *katib*) who lead daily prayers and act as religious officiants at





FIGURE 26. A large drum formerly announced the call to prayer at Akkaraipattu Town Mosque (*Sinnappalli*), shown here prior to major renovations (1971).

events such as weddings and funerals, a Muezzin (*mōtin*) who sings the call to prayer (now amplified by a loudspeaker), and a janitor-caretaker (*atikāri*) who performs general maintenance and watchman tasks. The distinctive practice of announcing prayers at the Town Mosque by means of a huge drum has been discontinued (figure 26).

Aside from these three older mosques, there are also many newer mosques that have been built to serve outlying neighborhoods or special Muslim constituencies. One is the Green Mosque (*Paccaipalli*, so called because of its original green-painted facade) in the northern part of Division 1. Another is a newly constructed shrine dedicated to Sufism's martyred tenth-century Persian saint al-Hallāj, built near the central market by the local followers of a new Sufi order and originally designed to receive the body of a Sufi sheikh from Androth Island in the Lakshadweep archipelago west of the Kerala coast. There are also a number of smaller neighborhood Muslim chapels called *taikkiyā* (or *takkiyā*, from Turkish, *tekke*) which are usually modest structures. These *taikkiyas* may sometimes house local saints' tombs, but many do not; one of their purposes is to provide a more convenient location for individual weekday prayer or for special Sufi group devotional practices (*zīkr*).

Because it is Akkaraipattu's oldest mosque, the Grand Mosque has historically exercised a preeminence in local Muslim affairs, and its members

are sometimes alleged to have displayed a snobbish attitude that has annoyed members of the Small Mosque and the New Mosque. There is, therefore, a submerged rivalry that comes to the surface now and then, as the newer mosque congregations seek to validate the equal sanctity and importance of their places of worship. Indeed, the decision to rotate the weekly *jummā* prayers between all three mosques was a concession to this sentiment.

### Tomb-shrines of Local Saints

One dimension of this competition has played out in the realm of Muslim sainthood, since the tombs of local Sufi saints are popularly revered as sites of miraculous blessings and vow fulfillments. The northern verandah of the Grand Mosque shelters the hundred-year-old tomb-shrine (*ziyāram*) of a legendary saint (*avuliyā*) from Kerala named Zainul Abdeen Maulana, a descendant of the Prophet (*Sayyid*), who tradition says was treacherously attacked and left to die while traveling alone in the jungles near Irakkamam, nine miles west of Akkaraipattu. An annual death-anniversary celebration known as a *kandoori* (*kantūri*) commemorates his martyrdom and miraculous powers (*karāmat*).<sup>4</sup> According to the story, his assailants were two Moorish men, vegetable traders from Oluvil, who befriended the holy man and then stabbed him with his very own sword and kris, hoping to find gold among his possessions. Long after the murderers had fled, the body of this saint was miraculously discovered in a state of perfect preservation by some Sinhala cultivators living nearby. A party of Moors from Akkaraipattu was then summoned to perform the Muslim funeral rites and to bury Zainul Abdeen Maulana in the jungle where he had fallen.

This was done, but disease and drought soon afflicted the region near the holy man's grave. After nine months, the Chief Maraikkar of the Akkaraipattu Grand Mosque dreamt that the saint had spoken to him, asking to be moved from his grave in the desolate jungle to a resting place nearer to his co-religionists. After this dream recurred three times, a party from the Grand Mosque was sent to exhume the body of the saint and bring it back to Akkaraipattu. When it was unearthed, the corpse was still in a state of perfect preservation; in fact, it was still oozing warm blood. When the body was placed on a funeral palanquin for transport back to Akkaraipattu, heavy rain began to fall in the area for the first time since the murder. Yet miraculously, it is said, not a drop of rain fell on the saint's palanquin or his pallbearers. When the cortege arrived in Akkaraipattu, a dispute broke out regarding where the holy

man's body should be enshrined. Supporters of the Small Mosque argued for the privilege of housing the saint there. However, since it had been a Grand Mosque man who had experienced the dreams and a Grand Mosque party who had recovered the saint's body, the remains were enshrined at the Grand Mosque.

Members of the Small Mosque eventually acquired their own Muslim saint, Abdusammat Maulana, a son of Sheikh Ismail ("Arabi Sahib"), an earlier saint who is said to have miraculously arrived on a plank (*palakai*) floating across the Arabian Sea from Yemen. Abdusammat Maulana and his older brother are historical figures to whom most of the elite Maulana (Seyyid) families in Akkaraipattu trace their ancestry. Local Muslim saints such as Abdusammat Maulana and Zainul Abdeen are popularly regarded as providing boons and blessings for the practical problems of everyday life, occasionally even attracting offerings from Tamil Hindus in neighborhoods adjacent to the Grand Mosque. A common Muslim vow is to promise to boil a pot of milk-rice (*pukkai* or *poinkal*) and serve it to the Lebbe or to an *ālim* after he has recited prayers for the saint. In some cases offerings such as a live rooster or some coconut-tree seedlings may be donated to the saint's shrine. Local saints are also found in the Moorish paddy-growing tracts located inland from Akkaraipattu, where they are believed to protect the surrounding crops from pillage and pestilence. Proof of their vigilance is reportedly seen in mysterious lights and perfumed vapors that emanate from their tombs at night. Evidence of their supernatural power is also found in tales about tractors and heavy earth-moving equipment that abruptly cease to operate, magically disabled by a secretly buried saint who wishes to be acknowledged and honored.<sup>5</sup> Since the outbreak of the Eelam conflict, the largely Muslim-owned paddy-growing tracts to the west of Akkaraipattu, many of which are contiguous with Sinhalese lands, have become dangerous zones of LTTE guerrilla infiltration and Sri Lankan Army counter-insurgency campaigns, posing an even more dangerous kind of threat from which local Muslim saints provide supernatural protection.

Although local Muslim saints perform many of the same protective and vow-fulfilling functions that local territorial Hindu deities do for the Tamils, the mosque legends I collected emphasize that the saints' personae and power are imported from far away, embodying an exogenous charisma of distance (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990). Even so, it is striking how both Hindu gods and Muslim saints tend to be "discovered" locally when devotees have a dream or stumble across a sign of sacred power in the environment. In 1993 I was wit-

ness to the revelation of a new saint at the Ambalattaru Mosque, located on the Moorish-Sinhalese agricultural frontier west of Akkaraipattu. A bulge on the concrete floor of the mosque had been rising mysteriously for months. When digging revealed no tree root growing underneath, it was taken as proof that a previously unknown son of the mosque's protective saint, Sheikh Sikkandar Voliyullah, had finally revealed his buried presence.<sup>6</sup>

### Politics of the Mosque

Each of the three *jummā* mosques in Akkaraipattu is administered by a board of male matrilineal trustees known as Maraikkars, and the same system of kudi management is also followed at several smaller (non-*jummā*) neighborhood mosques.<sup>7</sup> Following a pattern directly parallel to that of local Hindu temple trustees, the Maraikkars represent the various matrilineal clans that are found in the mosque congregation (figure 27). The individual trustees are chosen by consensus of the members of each kudi, with the position usually going to older men with reputations for piety and influence. Since members with the same Moorish matrilineal affiliation may be found at more than one mosque, each Maraikkar represents only a local congregational subset of the total membership of his kudi. Functionally, however, this is the apex of the east-coast matrilineal system: there is no higher-level leadership or formal organization of the kudi above the trustees of a given local Muslim mosque (or Hindu temple). With the larger Moorish matrilineal clans, there may be more than one Maraikkar representing a single kudi; conversely, several small matrilineal clans may be represented by the trustee of a larger clan. The boards of Maraikkars of each of the mosques is headed by a Chief Maraikkar selected from among the trustees serving on the board. I was told a Chief Maraikkar would normally serve until members of the board voted to replace him, or until he died.

In principle, the Maraikkar is a representative of only those members of his kudi who have a hereditary matrilineal affiliation with that specific mosque. It is the general pattern in Akkaraipattu that a man retains membership rights and obligations at the mosque of his mother, even though Moorish women never actually pray at the mosque themselves. Most Moorish men continue to attend their maternal mosque even if they reside some distance across town in their wives' neighborhoods. One question I asked in a survey of households within Division 3 was "Which is your mosque, and which is the mosque of your spouse?" There was never the slightest ambiguity in the answers, except in the case of persons who had moved into town from other parts of the dis-



FIGURE 27. The trustee board of matrilineal-kudi Maraikkars assembled on the steps of the Akkaraipattu Grand Mosque (*Periyapalli*) (1971).

trict. These people often gave the name of the local mosque with which their spouse was affiliated when attendance at their natal mosque was no longer practical. My survey revealed that 57 percent of the residents of Division 3 were members of the Grand Mosque and 38 percent belonged to the Small Mosque. The remaining 5 percent were either affiliated with the New Mosque or retained connections to their natal mosques in other towns such as Addalachenai, Palamunai, Oluvil, Kalmunaikudy, and Maruthamunai.

In the early 1970s I found that one matriclean at the Grand Mosque, Vadakkana kudi, had made an effort to create a more “modern” bureaucratic organization with a set of officers including, but not limited to, its two Maraikkars. This effort was spearheaded by a group of younger schoolteachers and government employees, as well as some bright unemployed youths, who felt that their matrilineal clan should somehow be put on a more rational Weberian bureaucratic footing. A special committee was set up to involve Vadakkana kudi members in public-service projects, although to my knowledge no significant results accrued. This kudi also compiled an official membership roster and collected donations from its members in a much more businesslike fashion than any other matriclean at the Grand Mosque. One aspiring candidate for the village council was an officer in this streamlined clan structure, but the new

bureaucratic set-up did not prevent his defeat in the local elections. During my fieldwork, this matriclan modernization plan never caught on with other kudis, and its long-term impact was minimal.

In the past, I was told, the effectiveness of the kudi Maraikkars was sometimes diminished by rivalries between the different mosques and the problem of equitable representation of both large and small kudis on the mosque boards. At the time of my early fieldwork, relative harmony prevailed after a joint agreement on Friday *jummā* prayer rotation was reached. Following a pattern of “big” and “little” Maraikkars, each kudi with more than one trustee would have a senior Maraikkar to head the delegation and junior Maraikkars to assist in collecting funds and communicating with the matriclan membership. This pattern may have had roots in an earlier system which accorded preeminence at the Grand Mosque to the big Maraikkars of only three clans: Vattukkattarai kudi, Paniyettu kudi, and Rasampillai kudi. Maraikkars of all the other kudis were relegated to an inferior status until sometime in the mid-twentieth century, when dissatisfaction at the Grand Mosque eventually led to a reorganization of the mosque board. Although no clan disputes were currently in the open while I lived in Akkaraipattu, there was ample evidence that kudi representation on the mosque boards had been a source of contention in past years. The Muslim Wakfs Board in Colombo has interceded in such disputes, and whenever agreement has been reached it has demanded signed statements from the trustees specifying the new composition of the mosque board, which are kept on file in Colombo in the event of further disagreements.

The local political authority of the Maraikkars had decayed considerably by the 1970s when I started my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu. It was said, however, that the mosque trustees had formerly exercised broad moral and jural authority within the Moorish community, adjudicating cases of misdemeanors, marital infidelity, and quarrels among members of the mosque congregation, and meting out fines and corporal punishment (caning) to those found guilty. In such cases the mosque Atikari would be directed to administer lashes with a coconut-frond whip to men who committed adultery or fornication. Fines collected in civil judgments were deposited into the mosque treasury. In the arena of political opinion the views of the Maraikkars were said once to have carried enormous weight, even leading to boycotts or other collective action by members of the congregation in the pursuit of religious or communal goals.

As opportunities for litigation in the civil-court system have increased,

and as the credibility and authority of the governmentally sanctioned Islamic magistrate (*Qāzi*) has grown, the locus of Moorish dispute settlement has steadily moved beyond the ambit of the neighborhood mosque.<sup>8</sup> An independent corps of religious experts (the government school *maulavis* and other seminary-trained *ālims*) who sometimes challenge the time-honored practices endorsed by the Maraikkars has also grown in recent decades. These elements, and a more cosmopolitan attitude on the part of the general Moorish population, has made the judgments of the Maraikkars irrelevant to many sorts of disputes. This state of affairs clearly emerged in a series of public skirmishes between the Maraikkars and the local Muslim electorate during the 1960s and 1970s. The general election of 1965 was said to have been the last occasion on which the Maraikkars of all the mosques in Akkaraipattu united to issue a public decree with regard to balloting: all Muslim voters were instructed to support the local candidate for member of parliament rather than the candidate from the rival village of Nintavur. The Maraikkars also ruled that anyone failing to support the local candidate would be deprived of ritual services by mosque functionaries at weddings, circumcisions, and funerals. However, despite extensive support for the local candidate, the Maraikkars backed down within several days in the face of public pressure against such an extreme position.

Having been forced to retract their political edict in 1965, the Maraikkars foreswore direct intervention in the parliamentary election of 1970. This election generated even greater village rivalry between supporters of the same two candidates, and political violence became quite serious. Once again the Maraikkars stood unanimously behind the local candidate, but they took no active role in the campaign. Persons who ridiculed the ineffectual efforts of the Maraikkars in 1965 were now heard to say that the beatings of the minority candidate's supporters and the burning of their houses could have been quelled if the Maraikkars had only spoken out. Yet it is doubtful that pronouncements from the Maraikkars would have had much effect on the mob violence, so the Maraikkars chose not to risk their credibility again.

At the same time, the Maraikkars were also losing their influence in village-council politics. When, following the village-council election of September 1970, a vigorous contest arose regarding which of the newly elected members should serve as chairman, the Maraikkars of all three mosques called a public meeting at the Grand Mosque to hear the arguments of each of the two main contenders (both of them Moors). The purpose of the meeting was to decide

which man should receive the unanimous backing of all Muslims in Akkarai-pattu, so that the Moorish bloc would not be split by dissension and not be politically vulnerable to the minority Tamil members on the village council. All the Moorish members of the newly elected council attended the unity meeting except for one of the contenders and his strongest supporter on the council, who chose to boycott the event. The widely advertised debate was a flop, and the Maraikkars adjourned the meeting vowing, once again, to abjure meddling in local politics.

Having lost a good deal of their earlier influence and authority in local affairs, the Maraikkars now usually settle for the role of respected elders whose advice may be sought (or ignored) depending on the particular circumstances. Many of the younger Moors I knew felt that the Maraikkar system was “old-fashioned” and expressed indifference toward the opinions of the mosque trustees. With the erosion of their broader authority in community affairs, the matrilineal kudi Maraikkars are left simply with the job of running the mosques, a task which they still perform quite successfully.<sup>9</sup>

Funds for mosque operating expenses and kandoori festivals are raised by the Maraikkars who collect donations from their matrilineal-clan constituents in an informal but effective way. An example of the donations collected by individual Maraikkars in support of the Grand Mosque and its activities was supplied to me by a man of Paniyettu kudi. Each male member of the kudi within the mosque congregation was expected to donate each year a payment either in cash or grain toward the salaries of the mosque officials and the maintenance of the mosque property. In 1971 this amount was five rupees, or two maraikkals of paddy per annum. On the occasion of special charitable feasts the donation might be as high as twenty-five rupees, or seven maraikkals of paddy per person. These kandoori celebrations generally featured numerous processions to the mosque as each matriclan or internal segment of a clan under the leadership of its Maraikkars—and accompanied in former times by Tamil Paraiyar Drummers—carried its contribution of food to the mosque compound, where it was dispensed from temporary pandals erected by each of the matriclans.

#### MOORISH MATRICLANS AND MARRIAGE

Although there is nothing radically different about the logic of Moorish kinship to distinguish it from the kinship structure of the Tamils, the specific kin-terms used by the east coast Muslims are in some cases distinctive (see



appendix 2) and not identical with those of the west-coast or Colombo Muslims (Raheem 1975). In fact, a number of the kinship terms of the Sri Lankan Moors are shared with the coastal Mappilas of Kerala and the Marakkayars of Tamilnadu, but not with the inland Muslims (Labbais) of Tamilnadu, suggesting an historic maritime connection between these three communities (McGilvray 1998a).<sup>10</sup> The most distinctive difference between Tamil and Moorish kinship behavior in Akkaraipattu is that the Moors observe a rule of mother-in-law respect-avoidance that is absent among the Tamils. Consequently, the matrilineal son-in-law in a Moorish household will typically not interact directly with his wife's mother unless required to do so. When son-in-law and mother-in-law unexpectedly find themselves in each other's presence, I have noticed, the mother-in-law often quickly retreats into the rear (female) area of the house.

The earliest published reference to the Moorish matrilineal clans in the Batticaloa district is in Mudaliyar S. O. Canagaratnam's *Monograph of the Batticaloa District*, where he lists the names of seven "Muhammadan Kudies," or as he also calls them, "tribes" (1921: 36).<sup>11</sup> From the outset of my own fieldwork, however, not a single Muslim with whom I spoke in Akkaraipattu, Kalmunai, Nintavur, Sammanturai, or any other Moorish settlement would agree that the Moorish matrilineal clans were ideally, or in practice, limited to seven. If you must insist on an ideal number, I was repeatedly told, it would have to be eighteen.<sup>12</sup> But like the Tamils, who often said that there should be exactly seven Tamil kudis but were seldom able to limit their lists to that number, the Moors I spoke with came up with lists that invariably exceeded or fell short of eighteen matrilineal clans.

As with the Tamils, I found it useful to conduct an empirical survey of Moorish households in Akkaraipattu in order to determine the actual distribution of matrilineal affiliations within the Muslim community. For this purpose I surveyed 169 Moorish households in Division 3, documenting the kudi of the husband, of the wife, and of the parents of each. In addition, I recorded the matrilineal mosque affiliations of the husband and of the wife. The results of this inquiry turned up the names of almost every Moorish kudi ever mentioned by my Akkaraipattu informants, plus several new ones, for a total of twenty-seven matrilineal clans (table 29). Only two of these clan names bore the slightest resemblance to the seven "Muhammadan Kudies" listed in Canagaratnam's 1921 monograph. It is clear from information gathered in many Moorish communities along the coast south of Batticaloa that there is wider variation in Moorish clan names from locality to locality than there is for the Tamil kudis.

TABLE 29. Matrilineal membership in 169 Moorish households in Division 3, Akkaraipattu, 1971

Kudi name	Men	Women	Total
Rasampillai <sup>a</sup>	115	130	245
Vellarasan <sup>b</sup>	51	84	134
Mamanappillai <sup>c</sup>	40	56	96
Lebbe <sup>d</sup>	48	43	91
Vadakkana <sup>e</sup>	30	23	53
Vattukkattarai <sup>f</sup>	28	21	49
Paniyettu <sup>g</sup>	18	30	48
Odavi <sup>h</sup>	24	21	45
Mutta Neyinta <sup>i</sup>	8	34	42
Mappillai Maraikkan <sup>j</sup>	20	21	41
Sultan <sup>k</sup>	20	5	25
Ranasinka Mutaliyar <sup>l</sup>	13	11	24
Padaiyanta <sup>m</sup>	10	4	14
All others <sup>n</sup>	25	22	47
<b>Total</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>955</b>

<sup>a</sup>The name *Rācāmpillai* means “king’s child”—that is, a prince—but no legend was ever recounted to explain the royal title.

<sup>b</sup>The name *Vellaracaṅ* might mean “white king,” or “king of the flood,” and one species of Bo tree is the *vellaracu maram* (*Tamil Lexicon* 6:3,791–92). I was offered no local explanation of this kudi title.

<sup>c</sup>*Māmaṅār* is the honorific form of the Tamil kin-term for mother’s brother or father-in-law. The matrilineal name could be translated as “mother’s brother’s child,” in other words a cross-cousin. Possibly, however, *Māmaṅār* was the nickname of a specific male ancestor.

<sup>d</sup>The Lebbe (*ilavvai*, or *katib*) is the officiant who leads the mosque congregation in prayers.

<sup>e</sup>*Vaṭakkaṅā(r)* means “northerner.”

<sup>f</sup>*Vaṭṭukkattarai* means “northern sublineage.”

<sup>g</sup>The meaning of the name *Paniyettu* is obscure. Some Moors assumed the term was an adaptation of the prestigious Tamil (*Mukkuvar*) matrilineal name *Paṅikkanā*, acquired through marriage and conversion sometime in the past. Canagaratnam lists the name as *Paṅṅaiyavītu* (1921, 36), which connotes the house of a large farming estate (*Tamil Lexicon* 4:2453–54).

<sup>h</sup>*Ōṭāvi* means “boatwright” in the dictionary sense of the term, but it is actually the common Tamil term for “carpenter” throughout eastern Sri Lanka.

<sup>i</sup>The meaning is unclear. It might be *mūta nērnta*, referring to a person who was “first to have met or encountered [something]” or possibly “first to have made a vow or pledge, *nērttikkaṭaṅ*.”

<sup>j</sup>This appears to be a man’s nickname, “bridegroom Maraikkan,” possibly someone who was once a mosque trustee (Maraikkar).

<sup>k</sup>The reference is to a Muslim ruler (*cūlān*, sultan), although there is no historical evidence of any Islamic king having governed in the eastern region of Sri Lanka.

<sup>l</sup>Etymologically, *Iranaciṅka* is a noble title that means “lion of war.” It appears to identify a Sinhala aristocrat named Rana-singhe Mudaliyar.

<sup>m</sup>*Paṭaiyāṅṅa* is identical with a well-known High Caste Tamil matrilineal name, signifying “ruler of the army.”

<sup>n</sup>There were fourteen other Moorish matrilineals identified in my survey, all of which had fewer than ten members. One was a well-known Tamil kudi name (*Kāliṅkā*), and one was a kudi that is historically documented among both Tamils and Moors (*Poṅṅāci*). Five others were eventually identified as strong clans in Muslim towns north of Akkaraipattu: *Utumāṅpillai* (child of Uthman) in Addalachchenai; *Cēr Matu* (fat woman) in Maruthamunai; *Cēṅā* (chena, shifting cultivation) in Addalachchenai; *Kocukoṭa* (apparently from the town of Kosgoda on the Galle Road south of Beruwala in the Western Province), a strong clan in Nintavur; and *Yāvuka* (Japanese) in Kālmunai. There was one additional matrilineal name that sounded possibly like a Sinhala aristocratic title: *Verriṅciṅka Ārācci*. The remaining names were unfamiliar: *Māntara*, *Ammanācci*, *Tavūṭṭavattara*, *Taccanā* (carpenter?), *Maraikalāṅ*, and *Velliṅkuṭṭa*.

*Note:* There were fifty-nine individuals whose matrilineal affiliations were not known, most of whom (93 percent) were fathers of one of the spouses in the household. This reflects the emphasis on matrilineal descent as well as the matrilineal residence pattern that sometimes draws bridegrooms from outside the immediate area.

It came as no surprise that Rasampillai was the largest matrilineal unit in my survey of Moorish households, since I already knew it to be the most widely recognized Moorish kudi in the Akkaraipattu area. However, I had not anticipated that the other large kudis would turn out to be Vellarasan, Mamanappillai, and Lebbe kudis, since these were matrilineal units that few people had mentioned prior to my survey. Part of this unpredictability has to do with the greater variety of Moorish matrilineal descent units and their uneven distribution from neighborhood to neighborhood, from mosque to mosque, and from town to town. However, it also points to a more general ethnographic finding that while the older generation preserves memories of earlier Moorish matrilineal prestige rankings and special kudi privileges, particularly in the domain of mosque politics and the celebration of saints' festivals, these old clan rivalries and inequalities are no longer a part of the ordinary daily experience of the younger generation of Moors in Akkaraipattu.

Statements regarding a possible status or prestige hierarchy among the Moorish matrilineal units in Akkaraipattu were never easy to elicit and seldom seemed very consistent, yet now and then traces of status consciousness could be noted in the offhand remarks I heard. The first admission of any rank differences usually came by way of a comment that the numerically largest kudis tended occasionally to be considered "more important" than the others. The matrilineal unit the individual usually had in mind was Rasampillai kudi, the largest Muslim clan in the entire town. Later on, more evidence of earlier kudi hierarchy came to light in the investigation of the history and administration of the local mosques, especially the Grand Mosque, which is the oldest Muslim place of worship. Some informants referred to traditions, now moot, according to which a few leading matrilineal units held the right to appoint the most senior (biggest, *āka periya*) trustees of the Grand Mosque. Although total consensus was rare, I learned that certain kudis such as Paniyettu and Rasampillai had once been considered to have greater authority in the administration of the Grand Mosque and, implicitly, greater influence in general community affairs. In fact, some people alleged that despite recent talk of allowing broader representation on the board of Maraikkars, this pattern of unequal matrilineal influence still continued.

I was never able to gather enough detailed information during my fieldwork to firmly establish whether decision making on the mosque boards was still significantly influenced by matrilineal inequalities, but within the clear memory of older Moors, the outward signs of kudi hierarchy within each mosque con-

gregation had been publicly displayed at the saints' kandoori festivals annually held at the Grand Mosque and the Small Mosque. Regrettably, I was unable to witness firsthand any kandooris during my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu, and therefore I cannot verify to what extent the older clan rivalries were still being enacted in that ritual setting. I did, however, record what older Moors said about these traditions. The typical practice had been to reserve the area of the mosque courtyard immediately in front of the main doorway as the exclusive location for the temporary cloth and bamboo pandals set up to distribute food by the highest-ranking matriclans. At the Grand Mosque, the special place of honor was reserved for Rasampillai, Vattukkattarai, and Paniyettu kudi, while at the Small Mosque this honored location was set aside for these same clans plus Vellarasan kudi and possibly others. I was told that a degree of competition existed to produce the most well-constructed and handsome-looking kandoori pandals, since they reflected on the status of the matriclans that built them.

I also stumbled across some traces of clan rivalry in fragments of derisive songs once directed by members of one matriclan toward members of another, taunting them about some ritual disability or historical embarrassment. For example, Rasampillai kudi once serenaded the (Muslim) Kalinga clan thus: "The Paraiyars say there is no *cēvaṇai* [compulsory ritual drumming service] provided for this kudi." This reinforced the testimony of some elderly Moors who recalled that, like some of the middle-ranking Tamil castes, not all of the Moorish matriclans had been entitled to the domestic services of the Tamil *kuṭimai* castes: Barbers, Washermen, and Drummers. In another song fragment, members of the Vattukkattarai clan, bringing up a legend of intermarriage with Tamil Kurukkal women in order to inflict some rhetorical embarrassment on Rasampillai kudi, reminded the latter: "Your [ancestor the] Kurukkal reigned at the temple near the lone palmyra palm at Tampaddai Muntal." The social context in which lines like this were once sung is not clear, but their teasing and derisive tone is unmistakable.

All these bits of information on Moorish matriclan ranking made it clear that claims to superior kudi status had once been made in the past, but I still had no clear indication whether a Moorish matriclan prestige hierarchy still existed in the present. Classic studies of Nayar and Rajput marriage in India have shown that a discrete hierarchy of clans and lineages was the basis of hypergamous patterns in Kerala and Himachal Pradesh (Gough 1961; Parry 1979). I thought at the time that if a discrete ranking of the Moorish clans in

Akkaraipattu could be established, it would permit a statistical test of Yalman's (1967) east-coast hypergamy hypothesis, so I probed for evidence of a Moorish matrilineal hierarchy using the very same kind of card-ranking procedure I had used to determine opinion rankings of the Hindu castes.

Immediately, the procedure became fraught with ambiguities over what my Moorish informants meant by high matrilineal "rank." The Tamil word *periyā* (big), for example, might refer to a clan's demographic strength or to its historic leadership and high status. Many Moors were unable to decide which kudi to rank higher or lower, so they simply declined the comparison. Only Rasampillai kudi emerged with a discrete opinion rank as number one, which is not surprising since it is by far the largest Moorish matrilineal clan in Akkaraipattu. Although I tried to press the statistical analysis further, it revealed no more than what I already knew. Some matrilineal clans were larger and more widely known than others, but in contemporary Akkaraipattu there is neither a broad consensus about a discrete ranking of Moorish matrilineal clans nor an unequivocally top-ranked set of kudi that exercise preeminence in Moorish community affairs. It was also obvious there was nothing remotely like Nayar or Rajput hypergamy occurring among the Moors of Akkaraipattu.

I easily could have inferred as much from what Moorish friends told me about typical marriage decisions. While they were candid and detailed in discussing the importance of family occupation, wealth, education, attractiveness, personal characteristics, reputation of the extended kinship group, preference for cross-cousins, and kudi exogamy in Muslim marriage negotiations, they *never once* mentioned the social status or public reputation of the bride's or groom's kudi. As with the Tamils, the Moors found it implausible that a marriage would ever be preferentially hypergamous (with women marrying "up" the social scale, and men marrying "down"), precisely because their typical goal in marriage is to achieve isogamy, marriage between equals.

In light of the formal marriage alliance that High Caste Tamil informants had already identified between the two top-ranked Tamil matrilineal clans in Akkaraipattu, I then enquired about similar formally recognized alliance (*koṇṭāṇ koṭuttāṇ, cōṭi cōṭi*) relationships between the largest Moorish matrilineal clans. There is no legendary charter or matrilineal origin story to explain the founding of the Muslim community, and few informants could think of any historic interclan marriage alliances. There was a modest link in my survey data between the largest clan, Rasampillai kudi, and Lebbai kudi, but a majority of Moorish respondents could think of no obviously "paired-up" matrilineal clans at all. This by no

means rules out the possibility of strong “historic” marriage alliances between matrilineal clans in other Moorish settlements on the east coast, such as Nintavur or Sammanturai or Kattankudy, but exploration of that possibility will have to await further fieldwork.

### Marriage Choice and Sublineage Organization

The Moors of Akkaraipattu agreed entirely with the High Caste Tamil view that marriage with a person of the same matrilineal kudi would be wrong, incestuous, and highly embarrassing for the families involved. Violations of the rule of kudi exogamy were in fact extremely rare among the Moors.<sup>13</sup> The stated preference for marriage between immediate bilateral cross-cousins is identical among the Moors and the Tamils, and the overall incidence of such first-cousin marriages in my Moorish sample (17.2 percent) is virtually the same as in my High Caste Tamil sample (18.8 percent). However, there is a slightly stronger behavioral tendency toward matrilineal cross-cousin marriage in the Moorish sample (12.6 percent matrilineal vs. only 4.6 percent patrilineal) than in the Tamil sample (11 percent vs 7.8 percent). I double-checked but could elicit no explicit preference for matrilineal marriage among the Moors. In some instances, of course, the question of the “direction” of cross-cousin marriage can be totally meaningless, as when Ego’s MB is married to Ego’s FZ, a perfectly acceptable “exchange marriage” (*mārrukkaliyāṇam*) for both Moors and Tamils. The Moors also had a significantly higher percentage of marriages with totally unrelated partners (64.4 percent) than the High Caste Tamils (41.5 percent). However, if these are combined with “distantly related” marriages, the difference evaporates. Lastly, the Moors reported a significantly higher percentage of terminologically “incorrect” marriages from the standpoint of Dravidian kinship classification (12.1 percent for the Moors vs. 2.9 percent for the High Caste Tamils). I was unable to obtain any explanation for this difference, but it does fit with my intuitive feeling that the Moors were a bit less concerned about marriages that violated formal kinship categories than were the High Caste Tamils (table 30).

In Akkaraipattu I found that very few of the largest Moorish matrilineal clans had any sublineage segmentation at all, and the exact number and precise names of the branches of these matrilineal clans seemed confused in the minds of many informants. My first clue was to note the existence of up to four Maraikkars (trustees) representing a single kudi at the Grand Mosque, and seven Maraikkars from a single kudi at the Small Mosque. I was told that

TABLE 30. Relationships between spouses in 174 Moorish marriages in Division 3, Akkaraipattu, 1971

Unrelated	112 (64.2%)
Distantly related but cannot specify links	6 (3.4%)
Related by specified kinship links	56 (32.2%)
Immediate cross-cousins	30 (17.2%)
FZS married MBD	22 (12.6%)
MBS married FZD	8 (4.6%)
Other specified cross-cousins	5 (2.9%)
Anomalous relationships	21 (12.1%)
w is classified as D [12] <sup>a</sup>	
w is classified as ZD or sw [6] <sup>b</sup>	
w is classified as WMZ [2] <sup>c</sup>	
w is classified as yz [1]	

<sup>a</sup>Over half of the reported anomalies consisted of a man marrying his classificatory “daughter” (*maka!*). Most of these turned out to be the daughters of a man’s male or female cross-cousins, that is, daughters of his classificatory (i.e., potential) “wife” or “wife’s brother.”

<sup>b</sup>Actual sister’s daughter marriage, common in many parts of patrilineal South India, is unthinkable in eastern Sri Lanka because it would violate the matrilineal-clan-exogamy rule. These cases are probably marriages with women who can be terminologically assimilated to the category of ZD or “daughter-in-law” (*marumaka!*), such as a classificatory sister of the son’s wife.

<sup>c</sup>One woman in this category was a member of the only openly polygynous Muslim household in my survey sample. In this marriage the first wife was unrelated to the husband, but the second wife was the first wife’s own younger maternal aunt (wMYZ). This logically placed her in the same terminological relationship to the husband as his mother-in-law (i.e., *māmi*). This was especially remarkable because the Moors have a rule of mother-in-law avoidance.

the presence of multiple trustees representing a single kudi on the mosque board usually pointed to separate submatrilineages from which each of the Maraikkars had been chosen. To this extent, the Moors seem to have a stronger concept of sublineage segmentation than the Tamils, but exactly the same terminological problems I had encountered with the Tamils arose also with the Moors. When I asked what the best word for a submatrilineage was, I was variously told *vakuttavāy* (Moorish variation of *vakuttavār*), or *kattarai*, or *tatti*.<sup>14</sup> These terms, which are virtually identical to the words used by the Tamils, had the same fuzzy implications for tracing matrilineal descent as I found among the Tamils. Most of the Moorish sublineages, like those of the Tamils, are named after prominent men, either the husbands or the fathers of the women from whom matrilineal descent is traced. Examples would include “Muhamed Podiyar’s tatti,” “Pakkeer Sahib Mullaikkaran’s tatti,” and “Ahmed Lebbai Kostappar’s tatti.”<sup>15</sup> A few of the Moorish sublineages have nonpersonalized titles such as “Uttam kattarai” (*uttamam*, perfection) or “Makudam kattarai” (*makuṭam*, crown). A third type of name identifies the ancestral woman from whom the sublineage is traced, usually by reference to a “granny” nick-



**FIGURE 28.** Muslim marriage negotiations in progress, with the groom's party on the left (1975).

name that includes the colloquial kin-term *pettā* (granny, or older female relative): for example, *Kocci Petta* (Cochin granny), or *Ūsi Petta* (needle granny). These Moorish granny names tended to proliferate in my notebook. In one puzzling instance, I finally discovered that informants were referring to the same Moorish submatrilineage by two different granny names, one of which referenced the woman's father and the other her husband. Although it would have illustrated stronger matrilineal reasoning, I never came across any granny sublineage names that referenced a woman's brother.

#### **A Closer Look: Two Matrilineages at the Grand Mosque**

Because there appeared to be a good deal more matrilineal segmentation within certain Muslim *kudis* than in others, I decided to pursue the issue of sublineage organization in a few of the leading clans at the Grand Mosque. These rather laborious inquiries proved that branching sublineages indeed existed in several clans, but there was a lot of ambiguity in the degree of kinship segmentation perceived by different informants, including the *kudi Maraikkars* themselves.

The first of the two clans I studied in detail, *Vattukkattarai kudi*, is one of



the traditionally preeminent Moorish matriclans at the Grand Mosque. This kudi, numerically strong in the Grand Mosque congregation, is represented on the mosque board by four Maraikkars. Some members asserted that succession to the office of Lebbe at the Grand Mosque was hereditarily transmitted within Vattukkattarai kudi, and one informant was able to recite a succession of seven Lebbes all drawn from this particular matriclan prior to the present chief Lebbe, who is also a member. Only one Lebbe in recent memory had been drawn from a different kudi, an exception carefully noted by several people.

There is a legend regarding the founding of Vattukkattarai kudi, or at least there are fragments of a story. I was told that this clan was old, possibly “the oldest,” Muslim kudi in Akkaraipattu. The original ancestors were two sisters, Sangamuttu and Sakalat Bibi, who arrived in what is now Akkaraipattu either from “Vadugedara” (*vaṭuketara*) in the Kandyan Sinhalese area or from “Vilchiturai” (*vilcciturai*) a location no one could trace.<sup>16</sup> According to a more elaborate version of the myth recounted by one informant, the two sisters thwarted the dishonorable intentions of the Kandyan king, who was scheming to abduct them. Having received a tip-off from her Tamil Washerman, the girls’ Moorish grandmother gathered up all seven of her nubile granddaughters and fled eastward, arranging marriages for each of them in the settlements through which she passed. The first girl was married in Nawalapitiya, the second in an unknown town, the third in Kotabowe, the fourth and fifth in Wellassa, and the remaining pair of girls in Akkaraipattu. This version of the story became increasingly elaborate in the telling, and I am not sure if it is broadly accepted as part of the local Muslim folklore repertoire. It definitely stood out, however, in the absence of legends and stories about the other Moorish matriclans in Akkaraipattu.

With its two legendary female founders, and four Maraikkars representing it on the board of trustees of the Grand Mosque, Vattukkattarai kudi seemed a promising place to look for a formal pattern of matrilineage segmentation. After extensive inquiries, however, I determined that in fact *none* of its branching sublineages actually traced their origins back to Sangamuttu or Sakalat Bibi. Instead, a picture gradually emerged of three matrilineal segments within the clan, one of which enjoyed higher status because it was the sublineage of the ranking, or senior-most, kudi Maraikkar on the mosque board. This sublineage is called Periya Lebbe vakuttavay, and it is regarded as a line of impeccable matrilineal ancestry including the earliest chief prayer leaders (Periya

Lebbe) from the era when the Grand Mosque was founded. In second place came Sinna Lebbe (small Lebbe) vakuttavay, which is further subdivided into at least four subsublineages, each with a granny nickname.<sup>17</sup> Despite a lack of genealogical evidence, most informants made a conventional assumption that all these “grannies” would have been sisters. There were two Maraikkars from Sinna Lebbe vakuttavay, but I could never sort out which specific sub-sublineages they each represented. I think it is possible, in fact, that they have no assigned sub-sublineage representation.

The smallest branch of the clan—and according to some nonmembers, the least prestigious—was described to me discretely as bearing a stigma of uncertain Sinhala parentage. One story I was told recalled a Muslim man from Akkaraipattu who traveled to the mountainous Kandyan region to the west to sell chickens, carrying them in baskets suspended from a shoulder pole. After selling his last fowl, he discovered that a baby of unknown origin had been placed in his empty chicken basket. Since no one had claimed the child, he brought her back to Akkaraipattu and raised her as a member of his wife’s clan. Her matrilineal sublineage today is referred to as Malaiyan kattarai (*malai*, mountain), and it is represented by its own kudi Maraikkar. However it later emerged that Maraikkars representing Malaiyan kattarai had enjoyed senior leadership roles within Vattukkattarai kudi, so the alleged stigma of this matriline is obviously at odds with the public achievements of its members.

The other Moorish matriclan I studied in detail was Paniyettu kudi, chosen in part because it was the clan of the Chief Maraikkar of the Grand Mosque. Several people surmised that Paniyettu kudi was an historical offshoot of Panikkana kudi, one of the two elite High Caste Tamil matriclans in Akkaraipattu, so I was also curious to see whether it preserved stronger legends or more hierarchical traditions than other Moorish kudis. There were four Maraikkars from Paniyettu kudi on the mosque trustee committee in the early 1970s, including the Chief Maraikkar, who served in this capacity by assent of the other trustees, not because of a hereditary claim to the office. It is customary, however, that the Chief Maraikkar be selected from among the five largest kudis at the Grand Mosque, one of which is the Paniyettu clan.

A total of seven sublineages were eventually identified within this matriclan, all of them linked to eponymous granny ancestresses. Roughly half of these granny names seem to be derived from the woman’s husband or father (e.g., *Kuñcu Mohideen Pettā*), and the remainder have intriguingly idiosyncratic nicknames, including my very favorite: *Sōppi Pettā* (whacking granny).

The Chief Maraikkar and one other Maraikkar together represent a single large matriline, while the remaining two Maraikkars represent two clusters of three smaller sublineages each. By tapping the knowledge of older women, informants from Paniyettu kudi were often able to reconstruct the kinship links between the founder of a sublineage and its present-day members, but I was surprised to find no legendary or folkloric tradition at all, and little evidence of hereditary distinctions between the internal branches of the clan.

Combining these sublineage case-study materials from the Grand Mosque with the questionnaire data from my Moorish household survey in Division 3 allows me to make several comparisons with the Tamils. For one thing, the awareness of submatrilineage membership among the Moors, while problematic in many ways, was nevertheless much stronger and more credible than among the High Caste Tamils of Akkaraipattu (65 percent vs. 40 percent).<sup>18</sup> Wherever formal submatrilineages were found, the Moors seemed to apply female granny names to them far more frequently than did the Tamils. This was true even when their adherence to strict matrilineal reasoning in the tracing of sublineages was weak or erratic. My informants on this topic, the vast majority of whom were male, would think immediately in terms of a diffuse ancestral connection to local men of prominence, such as well-known landlords, irrigation headmen, or Hajiars (pilgrims to Mecca).<sup>19</sup>

#### SUMMARY: MUSLIM MATRILINY IN PERSPECTIVE

Although twice as many Akkaraipattu Moors as Tamils were engaged in commerce in my 1970 sample, Muslim businessmen were still only 8 percent of the total. Like the Tamils, the Moors in Akkaraipattu are mostly farmers, not stereotypic merchants, and they also share most of the same matrilineal household and matrilineal kinship patterns as the Tamils. Although my Moorish marriage survey sample is 50 percent larger than my Tamil sample, the results show that the Moorish kudis are proportionally distributed in a pattern quite similar to that of the High Caste Tamil kudis. The largest Moorish kudi (Rasampillai) accounts for about a quarter of the total sample, and the number of Moorish kudis is also similar to that of the Tamils (roughly fifteen significant clans each).

The principle of maternal *jummā* mosque affiliation is widely observed in Akkaraipattu, and there is ethnographic evidence of certain big matrilineal clans having once enjoyed special leadership privileges at the Grand Mosque. There is also genealogical evidence at the Grand Mosque of a pattern of matrilineal

succession, or at least appointment, of a line of Lebbes (prayer leaders) within a single matriclan (Vattukkattarai kudi) going back seven generations. This suggests to me that the idea of matrilineal succession to office among the Moors was at one time not so different from the Tamil tradition of hereditary kudi honors and succession to the office of Urpodyar. It was also intriguing to discover that an extensive set of segmentary submatrilineages exists within several kudis at the Grand Mosque. Although I cannot account for it, the large number of Moorish submatrilineages with female granny names appears to reflect a more widespread and practical form of matrilineal consciousness among the Moors than among the Tamils.

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## MUSLIM ELITES AND SPECIALISTS

Moorish communities in Sri Lanka, unlike Muslims in some other parts of South Asia, do not perpetuate a caste-like hierarchy of hereditary occupational groups borrowed from their Hindu or Buddhist neighbors. Nevertheless, there are three hereditary or semihereditary groups of ritual specialists that stand out from the otherwise egalitarian uniformity of Moorish society in Akkaraipattu. The Maulanas claim exclusive status as endogamous descendants of the Prophet, the Bawas represent an ecstatic form of Sufi Muslim initiation and devotional practice, and the Ostras provide a low-status but essential service that defines Muslim religious identity: circumcision.

### MAULĀNĀ: DESCENDANTS OF THE PROPHET

In addition to their membership in a local matrilineal kudi, a small number of Moors in Akkaraipattu also claim patrilineal descent from a close relative or associate of the Prophet Muhammad. Their genealogical connection to the Prophet is recorded in a *silsila* or generational chain of patrilineal ancestry that sometimes goes all the way back, through the Prophet or a

member of his family, to Adam and Eve. Throughout the Muslim world, this enhanced religious status is generally denoted by the title *Sayyid*, but in Sri Lanka and other parts of South Asia a common term is *Maulānā* (Arabic, our lord or master). Muslim families in Akkaraipattu who take their holiness quite seriously refer to themselves as belonging to *Maulānā vamicam* (Skt. *vamśa*), while others advertise a Maulana ancestral connection simply by having the title in their personal names, for example, S. H. Meeralebbe Maulana. It carries unquestioned prestige, and to many it also suggests an innate spiritual propensity for honesty and faithfulness in business dealings. Perhaps this is why the name Maulana is so often seen painted on the lorries of Muslim freight and dry-goods entrepreneurs who maintain far-flung trading networks across the island.

There is a tradition that Maulanas are repositories of Muslim mystical knowledge and spiritual power, including power that can be applied through curative and protective recitations and inscriptions. Several older Maulanas I knew in Akkaraipattu were popular providers of protective copper *accarams* (amulets) that they inscribed with Islamic symbols and phrases. These were then either rolled up in a small silver cylinder and worn on the body, or mounted at home above a doorway. Another popular form of blessing, often lucratively dispensed by touring Maulanas from India and Pakistan, is called *isim*, which consists of curative or prophylactic phrases, including the divine names of Allah, written in ink on paper or on a plate. The devotee dissolves the ink in water and drinks it, incorporating the sacred words into his or her body.

Occupationally, the members of Maulana vamsam in Akkaraipattu follow ordinary pursuits in paddy cultivation and commerce with no obvious concentration in a particular trade. Residentially, the Maulanas are distributed throughout all the Moorish neighborhoods and headman divisions. Maulana status is inherited patrilineally, but there is no problem with simultaneous membership in matrilineal kudis. In fact, extensive genealogical checking established that Maulanas are members of all the major Moorish matriclans. However, their preference for marrying within their own group is reminiscent of the semi-endogamous Tamil Kurukkals, another group that seeks to protect its hereditary religious status through marriage. Indeed, while the formal rule of Maulana descent is patrilineal, it has been widely affirmed that the children of parents who are *both* of Maulana ancestry possess a superior pedigree and a distinctly greater degree of spiritual power than the children of a Maulana

father and a non-Maulana mother. For Maulana women, it is imperative to marry Maulana men in order to make their patrilineal ancestry count for anything at all. The result is a strong tendency toward endogamy, especially in the saintliest of Maulana families, an aristocratic or exclusionary attitude that is sometimes noted with amusement and ambivalence by ordinary Moors.

The ancestor of all the native Maulanas in Akkaraipattu is said to have been a nineteenth-century Yemeni holy man named Sheikh Ismail, informally remembered as “Arabi Sahib” (Ho 2006). The story is told that Arabi Sahib miraculously floated in from Yemen on a wooden plank (*palakai*), touching shore at the Sinnamuhattuvaram sand bar a few miles south of town. He was greeted by local Moors who immediately recognized his spiritual power as a Maulana from the homeland of the Islamic faith, but since he spoke only Arabic, the Tamil-speaking Moors of Akkaraipattu were unable to converse with him satisfactorily. As a result, Arabi Sahib was advised to go to Weligama on the south coast, where many learned Muslims were known to speak fluent Arabic. In Weligama he married and fathered five sons and one daughter. Two of his sons returned to live in Akkaraipattu, while the remainder of the children stayed in Weligama, Matara, and Colombo.<sup>1</sup> The eldest of these two sons, whom people called Periya (Big) Maulana, was believed to have forty wives in various parts of the island, but he had only one wife in Akkaraipattu, a woman of Mamanappillai kudi.<sup>2</sup> On his death, Periya Maulana was buried at the Maligawatte Mosque in Colombo, in accordance with the wishes of his descendants and followers there.

His younger brother, Abdusammat Maulana, is the saint who is now buried in a small *ziyāram* (burial shrine) in front of the Akkaraipattu Town Mosque. Abdusammat Maulana had a total of three wives, the first from Dickwella near Dondra at the southern tip of the island, the other two from Pottuvil (Mamanappillai kudi) and Akkaraipattu (Rasampillai kudi). It is said that virtually all the members of Maulana vamsam living in Akkaraipattu today can be traced to the marriages of Periya Maulana and Abdusammat Maulana. Judging from the genealogical details, these two men may have come to Akkaraipattu shortly after 1900. Except for the “floating plank,” the saga of Sheikh Ismail and his descendants seems well documented historically and genealogically, although his precise connection to the Prophet’s family is no longer perfectly understood in Akkaraipattu. This does not matter greatly to the congregation of the Town Mosque, who are content to venerate his son’s Maulana pedigree and to enjoy the protective power of his saintly tomb.



## Body Politics: A Maulana Mortuary Dispute

One of the familiar landmarks as the coast road passes through the Muslim town of Kattankudy, just south of Batticaloa, is the private mausoleum (*kaburaṭi*) of a famous Maulana family with strong connections to several different parts of the island as well as to Nagoor in South India. Although the family has no current members in Akkaraipattu, most Moors there would know something of its renown, because they would have glimpsed the tile-roofed mausoleum, with its flag-raising minaret, on every bus trip to Batticaloa. The mausoleum is popularly known as the *Kuḷantaiyamma Kaburaṭi*, recalling the nickname (“Infant Mother”) of a Maulana woman who, as a child, could magically transform the sand in her play-kitchen into cooked rice. Some people say this is a Tamil nickname, since over the years many Tamils have paid their respects at the shrine and made vows to the saintly souls who are buried there. It is also called by a Muslim nickname, the Periya (Big) Maulana mausoleum, because it houses the tomb of Abdul Qadir Maulana, a towering ancestor five generations removed who is said to have built the original Mettappalli Mosque in Kattankudy by charming the local *jinns* (Muslim spirits) and getting them to do most of the heavy lifting.

Members of this Maulana lineage have a printed *silsila* (sacred genealogy) that traces their direct ancestry not only to Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, but all the way back to Adam and Eve. The first member to arrive in Sri Lanka was Periya Maulana’s father, Sheikh Omar, from the Hadramawt region of Yemen, a sixth-generation forebear who was thirty-seventh in the line of descent from the Prophet. He came to Sri Lanka with his unmarried son because he had dreamt that in Weligama there was a Maulana father searching for a pedigreed son-in-law. The present-day descendant, forty-second in the *silsila* and also named Omar, is an energetic American-trained MBA who has worked as a professional social-services consultant and part-time gem trader while maintaining pastoral links to his Muslim followers in his spare time. He once remarked to me how useful the Maulana reputation for honesty was in the gem trade, where absolute confidence in one’s word is required to sell uncut emeralds and sapphires at the famous street-corner gem exchange (*pattai*) in Beruwala. Like his late father, Zain Maulana, who had a lumber business, and his grandfather who was married to a wealthy Maulana family in Nagoor, Tamilnadu, Omar intends first to have a professional career and then to become more engaged in religious work in his retirement.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Maulana tradition, indeed of the Muslim Sufi tradition more generally, is the strong emphasis placed on the veneration of the saintly tomb, in which is popularly believed to reside the uncorrupted body and miraculous spirit of the saint. Although saints can travel great distances magically to deliver boons and blessings to their followers, there is nevertheless a feeling that closeness to the physical remains of the saint is beneficial. Mystically initiated Sufi sheiks and hereditary Maulanas alike bestow perpetual grace and spiritual power (*baraka*) after they are entombed locally. As a result, a saintly person may be lobbied in advance by his followers to pledge his corpse to a specific burial shrine (*ziyāram*) constructed in advance for this purpose. For example, an impressive new taikkiya in Akkaraipattu was built in the hope of receiving the body of an Indian Sufi sheikh from Androth Island, offshore from Cannanore, Kerala, when he died. On other occasions, the followers of a living saint may even quarrel over the final disposition of his corpse, and this can become an urgent contest in light of the Islamic injunction to bury the dead as quickly as possible.

The young Omar's father and grandfather were both caught up in such mortuary politics when they died, because two different groups of their followers, one congregation located in Katugoda in the suburbs of Galle, and the other located at the ancestral village of Kattankudy, near Batticaloa, were vying for the privilege of entombing their bodies locally. So keen was this competition that the corpse of Omar's father's father, Sakkaf Maulana, was whisked immediately from Colombo by the southern faction to Katugoda to be buried in a prebuilt taikkiya, a move they justified on the basis of instructions they claimed to have received directly in a dream from Sakkaf. The eastern faction from Kattankudy, who viewed this as virtually a mortuary hijacking, raced to Katugoda and succeeded in wresting the corpse before it had been interred. In order to achieve peace, however, and to win the southerners' assent to bury Sakkaf in the Kattankudy mausoleum alongside his ancestors, the leader of the eastern faction, Omar's father, Zain Maulana, agreed in advance that his own corpse would eventually be entombed at the southern Katugoda shrine. This promise was fulfilled in 1992 when Zain Maulana was laid to rest in the Zain Maulana Taikkiya in Katugoda. His son Omar felt this was a fitting compromise, because both the bright-green taikkiya and a nearby street already bore the name of a previous Zain Maulana, Omar's great-grandfather, who is buried at Mavadippalli, near Kalmunai.

## BĀWĀ: ECSTATIC SUFI MYSTICS

At the northern edge of Akkaraipattu, adjacent to the Muslim cemetery, is a small roadside taikkiya sheltering the tomb of a Muslim holy man whose full name is Faqir Miskin Alishah Maboot (map 9). Scattered in the surrounding neighborhood known as Taikkiyanagar are perhaps ten houses which belong to a local group of Sufi mystics, known in Sri Lanka by the general term *Bawa* (*pāvā*, from Turkish *bābā*, or missionary preacher), or occasionally by the Arabic term *Faqir* (Tamil, *pakkīr*). The buried saint, Miskin Alishah, was a member of the Sufi order of *Tabakāttiyā* (also known as *Mallang* or *Madari*), a holy man who had taken vows of celibacy and who wore his uncut hair matted in conformity with the rules of his brotherhood (hence this order's colloquial name, *caṭaiippakkīr*, from Tamil *caṭai*, or matted locks of hair).<sup>3</sup> The saint left no initiated followers in Akkaraipattu to perpetuate his lineage. Instead, the members of the local Bawa chapter are mainly members of the *Rifā'i* order, which originated in the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in modern-day Iraq in the twelfth century C.E., and which is noted for its ecstatic and self-mortifying practices (Trimmingham 1971). The taikkiya that is the locus of their activities in Akkaraipattu is used chiefly as a place of individual and small-group devotional meetings and meditation; collective daily prayers are not conducted there.

In accordance with the prevailing system of matrilocal residence, roughly half of the local Bawas live in or near their wives' natal homes. In the 1970s at least five lived within the residential wards of Akkaraipattu town itself, while another four lived just north of the taikkiya in the adjacent village of Addalachenai. However, eight Bawas, including their spiritual leader at the time, the late Cader Mohideen Bawa Kalifa (figure 29), lived in houses situated within sight of the taikkiya, and all of the local Bawas regard this location as their holy ground. The Bawas are part-time Sufi medicants who periodically leave their wives and families and travel to other major centers of Muslim settlement on the island, beating tambourines at each door and offering devotional songs and prayers in return for a few coins or other alms. They wear turbans and rosary beads and carry a begging bowl in their sacks, and they are a regular sight at annual Muslim saints' festivals across the island.



**FIGURE 29.** The late Cader Mohideen Bawa of Taikkyanagar, Akkaraipattu, formerly head Kalifa of the Bawa Jamaat in Sri Lanka (1970).

### Sufi Orders and the Zikr of the Bawas

Although they travel widely, most of Sri Lanka's Bawas reside in the Batticaloa and Ampara Districts, organized into local chapters each with its own leader (*Kālifā*) in Akkaraipattu, Sainthamaruthu, Kalmunai, Eravur, and Ottamavadi. Bawas appointed under each Kalifa fill the following ranked offices: *Nakkīban* (secretary), *Kottuvāl* (sergeant-at-arms), *Paṇṭāri* (commissary), and *Ijini* (messenger).<sup>4</sup> Islandwide leadership is vested in a chief Kalifa chosen by the entire community of Bawas, who are thus taken to constitute a religious corporation or *jamāt*.<sup>5</sup> The present head Kalifa, Dr. P. C. Pakkeer Jaufar, a lecturer in education at the Open University in Colombo, is the son of the previous chief Kalifa, the late Cader Mohideen Bawa, whom I knew during my early fieldwork in the 1970s. The number of actively practicing Bawas on the island is now said to be around seventy, but it had been twice that number before the government repatriated all the Bawas with Indian citizenship in 1963.

The Bawas of Sri Lanka are associated with one or more of the Sufi orders

found in India and Pakistan. Some even speak a few words of Urdu, a faint link with the ecstatic faqirs of Hyderabad and Belgaum (Flueckiger 2006; Assayag 2004). According to the rules of the Bawas, a son cannot receive the two levels of religious initiation (*tīṭcai* or *diksha*, first as a *murīd*, then as a *pakkīr*) into a Sufi order from his own father, although he may later assume his father's role of leadership as a Kalifa. The present chief Kalifa received all of his Sufi initiations, his black mantle (*hirkkā*) of authority, and his official title of Sayyid Daulatasha Sarkalifa from a Sufi leader in Melappalaiyam, near Tirunelveli in southern Tamilnadu. His primary Sufi order is Rifā'i, but the initiation also gave him membership in five other orders: Qadiriya, Suhrawardiya, Tabakattiya, Chishti, and Ahmadiya. This helps to explain why many Bawas I spoke with seemed vague or ambiguous about the relation between the Rifā'i order (to which they generally claimed to belong) and the Qadiriya and other orders with which they also wished to claim a connection.<sup>6</sup> This reflects the high status throughout South Asia of the Qadiriya order, whose founder Mohideen Abdul Qadir Gilani is popularly venerated by Sri Lankan Muslims as Mohideen *Āṇṭavar* (Lord Mohideen).

All agreed, however, that each Sufi order was segmented into a confusing array of sub-orders or branches (*kiḷai*) and that the basic principle of organization was a "chain connection" (*caṅkili toṭarppu*) of successive master-disciple relationships. It was also clear that, in the eyes of the Bawas themselves, each different Sufi order clung to those outward features of dress and ritual that lent it contrastive uniqueness in comparison with the others. The Bawas emphasized that only certain Sufi orders or sub-orders customarily perform acts of mortification of the flesh. Even among those that do, the exact style of the weapons used is traditionally distinctive from group to group, as is the style of wearing the turban (e.g., one "horn" versus two). The shape, color, and design of a Bawa's clothing and personal accoutrements also vary with his order, each article having an esoteric meaning for those initiated in Sufi wisdom. However, doctrinal or religious differences between orders, if any, were not mentioned, because Sufi knowledge is essentially gnostic and acquired spiritually through initiation.

There are three older shrines especially popular with the Bawas in the region south of Batticaloa—at Akkaraipattu (Taikkiyanagar), at Karaitivu (Mavadippalli), and at Kalmunaikudy—but only the latter is of major size. At the Kalmunaikudy mosque, known colloquially as the Beach Mosque (*kaṭarkaraippalli*), a colorful annual flag-raising festival (*koṭiyērram*) is held, with the hoisting of new segmented "centipede" banners (*pūrāṇ koṭi*) embroi-



**FIGURE 30.** Distinctive “centipede flags” (*pūrāṇ koṭi*) at the Beach Mosque shrine in Kalmunaikkudy, a branch of the Nagoor Dargah in Tamilnadu, where gatherings of the Bawa Jamaat take place at the annual festival (1970).

dered with the powerful Muslim number 786 from the tops of two minaret-like towers (figure 30). Like the taikkiya near Akkaraipattu, the Seashore Mosque is located adjacent to a Moorish cemetery, reflecting the self-conscious indifference to death espoused in the Bawa theosophy. The flag-raising festival at the Seashore Mosque is part of an annual cycle of flag-raising celebrations at different Muslim shrines around the island, including most notably Porvai (in Godapitiya near Akuressa), Daftar Jailani (near Balangoda), and Katara-gama (McGilvray 2004). It also coincides with the annual festival of the Sufi saint Shahul Hameed at his renowned *dargah* (tomb shrine) at Nagoor on the Tamilnadu coast near Nagapattinam (Nambiar and Narayana Kurup 1968; Saheb 1998). In fact, the Beach Mosque houses a physically empty or “virtual” tomb that is spiritually connected to Nagoor. Informants referred to it literally in English as a “branch office” of the Nagoor dargah, part of a larger Indian Ocean network that also includes branch shrines for the Nagoor saint in Singapore and Penang.

At such flag-raising festivals and kandoori feasts, it has been the custom

for Bawas to publicly exhibit their mystical faith by performing ecstatic acts of self-mortification. Indeed, it is common to see Bawas walking from village to village carrying, among other things, the sharp-pointed implements used in such demonstrations. While Hindu Tamil and Buddhist Sinhalese vow-keepers often walk on hot coals as their supreme test of faith, the Muslim Bawas shun firewalking — “Too simple,” said one — and choose to focus instead on perforating their flesh with various kinds of steel needles, spikes, and daggers. Some Bawas appear to take a greater interest than others in this “cutting and stabbing work” (*veṭṭukkuttu vēlai*), but at public exhibitions every Bawa will join the circle to support the group with singing and beating of tambourines as individuals perform their prescribed Sufi *zīkr*. Perhaps the most dramatic gesture during these sessions is the pounding of a *dabus* (Arabic, “pin”), a spherically knobbed steel spike decorated with dangling hair-like chains, into the top of the skull sufficiently deep for it to remain upright while the Bawa dances around the enclosure. Other devotional acts I have seen include the insertion of *dabus* spikes into the corners of the eye sockets; the piercing of both cheeks with a single, long steel needle; the laceration of the torso with daggers and swords; and the perforation of the skin of the back with hooks and barbs. The Kalifa presides throughout the *zīkr*, blessing the Bawas’ weapons by touching them to his lips and anointing them with his protective saliva.<sup>7</sup>

This is all part of a Rifā’i tradition of ecstatic mortification that displays common features across much of the Muslim world, including similar acts performed in Gujarat, Lakshadweep, and Kerala (Van der Veer 1992; Gabriel 1989; Didier 2004) and even farther away in Macedonia (Masulovic-Marsol 1988) and Java (see the display of Sufi *dabus* spikes in the National Museum, Jakarta). Also celebrated in some east-coast Moorish settlements, such as Kattankudy, is a companion practice to the Rifā’i *zīkr* known as the Rifā’i *rātīb*, which is performed by Muslim Sufi laymen under the leadership of a sheikh. Based on a practice derived from Androth Island in the Lakshadweep archipelago, two lines of men sit facing one another responding to the calls of a leader, fervently singing devotional phrases punctuated with sharp slaps at their tambourines and executing dramatically choreographed movements of the head and torso (see also Gabriel 1989: 139–43, 242–49).

### Becoming a Bawa: Rituals of Entombment

There are said to be two ways to become a Bawa: *karu valī* (“the way of the embryo,” i.e., birth) and *kuru valī* (“the way of the guru,” i.e., initiation). This dyadic contrast is not quite as clear as it sounds, for everyone who wishes to

become a Bawa, regardless of birth, must also study under a guru or spiritual teacher who holds the rank of Kalifa. However, a man of Bawa parentage is presumed to possess certain intrinsic qualities of saintliness and devotion that will greatly assist him in his spiritual quest, while an outsider must prove his suitability through effort and pious deeds. Descent within the patrilineal line (*paramparai*) of Bawas is quite independent of a Bawa's concurrent exogamous matrilineal kudi membership. Like the Maulanas, the Bawas with whom I spoke reiterated the principle of patrilineal descent but also praised those who could trace Bawa ancestry bilaterally on their mother's as well as their father's side. While presumptive candidacy for a career as a Bawa is transmitted from father to son, such descent does not determine which particular Sufi order a man will enter. This is a choice determined by the selection of one's Sufi preceptor (*shēku*, sheikh), who cannot be his own father. Reviewing the family histories of several local Bawas, I did note several instances in which a son had entered a Sufi order different from that of his father.

Bawas who have entered a brotherhood without being sons of Bawas are rare indeed; in Akkaraipattu in the late 1970s I came across none. A survey of households indicated that current-generation Bawas were marrying non-Bawa women about 50 percent of the time, which is also what their fathers seem to have done, according to my genealogical evidence. Most of the present Bawas were born in the Batticaloa region, a few as far away as Mannar. An analysis of Bawa marriage choice revealed no patterns of matriclan affiliation or marriage alliance that deviated from the bilateral cross-cousin marriage preferences typical of all the Tamil and Moorish groups in this region. All of the Bawas in the Akkaraipattu area are matrilocally married and have access to dowry property through their wives, so they typically engage in paddy cultivation during part of the year. Alms collected on the annual Bawa circuits of the island augment their livelihood, and several have additional skills. One Bawa I met was a teacher of "Chinese fighting" (*cīnaṭi*), one was a practitioner of curing by the use of mantras (*mantirikam*), one was an herbal folk doctor (*paricāri*), one was a perfume (*attar*) merchant, and two were talented singers who recorded Muslim devotional music for the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

Perhaps the most intriguing custom of the Bawas is the process by which a man is initiated into the order, a procedure which was described to me in some detail but which I never actually witnessed firsthand. Once a man has gained the tutelage of a recognized Kalifa, it may take him six years to acquire



the knowledge and self-discipline necessary to become a Bawa. After a certain amount of preliminary study, he receives the first level of initiation, which includes receiving secret words or phrases (*upatēcam*, sermon) from his guru. This first initiation transforms the candidate into a *murīd* (novice), and he is then able to begin a religious mendicant life.

The second initiation, however, is the truly important one. When the novice is considered by his guru to be ready, he is prepared for a symbolic death that terminates his identity as an ordinary mortal. At least forty Bawas, the quorum necessary to convoke an official jamaat, must gather at the site, usually at a taikkiya adjacent to a graveyard. First, the body of the novice is completely shaved by the Moorish *Ostā* barber-circumciser. This is necessary in order to remove the vestigial pollution that remains on his body hair from contact with the walls of his mother's vagina during birth. After his initiation, the new Bawa should (ideally) never cut his re-grown hair, except possibly to trim his beard, for he considers it to have been blessed by his guru and by the members of the assembled jamaat. The novice is then laid naked upon a plank, bathed according to Islamic practice as if he were a corpse, and dressed in a white funeral shroud (*kafan*) as if for a normal Muslim burial.

In the presence of the assembled Bawas, the novice then receives a sermon, a final set of phrases for meditation, and a new "initiation name" (*tītcai peyar*) from his guru, the Kalifa. Members of the Bawa jamaat then place their hands upon his head and bestow their blessings, after which the novice enters a symbolic grave for forty days of fasting, solitude, and meditation. In some cases the grave is an actual pit in the ground covered with a temporary structure of cloths and poles. In other cases, the grave may be a cloth pandal enclosure which is erected inside the taikkiya itself as a substitute tomb for the novice. While inside this symbolic mortuary/meditation chamber, or *chillā*, the novice is nourished by milk and fruit once every twenty-four hours and is visited only by his Kalifa.<sup>8</sup> He is expected to sleep as little as possible and to meditate constantly. Meanwhile, the gathered Bawas recite conventional Muslim post-mortuary *kattam* prayers on his behalf on the first, third, seventh, and fortieth days. On the final day, he is reborn from his symbolic grave and joins the fraternity of local Bawas.

There is obviously a comparison to be made with rites of initiation into Hindu ascetic orders through "social death" and funeral rites conducted on the cremation *ghats* in Varanasi (Bharati 1961; Sinha and Saraswati 1978; Parry 1994), as well as with the more generalized motif of death associated with the

Buddhist monkhood. Both Hindu sanniyasis and Buddhist *bhikkus*, however, are explicitly world-renouncers, whereas the Bawas, in spite of their conspicuous closeness to the Muslim graveyard, resume all of their family and economic ties after initiation and seem to confine most of their religious mendicancy to certain seasons of the year. The symbolic death of the Bawa is not primarily an escape from the world, but a form of spiritual initiation through purification, as the shaving of the “corpse” seems to indicate.

One of the clearest impressions I had about the Bawas in Akkaraipattu in the 1970s was that their unorthodox dress, manner, belief, and ritual—their overall style, if you will—was strongly disapproved of by the wealthier and better-educated Moors as well as by the orthodox Islamic experts, the *maulavis* and *ālims*. Sufism has characteristically posed a challenge to Muslim orthodoxy wherever it has spread, so I assumed that the Bawas would slowly dwindle in numbers in the face of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism and the spread of middle-class Sri Lankan Muslim values. Despite these pressures, however, the Bawas of the Batticaloa region continue to thrive into the twenty-first century. In 1993 members of a Bawa chapter in Eravur were invited to perform their penetrating *zikr* at a government-sponsored cultural exhibition in Batticaloa, and their demonstration was later distributed on videocassette. In 2001 and 2002 I witnessed well-attended Bawa *zikrs* at the Jailani kandoori festival, and in 2003 and 2007 I watched the customary Bawa participation in the Beach Mosque flag raising. Over the past decade there has also been a surprising increase in the popularity of lay Sufism, involving a more meditative and less physical type of *zikr*, often inspired by visiting Indian Sufi sheikhs who visit their Sri Lankan Muslim followers on annual circuits of the island.<sup>9</sup>

#### **OSTĀ: MUSLIM CIRCUMCISERS**

The Moors of Akkaraipattu are proud of the Muslim egalitarianism of their community, which contrasts with the hierarchical caste ethos of Tamil Hindu society, although they also employ Tamil service castes to perform such polluting tasks such as laundering, lime burning, and the cutting of hair. There is one task, however, that the Moors cannot delegate to a Tamil specialist despite the widespread feelings of impurity that are involved. This is the circumcision of each Moorish boy between the ages of nine and twelve and the operation of symbolic genital scarification on each Moorish baby girl before the age of forty days (McGilvray 1982c).<sup>10</sup> The community of professional Muslim barber-circumcisers in Akkaraipattu numbers only about ten families, and

they are known as *Ostā*, from Arabic *ustād* (master, expert). A similar group is found among the Muslims of Kerala and Lakshadweep, where they are called *Ossān* (Ibrahim Kunju 1989: 177–80; Gabriel 1989: 168–76). In Akkaraipattu the circumciser is colloquially referred to as the “*Oyttā Māmā*,” and his wife is called the “*Oyttā Māmi*,” expressions which evoke the warm kinship metaphor of the mother’s brother (*māmā*) and his wife. There is also a false paternalism to this expression, however, because the Osta would never be an actual kinsmen of the family.

I was told the best place to pursue research on the Osta community in the Eastern Province would be the village of Sainthamaruthu, an old Muslim settlement near Kalmunai. Legend maintains that it was to Sainthamaruthu that the first Osta came to settle with his wife. He is said to have been an Indian Muslim who married a woman of Osta descent from the inland Moorish settlement of Kotabowe in the Province of Uva (Yalman 1967: chap. 13; de Munck 1993: 85–90). For many years the Ostas from Sainthamaruthu provided circumcisions for the other villages in the southern part of the Batticaloa and Ampara districts. Like a colonial administrator, the Osta would make periodic circuits to villages in the area once or twice a year. Akkaraipattu eventually grew to such a size that local Moorish leaders wished to obtain a resident circumciser for the community, so an Osta named Utumān Kaṇṭu from Sainthamaruthu was induced to settle in Akkaraipattu on a piece of land near the Tamil Barber caste neighborhood.

This man and his descendants, some of whom still live in the same place today, were originally supported by a tithe amounting to several maraikkals of paddy from each Moorish family annually. Judging from genealogical data, the arrival of Utumān Kaṇṭu occurred five or six generations ago, that is, at some point in the latter half of the nineteenth century. One would expect, however, to find more than only ten Osta families living in Akkaraipattu after five generations. The reason for this very small increase in numbers appears to be a congenital tendency to infertility that was cited by Osta informants themselves and was corroborated by the genealogical information they supplied. The number of Osta families has even declined in the last forty years, according to one person.

In the 1970s there were eight or ten Osta families living in different parts of Akkaraipattu, all engaged to some degree in traditional Osta work. Most visibly the Ostas served as circumcisers, but they also worked as barbers for the Moorish community. During my early fieldwork, virtually all circumci-



**FIGURE 31.** A well-known Muslim circumciser (*ostā māmā*) in Akkaraipattu, Mr. Mohideenbawa Meerasahib, departing for a surgical appointment (1971).

sions in town were being performed by one man, Mr. Mohideenbawa Meerasahib (or “Meera Māmā” for short) who brought along one or two assistant Ostas each time his services were required (figure 31). The Osta is normally compensated on a sliding scale informally based on the wealth of the boy’s family and the lavishness of the circumcision ceremony itself. According to my notes, payments in the 1970s ranged from twenty-five to one hundred rupees, which were then divided according to shares among the assistant Ostas and even some of the inactive Ostas. The fee collected by the wife of the Osta for performing female genital scarification on Muslim baby girls, an operation that is not ceremonialized at all, was said to be only five or ten rupees.

As a Muslim barber, the Osta was also traditionally called on to shave the hair of all Moorish babies on the fortieth day after birth, just as the Tamil barber shaves the heads of Tamil babies on the thirty-first day. Nowadays, this tonsure is sometimes conducted by an older woman of the household or by any close relative who is willing. In some parts of Sri Lanka, the Ostas also performed

the duty of washing Muslim corpses in preparation for burial, somewhat like the Tamil Barbers who serve as Hindu funeral priests (Hussein 2007: 144–47, 464–69). Throughout my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu, however, I was told this intimate responsibility always fell upon close relatives of the deceased. The Osta was also traditionally a practitioner of folk medicine, and in fact the first Osta to settle in Akkaraipattu was said to have come from a long line of folk doctors (*parisari*). This, too, seems less common in the present generation. In the past the Osta was often called on to decorate special pandals for kandoori feasts at the mosques and for major life-crisis ceremonies at Moorish homes. The traditional Muslim *ālatti*, a bright, conical, tree-shaped object made of tin and colored paper which is circled around the head of a bridegroom or a “circumcision bridegroom” in order to insure good luck and to draw away the effects of the evil eye, is often constructed by Osta families and rented out on special occasions.<sup>11</sup> In the past, some members of the Osta community were hired to give exhibitions of special martial arts, including Burmese fighting (*barmiyaṭi*), Chinese fighting (*cīṇāṭi*), stick fighting (*kampāṭi*), sword play (*vāḷ viḷaiyāṭṭu*), and coiled sword (*curuṭṭu vāḷ*). It was also said that the Ostas would set up carnival amusements at mosque celebrations, including large swings, and would present puppet shows called *pāvaiṭṭai kūttu*.

Because the entire circumcision trade was in the hands of Meera Māmā and a few helpers, most of the remaining members of the Osta community in Akkaraipattu worked as traditional Muslim barbers. In the 1970s the majority of Moors patronized Tamil barbershops (saloons) operated by members of the Barber caste, but some older Muslims still preferred the tonsorial services of Osta barbers, who would shave the face, scalp, and armpits of men each month in accordance with local Muslim tradition. I also noticed that a few enterprising Ostas were beginning to open modern-style barbershops to compete with Tamil saloons offering regular haircuts. Although their numbers were small, they had the advantage of being able to locate their barbershops within the Moorish neighborhoods rather than only along the main road and near the central market, a convenience for Moorish customers living far from the center of town. In towns to the north like Addalachenai and Nintavur, where the population is almost wholly Moorish, Osta-run barber saloons were said to be prospering, although they could not fully satisfy the demand for haircutting services. Given its sad legacy of infertility, the Osta community today has no problem of excess manpower; every able man is employed either in circumcision work or in commercial barbering.

### Are the Oostas a Caste?

I had resided for nearly a year in Akkaraipattu before fully realizing that the Moorish Oostas were a closed community strongly linked with a traditional hereditary occupation. Moorish acquaintances usually talked of circumcision as a specialty occupation carried out “by tradition” in certain families, but when I met and interviewed members of the Oosta group, their sense of separate identity from ordinary Moors was easy to notice. The name they gave for themselves was *Oosta vali*, meaning the Oosta “path” or “line of descent.” Local Oosta informants themselves candidly described their group as a “caste” (*cāti*), and there were obvious similarities with Hindu domestic specialists such as the Barbers and the Washermen.

For one thing, marriage among the Oosta community is virtually endogamous; only three examples of intermarriage with non-Oosta individuals appeared in all the genealogical data I gathered. The Oostas also do not participate the regular Moorish matrilineal system; in fact, they have no general kudi names at all. There are, however, three smaller internal matrilineal sublineages (*kattarai*) having no representation on mosque committees that do play a role in the local marriage system of the Oostas: *Umār Katāb kattarai*, *Urahīm Poṭiyār kattarai*, and *Vellaiyam Pettā kattarai*. The first two sublineages bear the names of prominent men, and the third (the largest in terms of numbers) bears the name of an older woman (“White Granny”), a pattern similar to that found in regular Moorish sublineages. Informants affirmed that marriage should be exogamous with respect to these three matrilineal branches, but because genealogical memory was weak in some cases, conformity with this marriage rule over time was difficult for me to judge. I was also told of several instances in which infants from regular Moorish families had been adopted by Oosta parents. At times my Oosta informants made it a point of pride to say they were an exclusive group quite distinct from the mainstream society of Moors. At other times, when it was obvious that their status suffered in the eyes of ordinary Muslims, my Oosta informants would boast of the mixed ancestry within their community.

For many Moors who want to promote a progressive image for their community, the existence of the hereditary Oosta group poses an awkward problem, because it complicates the otherwise simple comparison between Tamil Hindu caste-based inequality and their own ideals of pan-Islamic egalitarianism. Moorish sensitivity on this issue was evident when I began to inquire

about the Moorish kudi system; a number of persons quickly warned me not to mistake the Moorish matriclans for castes. The Oostas are a numerically insignificant part of the Muslim community, which accounts for some of the silence I encountered regarding the nature of this group, but they are also endogamous, they practice a stigmatized hereditary occupation, and in the past all their homes were restricted to a single neighborhood near to the Tamil Barbers. Little effort was needed to establish that, in the eyes of most Akkaraipattu Moors, the Oosta is a low-ranking hereditary specialist, albeit an indispensable and familiar one. While the Oosta is recognized to be a surgeon whose skill determines the outcome of an especially delicate operation, his status is lowered by his group identity as a barber and by his special contact with a part of the body Moors usually regard as the most unclean.<sup>12</sup> When I asked an informal sample of twenty-two Moorish men whether they would be willing to eat food served at an Oosta house, a majority had strong reservations. Nine vowed they would never touch Oosta food, and four said they would only be willing to accept uncooked items such as fruit and betel nut, or perhaps a cup of tea. The remaining nine men said they were hypothetically willing to accept a full meal from the Oosta, knowing that such an opportunity was extremely unlikely to arise. Like the Tamil Barber with whom he may be compared in this regard, the Oosta is a hereditary household-service specialist who customarily receives food from his Moorish patrons, rather than giving food to others.

It is obvious that many signs of Hindu-type caste identity are present among the Oosta community: endogamous marriage, hereditary occupation, ritual pollution, household-based clientage, asymmetrical food exchange, and (historically) residential segregation. With a tiny hereditary Maulana religious elite at the top and an even smaller occupationally defiled Oosta community at the bottom, Moorish society in Sri Lanka might seem to express, in principle at least, the two binary poles of a ritually based caste hierarchy in the Dumontian sense: a ranking paradigm based on the contrast between spiritual purity and bodily pollution. However, in terms of social history and social praxis Moorish society in Sri Lanka has not developed this dualism into a thoroughgoing sociological principle in the way that Hindu society has over the millennia. Within the parameters of wealth and social class, the vast majority of Moors in Akkaraipattu are matrimonially unrestricted (except for rules of Dravidian kinship and matriclan exogamy, of course), ritually undifferentiated, and occupationally free. They are sometimes skeptical of the Maulanas and occasionally embarrassed about the Oostas, neither of whom are seen as

typifying the essence of Muslim society. Among Akkaraipattu Muslims there is no comprehensively ranked hierarchy of discrete caste groups, no segmentary infrastructure for an entire caste *system* of ranked groups in the Dumontian sense, as there is for example among the hierarchical Muslims of Kerala and Lakshadweep (D'Souza 1973; Dube 1973). While the Osta community is a small fragment of caste-type organization embedded within the contemporary Moorish community, it does not indicate the existence of a "caste system" among the Muslims of Sri Lanka.

**SUMMARY: SPECIAL IDENTITIES  
WITHIN MOORISH SOCIETY**

Because the Moors of Akkaraipattu are generally speaking quite egalitarian in comparison to their caste-stratified Tamil Hindu neighbors, the presence of Muslim religious elites and lower-status ritual specialists was not something I immediately noticed during my early fieldwork. However, each of these groups—Maulanas, Bawas, and Ostras—turns out to have an interesting and distinctive religious position that lends the Moorish community cultural complexity and variety. To be a Maulana is to be a member of the Prophet's patrilineal bloodline, creating a typical concern for in-group marriage to conserve this charismatic genealogical patrimony. To be a Bawa is to take the Sufi path of mystical initiation and ecstatic devotional practices, displaying extreme forms of religious performance that are often counter to middle-class Islamic norms. To be an Osta is to serve the Muslim community as an essential ritual specialist, the circumciser who transforms Moorish boys into Muslim men, yet who suffers the low-caste stigma of barber-surgeons everywhere in the South Asian world. While these ritual and occupational identities generate vastly different social rank within the Moorish community of Akkaraipattu, they do not constitute a Muslim caste system. These small groups augment, but do not redefine, the central egalitarian core of Moorish society in Akkaraipattu.



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**PART 4.**

ETHNICITY, CONFLICT, AND THE WAR IN THE EAST



*Chapter Ten*

**ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND  
COMMUNAL VIOLENCE**

To acknowledge all of the historical factors leading to current ethnic tensions between the Tamils, the Moors, and the Sinhala would require a more extensive review of Sri Lanka's nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnic politics than I can possibly provide here, but the literature is ample.<sup>1</sup> The crux of the issue is whether Sri Lanka's polity can accommodate two fully fledged national identities expressed in two languages and deriving from two deeply intertwined historical pasts, the Sinhala and the Tamil, while at the same time honoring the Muslim (Moorish) community as a full stakeholder in the island's future. When Sinhala majoritarian politics in the post-independence era proved incapable of accommodating Tamil demands for political and cultural equity, and resettlement of Sinhala farmers had tipped the electoral balance in many Tamil-speaking districts in the northeast, an armed rebellion broke out in the early 1980s that is still in progress today, pitting the Sri Lankan government against the well-armed guerrilla cadres of the LTTE, or Tamil Tigers, who occupied a large swath of Dry Zone territory north

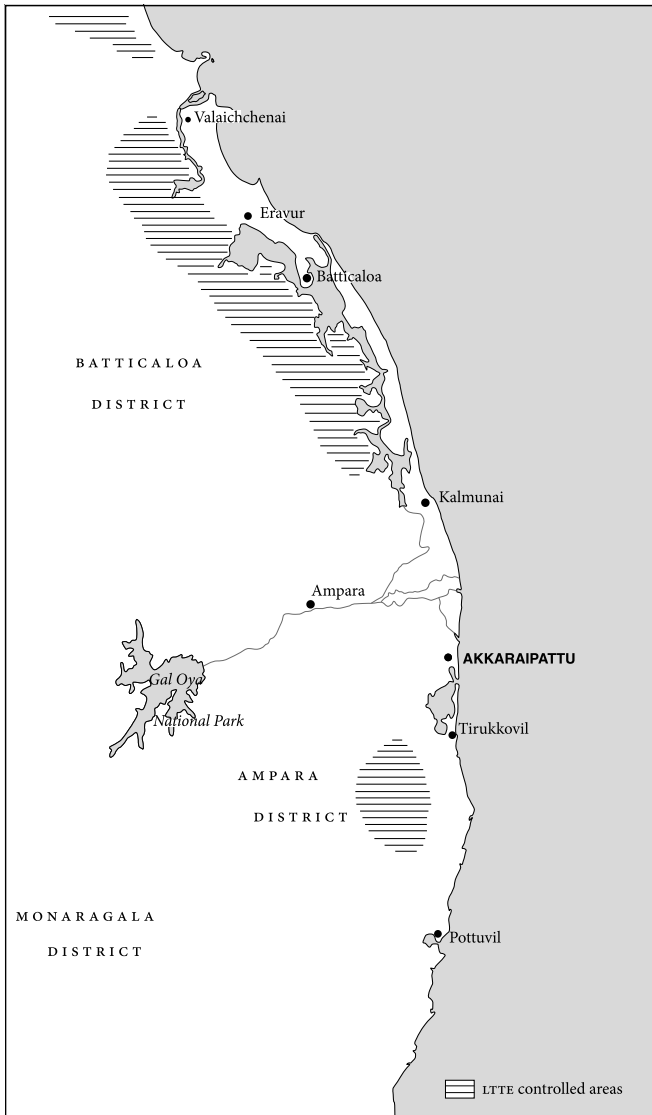
of Anuradhapura as well as jungle bases throughout the eastern coastal zone as recently as 2005 (map 12).

The focus of this book is on the eastern Batticaloa region, where national-level politics have not always taken into account local social and cultural realities, and where Tamil-Muslim tensions deeply complicate the Tamil-Sinhala conflict scenario. At the national level, the intensification of Tamil versus Muslim political rivalry is a product of late-colonial “racial” categories and political incentives in the two-party Sinhala ethnonationalist system. Fieldwork at the local level in a place like Akkaraipattu, however, shows that while the Tamils and Moors both share a similar culture, they also harbor ethnic stereotypes and a reservoir of mutual distrust.

#### **DIVERGENT IDENTITIES: TAMIL AND MUSLIM ETHNICITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

The central innovation in the period leading up to independence in 1948 was not the bifurcation of Sinhala versus Tamil political identities, since these two ethnic communities had long been recognized as distinct players in the nineteenth-century colonial system.<sup>2</sup> The new development was the political separation of the Ceylon Moors as a distinct ethnic group from the larger Tamil-speaking community, a shift that began to attract public attention in the 1880s. While the Tamil elite near the center of colonial government tried to contend that the Moors were merely “Muslim Tamils,” they were unable to prevent a long-term political divorce that stretched over most of the twentieth century. The twists and turns of Muslim identity politics have been traced elsewhere (Kingsley M. de Silva 1986a, 1986b, 1986c; McGilvray 1998a), but it is worth noting that the Sri Lankan Moors took a different historical path from the Muslims of Tamilnadu, South India, who still maintain their strong ethnic and linguistic identification as Muslim Tamils. Unfortunately, in Sri Lanka, where two-thirds of the Moors live in Sinhala majority districts, and where Sinhala mobs ruthlessly attacked Muslim shop owners in the 1915 riots, a “Muslim Tamil” identity has always had severe, even lethal, disadvantages.<sup>3</sup>

One emblematic episode has repeatedly come back to haunt Tamil-Moorish relations. Until 1889 the Muslims throughout the island had been tacitly represented on the all-island Legislative Council by a government-appointed Tamil member, the last of whom was (later Sir) Ponnambalam Ramanathan, a highly influential figure among both Sinhala and Tamil nationalists. Since the underlying colonial discourse in the nineteenth century assumed “race” as the cri-



MAP 12. LTTE-controlled areas of the Batticaloa region, circa 2005

terion for political representation (Rogers 1995), members of the west-coast urban Muslim elite began to promote their racial identity as “Ceylon Moors” in order to establish their claim for seats in the formal system of communal representation that the British instituted and maintained for a hundred years (Nissan and Stirrat 1990: 28–29). In a speech to the Legislative Council in 1885 that was calculated to preempt this move, Ramanathan marshaled linguistic

and ethnographic evidence to argue that, apart from religion, the Moors and Tamils shared a great many cultural and linguistic traits resulting from conversion and intermarriage over the centuries. When he published it three years later (1888) as an academic essay on “The Ethnology of the ‘Moors’ of Ceylon” in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*, Ramanathan’s views seemed to acquire scholarly respectability, much to the displeasure of the Moorish elite, who saw it as an effort to sabotage their campaign for separate Muslim representation.

Ironically enough, Ramanathan was promulgating a more inclusive definition of “Tamilness” than many high-status Hindus of Jaffna and Batticaloa would have preferred, given their historic reluctance to recognize members of the lowest castes as genuine “Tamils.” Even though Ramanathan’s strategy failed and a Moorish seat was created, his essay seemed to embody the patronizing Tamil outlook found in many areas of the island, including Batticaloa, where even today High Caste Hindus look down on the Moors as their inferior and uneducated neighbors. In the narrow rhetorical space of colonial politics the logic of Ramanathan’s aggrandizing ethnological thesis forced the Moors to repudiate their Tamilness. In 1907 the Moorish editor I. L. M. Azeez published a rebuttal of Ramanathan’s claims, arguing that an Arab patrilineal “racial” pedigree distinguished them from the Sinhala and Tamil “races.”<sup>4</sup> In the 1930s a broader pan-Islamic religious identity as Ceylon Muslims began to be fostered as well. Then, as independence loomed on the horizon in the 1940s and the era of Sinhala electoral dominance was about to commence, the west-coast urban Muslim political leaders strategically switched their support to the Sinhalese-majority parties, explicitly denying any necessary link between Moorish ethnicity and the Tamil language.

In the eastern zone, where Tamils and Moors lived side by side and shared a common language, the idea of “Tamil-speaking” solidarity continued to have some local appeal as late as 1956, when both communities elected candidates on S. J. V. Chelvanayakam’s Federal Party (*Tamiḷ Aracu Kaṭci*, literally “Tamil Government Party”) ticket. Generally, however, the Moorish politicians from independence up to the mid-1980s opted for a strategy of flexible and adroit coalition politics within the two major Sinhalese nationalist parties, the UNP and the SLFP. In the 1970s east-coast Muslims readily admitted to me that their members of parliament would “reverse hats” (*toppi tiruppuvāṇ*), that is, switch party affiliations, to ally themselves with the party in power, a maneuver perfected by the late Gate Mudaliyar M. S. Kariapper of Kalmunai, his son-in-law

M. M. Mustapha, and his nephew M. C. Ahmed (Phadnis 1979: 45–46; Mohan 1987: 47; Wagner 1990: 157). Several east-coast Tamil members of parliament adopted this tactic as well (University Teachers for Human Rights 1991: 45–46). Sir Razik Fareed, who emerged as the leading Moorish spokesman in the early decades of independence, conspicuously endorsed the Sinhala-Only national language policy in 1956 and railed against what he called “political genocide” of the Moors under the “the Tamil yoke.” During the official-language debate in 1956, a Tamil member of parliament sarcastically accused him of being a Sinhala defector. Fareed replied that the Moors were not “Tamil converts,” and a heated replay of the old Ramanathan-Azeez “ethnological” argument of 1888–1907 immediately ensued on the floor of parliament (Hassan 1968: 96–106).

As Kingsley de Silva notes, “Tamil-Muslim rivalry in Sri Lanka is a political reality, and the Muslims themselves have responded with alacrity to Sinhalese overtures to back them against the Tamils” (1986c: 449). De Silva and others have approvingly viewed the Muslims’ cultural assimilation into Sinhala society and their pragmatic accommodationist politics, as the mark of a “good” minority, implicitly contrasting them with the troublesome and recalcitrant Tamils, whose politicians by the 1970s had coalesced into the Tamil United Liberation Front and were calling for a separate Tamil homeland, or federal province, in the northeast (Kingsley M. de Silva 1986c, 1988; Dewaraja 1994, 1995). A tangible reward for the Muslims’ pliant political behavior was the establishment of a separate system of government schools for Muslim students in the 1970s and the training of a corps of Muslim teachers to staff them. Apart from standard academic subjects, the curriculum in the Muslim government schools includes Islam and optional Arabic language, and in recent years a distinctive Muslim school uniform has been introduced as well. This has demonstrably improved Muslim educational success (Ameer Ali 1986–1987, 1992a), but it has arguably worsened ethnic tensions by restricting direct face-to-face classroom contact between students and faculty from different ethnic communities.

As Christian Wagner has documented in detail, post-independence governments favored the west-coast Moorish urban elite politically, while they disempowered the rural east-coast Moorish farmers socioeconomically (Wagner 1990, 1991). This pattern might have continued indefinitely if not for the fact that after 1983 the government could no longer guarantee the lives and property of Moors in the east-coast Tamil guerrilla combat zone. In the mid-1980s,



when President Jayawardene's UNP government employed Israeli military advisors and proposed submerging the key Moorish parliamentary constituencies of Ampara District within an enlarged Sinhala-dominated province of Uva, the Moors, led by east-coast sentiment, finally broke with the UNP and SLFP, organizing the first distinct Muslim political parties in independent Sri Lanka. These included the East Sri Lanka Muslim Front (ESLMF), which later became the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). When in 1989 the SLMC won four parliamentary seats, the political initiative within the Moorish community had been seized for the first time by leaders self-consciously representing the Eastern Province (Wagner 1990, 1991; Ameer Ali 1992b; Hennayake 1995; Kingsley M. de Silva 1998). Whether the SLMC can continue to attract the support of Muslims islandwide in the twenty-first century is an open question, particularly in the wake of the death in September 2000 of its founder, M. H. M. Ashroff, and the subsequent proliferation of quarreling SLMC factions. However, the vital interests of the east-coast Moors have definitely become a key ingredient in Sri Lanka's ethnic future (McGilvray and Raheem 2007).

Overall, the numbers of Sinhalas, Tamils, and Moors in the eastern region of the island are now roughly equal, with each group accounting for approximately one third of the population. However, because of the fragmented and Balkanized settlement pattern, none of the three ethnic groups can easily be encompassed within a single territorially contiguous unit. To the north, in the Trincomalee District, the Moorish, Tamil, and Sinhala populations are now of almost equal size, the result of Sinhala colonization under the Mahaweli Accelerated Program (Kemper 1991: 148–60; Manogaran 1994). Tamils predominate in the Batticaloa District, but there are significant Moorish enclaves at Kattankudy and Eravur. In Amparai District, where the greatest demographic change has taken place, Sinhalas and Moors now predominate, but there are significant Tamil enclaves at Karaitivu, Akkaraipattu, and Tirukkovil (Manogaran 1987, 1994). It is on the east coast that one of the pivotal issues of the Tamil separatist movement must be decided: will the Muslims eventually agree to join the Tamil-led movement for a Tamil-speaking homeland, perhaps with a constitutional provision for Muslim-majority subregions to safeguard their minority rights? Or will they prefer to remain an even smaller and more submerged minority within Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-majority districts? Sri Lanka's modern history is replete with episodes of communal conflict between each of these three ethnic communities. As Sri Lanka enters the twenty-first century, the status quo is tense and the long-term outcome is still not known.

## INTIMATE APPREHENSIONS AND STEREOTYPES

Residential neighborhoods of Tamils and Moors often look quite similar to the eye, lushly planted with hibiscus, coconut, arecanut, and mango trees, each household lot guarded by perimeter walls or formidable barbed-wire fences. At a glance it is not always obvious where Moorish villages stop and Tamil villages begin. As with the popularly alleged “racial” differences between Sinhalese and Tamils, outward physical differences between Tamils and Moors are also sometimes difficult for an outside observer to detect. Local people will occasionally point out Moors with lighter skin and aquiline features as evidence of their Arab ancestry. However, the most reliable markers of Tamil versus Moorish identity “on the street” are the cultural ones: dress, occupation, and to some degree, vocabulary and dialect.<sup>5</sup> Although Western-style shirts are nearly universal, Moorish men tend more often to wear as a lower garment a tubular stitched-cotton sarong (*cāram*), typically in a plaid or check pattern, in older generations secured with a wide black belt, while Tamil men more often wear a plain white, unstitched cotton *vēṭṭi* and never a belt. Both Tamil and Moorish women wear a sari and blouse, but Islamic modesty requires Moorish women to cover their heads and part of their faces with the ends of their saris in public, a practice locally known as *mukkāṭu*. Hindu Saivite face and body markings (sacred ash, sandalwood paste, vermilion powder, male earrings) are unmistakably Tamil. Simple white kerchiefs, embroidered skullcaps, or the almost-extinct fez may be worn by Moorish men, especially as the hours of prayer approach. However, ambiguity and disguise are always possible: during anti-Tamil riots in Sinhala areas, Moorish men have sometimes escaped mistaken slaughter only by displaying anatomical proof of circumcision.

Hindu and Muslim places of worship in Akkaraipattu are managed on a similar matriclan basis. In the course of fieldwork, however, I was struck by the difference in religious behavioral styles between the Tamils and the Moors. The Tamils I knew seemed to enjoy their rituals, and they encouraged me to enter temples and attend pujas at will. The Muslims were generally more protective of their sacred spaces and more eager to engage in theological debates concerning my personal religious beliefs. As a first approximation, the distinction between Hindu “orthopraxy” and Muslim “orthodoxy” works pretty well, although the east-coast Tamil Hindus are notably less Sanskritic in their rituals than one would find in the agamic temples of Jaffna (McGilvray 1988). In the sphere of public worship, there is now very little crossover or joint participation by Hindus and Muslims. The only exceptions I noted were some Tamil

Hindus who made vows and offerings at the tombs of Muslim saints and one or two Moors from other villages who participated in firewalking vows at the Bhadrakali temple.

Moors and Tamils share very similar cultural understandings of sexuality and the body, of heating and cooling foods and substances, and of folk medicine derived from the Siddha and Ayurvedic traditions. Local specialists in both communities are called “curers” (*parikāri*; colloq. “*parisari*”); no Muslim practitioners in Akkaraipattu use the title of *hakīm* or identify with the Arabic *Ūnāni* medical system. At the level of ghosts and malevolent spirits (*pēy*, *picācu*, Muslim *jinn*), the Tamils and the Moors have a similar construction of the supernatural. There are both Tamil and Muslim *mantiravātis* (experts in the use of mantras to control demonic forces), and there is a cult of local female spirits (*tāymār*, the mothers) discretely conducted by some Moorish women beyond the male gaze. Until venturing outside of one’s own ethnic neighborhood became a dangerous undertaking as the Eelam “problems” progressively worsened, some Moors would consult Tamil astrologers concerning marriage, career, and other personal problems. Similar guidance remains available from Moorish numerologists and ink-readers, although I never heard of Tamils seeking their services.

Young Muslim children of both sexes continue to attend traditional neighborhood “recitation schools” (*ōtuppallikkūṭam*) to memorize Quranic scripture, but the agents of modern pan-Islamism are nowadays more visible, particularly young *ālīms* and *maulavis*, college and seminary-trained teachers of Islam in the Muslim government schools. Their efforts to suppress local traditions and practices as “non-Islamic” have met with mixed success, and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate the pro-Islamic from the anti-Tamil motives which may lie behind such actions. For very practical reasons, poorer Moorish women still work as members of female weeding and threshing teams in the fields, bringing home cash or a share of the paddy harvest for their families. At the same time, Muslims in many areas have stopped employing Hindu caste musicians at local ceremonies and circumcisions, because this Islamic “purification” also enables an anti-Tamil economic boycott. During my visits to Akkaraipattu between 1993 and 2005, many Moors still employed Tamil Washermen for domestic laundry services, and Tamil Blacksmiths still forged agricultural tools and bullock-cart wheels for Moorish farmers, despite the heightened ethnic tensions of Eelam War III.

Despite the life-ways the Tamils and the Moors have in common, there are

barriers to direct social interaction between them, such as the bifurcated government school system. There seem to be virtually no Tamil-Moorish intermarriages today, although they must have occurred widely in the distant past. Similarly, contemporary Tamil converts to Islam are rare; I came across only one or two in my entire fieldwork, both Tamil women who married Moorish men. I observed very few Tamil-Moor interhousehold visitations, gift-giving relationships, or food exchanges except those associated with landlord-tenant obligations or with hereditary low-caste Tamil service to Moorish land owners. Women are generally shielded from contact with the opposite community more than men, and Moorish women are shielded most of all.

The remaining opportunities for direct Tamil-Muslim social interaction are largely vocational and economic. In the 1970s, before the escalation of the Eelam War, Tamils and Muslims might cultivate paddies on adjacent tracts of land, in which case they would also participate together on irrigation committees. Tamil and Muslim landowners would also recruit tenant cultivators and field laborers from the opposite community. As a result of violence starting in the 1980s, paddy-cultivation and land-tenure patterns have been severely disrupted, and farmers in some areas have lost control of their fields to members of other ethnic communities, or to the LTTE itself. I do not know whether many joint Tamil-Muslim irrigation committees continue to function today, but many Tamil laborers were still reported to be employed by Muslim landowners in Akkaraipattu (University Teachers for Human Rights 1993b). In the 1970s shoppers could choose to patronize Tamil or Moorish or Low-Country Sinhalese merchants in Akkaraipattu, depending on a complex set of considerations (price, selection, convenience, credit, and personal trust). However, ethnic resentment and suspicion was often noted, particularly among the Tamils, because the majority of retail establishments in Akkaraipattu were owned by Moors or Sinhals or “Jaffnese” Tamils. In the past decade the purchasing power and entrepreneurial activity of Tamils in a town such as Akkaraipattu has been drastically reduced by the Eelam conflict, while the Muslims are visibly more prosperous (University Teachers for Human Rights 1993b).

The High Caste Tamils with whom I became acquainted expressed at least a vague awareness of being heirs to a great Tamil cultural tradition, a Dravidian civilization with linguistic roots possibly going back to the pre-Vedic Indus Valley culture—and therefore much older than either Buddhism or Islam (Fairservis and Southworth 1989). Yet, although the linguistic and cultural chauvinism which has characterized Tamil politics in the twentieth century

has also been felt on the east coast, there is a tinge of ambivalence about the arrogance and presumed cultural authority of the Jaffna Tamils who have led this movement. My Tamil friends were not doctrinaire on these issues, but they prided themselves on adhering to a coherent and time-tested set of rules for living, including standards for Tamil food and attire, Tamil family patterns, Tamil religiosity, Tamil language and manners. They did not expect me, as a *vellaikkāran* (white man), to follow the same regimen, but they were surprised when they found I adhered to no systematic rules at all. My blatant dietary promiscuity and my groggy morning regimen seemed particularly lax to them, and the American kinship system struck both the Tamils and Moors as appallingly disorganized. When the postman delivered a wedding invitation from California announcing the marriage of my mother's brother's daughter—in Tamil and Moorish kinship a preferred wife—my friends were astonished I had not met and carefully scrutinized her fiancé, my rival, they presumed, for my cross-cousin's hand.

Many of the very same elements are found in Moorish self-perceptions, especially the concern to evince a well-ordered cultural system for living. However, they have the option of drawing on both the Islamic and the Dravidian cultural traditions, and sometimes there is debate over which one to emphasize. From the religious point of view, the Moors enjoy a robust, unequivocal self-definition as orthodox Sunni Muslims; indeed some of my friends urgently referred me to locally respected treatises on *sunnā* and *hadīth*, especially the nineteenth-century Arabic-Tamil commentaries of “Mappillai Ālim” (Ahmad Lebbai 1873; Shu'ayb Ālim 1993). Among the young, educated Moorish men who became my close friends during fieldwork in the 1970s there was some concern about their own “hybrid” cultural traits, which they humorously self-caricatured as consisting of an Arabic religion, together with a South Indian language, and a mixed repertoire of clothing and cuisine. Shouldn't the Moors have their own unique “national dress,” some of them asked, instead of just borrowing a Sinhala-Malay sarong and a Tamil sari? A further sartorial complication in the 1970s was the official adoption of the “Punjabi costume” of *salwar kameez* for Moorish high-school girls, more recently augmented with a white-hooded head-covering (referred to as *partā*, *purdah*). With grudging admiration, a Moorish friend of mine once remarked back in the 1970s that, regardless of where she might be living, a Tamil woman would unhesitatingly prefer to wear a traditional silk Kanchipuram sari and attach a garland of fragrant jasmine blossoms to her oiled and smoothly plaited hair. Lacking such a

strong cultural identity, a Muslim woman, he felt, would be more inclined to adopt local, or more Western styles. However, the spread of *hijāb* and “Islamic” dress among contemporary Sri Lankan Muslim women in recent decades has refuted this prediction.

There are many different perceptions and opinions of Tamil-Moor cultural difference, but some basic themes emerged in offhand remarks I heard from members of each group. Tamils I knew generally conceded that the Moors were extremely energetic and hardworking, a fact visibly reflected in their improved houses and growing material wealth. In fact, the increasing prosperity of the Moors is of acute concern to many High Caste Tamils, because it challenges their traditionally dominant position in society. Not only are the Moors getting richer, but they are also accused of having too many children. The Moors have maintained the highest birthrate of any ethnic community in the island over the past fifty years (Kurukulasuriya, Gafoor, and Hussein 1988: 191), a trend which is also true among Muslims in India. With demographic and electoral trends in mind, many Tamils and Moors—and nowadays some Sinhalas as well (Schrijvers 1998: 12)—view such robust fecundity as a political act.

I also encountered a more covert level of ethnic stereotyping constructed from private beliefs and suspicions, a more concealed discourse among younger men, reflecting both their curiosity and their anxiety about matters of the body. Because they are blocked from public view, the intimate domains of Muslim diet, sexuality, and hygiene typically generated the most Tamil gossip. For example, some Tamils theorize that the Moors’ vigor and fertility come from their consumption of beef, in Hindu eyes a polluting and highly “heating” meat that energizes the body and the libido.<sup>6</sup> Whether these ideas have had any practical impact at all on Tamil-Muslim communal politics is impossible for me to say, but at some level they form part of the web of cultural prejudice that separates the two groups.

There are some other grooming and adornment practices as well which serve to distinguish the Moors from the Tamils. It is considered good (*sunnat*) for Moorish men and women to shave or clip their armpit and pubic hair every forty days in order to ensure that all parts of the body are moistened during bathing to remove Muslim ritual pollution (*muḷukku*). Some informants also told me there was a *hadīth* against having body hair long enough to grasp. I knew a number of older, more traditional Moorish men in the 1970s who had their heads and armpits shaved monthly by a Moorish *Ostā* barber, while there

was no corresponding tonsorial practice among the Tamils except to fulfill special Hindu vows. While women of both communities wear pierced earrings, and Tamil women wear nose ornaments, it is *harām* (forbidden in Islam) for Moorish women to pierce the septum. Similarly, unlike traditional Hindu Tamils, Moorish men must not pierce their ears or wear earrings (Ahmad Lebbai 1873: 480).

In the sort of intimate observation which only a few of my closest male Moorish and Tamil friends ventured to offer, it was suggested that the substantive focus of everyday pollution-anxiety is different among the Tamils and Moors. While both communities share an aversion to contact with blood, semen, and menstrual and childbirth substances, the Tamils have a marked aversion to saliva (*eccil*) which is not reciprocated as strongly among the Moors. Indeed, some ecstatic Sufi rituals conducted by local Bawas involve the transfer of sacred power to implements of self-mortification from the breath and saliva of the presiding *kalifā*. The Moors, on the other hand, seem to have stronger taboos on contact with excreta, especially urine and sexual fluids. Moorish men are taught to take special precautions when they squat to urinate so that no urine touches their sarong or other clothing, a form of contamination that would bar them from the mosque and from Muslim prayers. Some male friends of mine said they would use a porous piece of brick to absorb the last drops of urine, echoing a Muslim practice also followed in North India (Mehta 2000: 86). Islamic rules require a full head-bath not only after but *between* all acts of sexual intercourse, a fact which can raise a chuckle when the squeaking sound of the well-sweep and the splashing of the bucket is heard late at night in Moorish neighborhoods.

The most frequent complaints I heard from Tamils concerning the Moors as a group were that they were politically unreliable, that they were at one time relatively less educated, that they lived in overcrowded houses and neighborhoods, that they ate beef, and—admittedly a minor point—that they had a fondness for asphyxiating scents and perfumes (*attar*). The latter is obviously a case of selective criticism, for the Tamils burn strongly aromatic camphor and apply sweet-smelling sandalwood paste in all their Hindu rituals. I did notice that long-lasting, concentrated *attar* scent was routinely applied to guests and participants at many Moorish events in order to enhance the sense of ritual occasion.<sup>7</sup>

Moorish stereotypes of the Tamils reflected a less voyeuristic concern with the details of grooming and sexual practices. Instead, they complained to me

about the monopoly of Tamils in the professions and the civil service, a charge more properly directed against the Jaffna Tamils, who have historically far outnumbered the local Batticaloa Tamils in these career paths. Moors would acknowledge that, until recent decades, the Tamils had been better educated, both in traditional Tamil culture as well as in the modern professions, but they resented the Tamils' unnecessary arrogance and ingrained attitudes of superiority. Moors attributed much of this to the rigidity of the Hindu caste system and to the inegalitarian hierarchical frame of mind on which it is based. All Muslims, they assured me, are equal before Allah. Although my fieldwork eventually turned up some very small hereditarily ranked endogamous Moorish subgroups (*Ostā* barber-circumcisers and *Maulānā* Sayyids), the claim of broad ritual equality among the Moors is indeed valid. In a town like Akkarai-pattu, however, wealth differences appear more pronounced among the Muslims than among the Tamils.<sup>8</sup> Tamils are stigmatized in the eyes of the Moors for their propensity to waste time and money drinking alcohol, although some Moors are also known to imbibe on occasion. Finally, although they had little eyewitness knowledge of these matters, the Muslims' opinion of Hindu religious practices was uniformly negative. Tamil Saivism was criticized for being polytheistic, idolatrous, and demonic, and for not being a prophetic Religion of the Book. On this issue, the local Muslims and the Christians definitely saw eye to eye.

#### **KUḶAPPAM: LOCAL TAMIL-MUSLIM DISTURBANCES**

Popular memory recounts the many localized Tamil-Moor riots and disturbances (*kuḷappam*, mix-up; *caṇṭai*, fight) that have plagued communal relations on the east coast throughout the twentieth century and probably earlier.<sup>9</sup> Although I directly witnessed no local Tamil-Muslim violence during my fieldwork, I did gather oral accounts of such outbreaks. One type of incident was the post-election reprisal, typically an attack on members of the opposite community for failure to deliver blocs of votes that had been purchased in advance with money or arrack (or possibly purchased twice, by different candidates). A second type of conflict would arise from an individual provocation which was perceived as a generalized insult to the entire Tamil or Muslim community. When, for example, in the late 1960s a drunken Moorish man allegedly snipped off the braided hair of a Tamil woman who had spurned his advances in public, an innocent Moorish bystander soon lost his ear, and there were communal ambushes and roadblocks for a week. A year or so later,



Moorish youths organized Akkaraipattu's very first—and not very Gandhian-inspired—Shramadana community self-help project: a new road allowing Muslim cultivators to circumambulate Tamil villages to evade ambush during future communal riots.

A third type of violence was related to a growing competition for land, including residential building sites. The historical tendency over the last 150 years has been for successful Moors to expand their agricultural landholdings and businesses, while upwardly mobile Tamils have favored education and a career in the professions. Recognizing the gradual decline in the numbers of Tamil-owned paddy fields, the Tamils are now chagrined and resentful. Because of the determination of Muslims to reside together in established enclaves, the pressure on adjoining Tamil neighborhoods has resulted in both irresistible buy-outs and violent evictions of Tamil residents by their Moorish neighbors. For example, lower-caste Tamils have been forcibly driven out of their neighborhoods in the Kalmunai-Sainthamaruthu area, and Moors have quickly moved in (University Teachers for Human Rights 1991: 49–55; Fuglerud 2003: 70–73; and my own fieldnotes).

Based on accounts of Hindu-Muslim rioting in North India, I had initially assumed that Tamil-Moorish conflicts in Sri Lanka would be sparked by religious provocations: Muslim cow slaughter, Hindu processions near mosques, and the like. However, the actual incidents I recorded suggest that “religious” issues have not been a trigger, not even a major underlying cause, of local Moorish-Tamil violence on the east coast. Even when religious sites have been targeted, such as the destruction of the Bhadrakali temple in Akkaraipattu by Muslims (with the acquiescence of the Sri Lankan Army) after the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1989, the underlying motive appears to have been a desire to expand the boundaries of the Moorish residential neighborhood near which the temple was situated. With the upsurge of warfare between Tamil guerrillas and Sri Lankan armed forces in the region since 1983, Moorish seizure of agricultural lands abandoned by fleeing Tamil refugees and reprisal depredations by Tamils of exposed Moorish fields have further enflamed the inter-ethnic situation (University Teachers for Human Rights 1991, 1993b).

Difficult as it is to take a longer view of such events, they must nevertheless be understood as part of the gradual emancipation of the Moorish community from pre-modern Tamil Hindu political domination, caste hierarchies, and land-tenure systems in the Batticaloa region: the Mukkuvar *vannimai* and its postcolonial incarnations. Nowadays the Moors enjoy a degree of economic

prosperity and political independence from the Tamils that would have been impossible to imagine a century earlier. The wealthier, High Caste Tamils are particularly aware of this trend, which represents the loss—or the increasing irrelevance—of their hereditary status privileges. The Moors are fully aware that many High Caste Tamils look down on them as their recent inferiors, and this has spurred the younger and more professionally oriented Muslims to strive for modern careers and avenues of self-respect quite independent of the Tamils.

#### THE REEMERGENCE OF EASTERN IDENTITY

In the 1990s the violence drastically escalated on all sides. From the very start of the Eelam conflict, communal interests represented by the Sinhalese majority parties had repeatedly sought to deepen the schism between the Tamils and Moors by deliberately provoking and exacerbating local violence between them (Ameer Ali 1986–1987: 164; University Teachers for Human Rights 1991; fieldwork data 1993, 1995). In the 1980s the Sri Lankan Army and security personnel committed indiscriminate massacres, mass abductions, rapes, and grisly nonjudicial executions, followed by the harsh occupation of the IPKF (Bastiampillai 1995). In the 1990s, however, the LTTE guerrillas themselves committed appalling massacres and forced expulsions of Muslims. In response, government-armed Muslim Home Guards were recruited in some settlements, and these Muslim militias were sometimes accused of vendetta operations against local Tamils. Also working against Tamil-Muslim cordiality were the various armed and thuggish “ex-militant” Tamil groups (e.g., PLOTE, TELO, EPRLF) who implemented the Sri Lankan security forces’ strategy of divide and rule in the Batticaloa region after the withdrawal of the IPKF in 1989 (Krishna 1994: 312).

The original Federal Party slogan of S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, who sought to unite all of Sri Lanka’s “Tamil-speaking peoples” under one political umbrella, was rejected by earlier Colombo-based Muslim leaders, who seemed unable to forget the hypocrisy and unreliability of Ramanathan, the Tamil leader, a half-century earlier. However, there is actually a great deal of local, regionally inspired poetry, folklore, and religious literature composed in Tamil by both Muslims and Tamils from Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mannar, and elsewhere (Kandiah 1964; Sivathamby 1987; Uwise 1986, 1990; Saleem 1990). In fact, when the Eelam War first broke out in the 1980s, Tamil militant groups, including the LTTE, were still able to recruit some Muslim fighters from the Eastern and Northern Provinces on the basis of regional loyalty to the idea of a Tamil-

speaking homeland. This militant collaboration between Tamil and Muslim youths, with its echo of the historic Moor-Mukkuvar alliance celebrated in Batticaloa legend, was shattered in 1990 when the eastern command of the LTTE, acting on local enmities and personal resentments, launched a series of attacks and pogroms against Muslims, including the well-publicized Kattankudy Mosque massacre (Sivaram 1991, 1992; McGilvray 1997). The depth of LTTE misunderstanding and miscalculation was illustrated by a speech given later that year by Tamil Tiger spokesman Y. Yogi, scolding the Moors for failing to properly identify themselves as Tamils and justifying the mass expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna and Mannar by the LTTE in 1990 as punishment for their alleged ethnic betrayal (University Teachers for Human Rights 1991: 42–43; Sivaram 1992; Hennayake 1993; Hasbullah 2004). Tragically, this was Ponnambalam Ramanathan's 1888 "ethnological" thesis all over again, but this time it was enforced with Kalashnikov rifles and a brutal agenda of ethnic cleansing.<sup>10</sup> However, if Yogi had asked Tamils in Akkaraipattu, most would have told him, as they told me, that the Moors were a separate race (*iṇam*).

Such calculated acts of inter-ethnic sabotage by government forces and by Tamil militants have intentionally widened the division between the Muslims and the Tamils into a political chasm (Thangarajah 2003a: 30–34). Predictably enough, there has even been a call for the creation of a separate Muslim province—or a linked set of Muslim cantons—centered in the southeast of the island, labeled by some media pundits as "Muslim Eelam." However, regional and ethnic identities are always contextually constructed and historically conditioned, and a great deal of new history is presently being made in Sri Lanka. The opportunistic "non-Tamil" ideology of the Muslim establishment, coupled with the harsh "Eelam or nothing" mindset of the Tamil guerrillas, have made a rapprochement based on a recognition of shared Tamil and Moorish cultural affinities and regional loyalties on the east coast extremely difficult to achieve. However, the sheer terror and exhaustion of the Eelam conflict is so desperately felt in the eastern war zone, that the basis for a pragmatic rapprochement between the Tamils and Muslims of the Batticaloa region may still be possible (Lawrence 1997, 1998, 2000; McGilvray 1997; Schrijvers 1998; McGilvray and Raheem 2007; but see Krishna 1994 for a more pessimistic view).

Throughout the conflict there has been a feeling among some Batticaloa Tamils that the Eelam secessionist cause has been monopolized by the LTTE's Jaffna-based leadership, and that eastern-born sons and daughters have been disproportionately martyred to achieve the military objectives of the LTTE in the north, such as the capture of the Sri Lankan Army's strategic bastion at

Elephant Pass, gateway to the Jaffna Peninsula. As I neared completion of this book, the most significant schism in the history of the LTTE occurred as the leader of the Tamil Tigers in the eastern region, known by his nom de guerre, Colonel Karuna, broke away from LTTE founder Velupillai Prabhakaran in 2004 and took 6,000 cadres with him, charging the Vanni-based leadership with not representing the best interests of Tamils in the east. Karuna's forces were quickly dispersed by a decisive LTTE counterattack, but a historic watershed in the Eelam struggle had been reached. The suffering and hardship of the Batticaloa Tamils over two decades of civil war has now been expressed openly in the form of an eastern regional mutiny within the LTTE itself, even though the personal motives and hidden allies of Karuna are suspect in the eyes of many.<sup>11</sup> There is also little prospect that the schism will be healed quickly, since it has been thoroughly exploited for strategic ends by the Sri Lankan security forces.

#### **SUMMARY: PROGRESS OR DEEPER POLARIZATION?**

After decades of political marginality—a sense of cultural subordination to Jaffna in the case of the Tamils and of agrarian provincialism in the eyes of Colombo Muslim urban elites in the case of the Moors—the people of the Batticaloa region have emerged in the era of the Eelam conflict as significant actors in Sri Lanka's ethnic drama. A pattern of local-level Tamil-Muslim riots and civil disturbances in towns such as Akkaraipattu can be traced back many years, but the causes have been land scarcity and insults to communal honor, not religious hatreds. However, the Eelam struggle has exacerbated these polarizing events, and the increased separation of the two communities has, if anything, deepened the mutual suspicions and cultural stereotypes of each group.

It is too early to say what the long-term impact of the Karuna schism will be, but an escalating series of internecine reprisals and assassinations between both Tamil guerilla factions suggests that they see the stakes as very high indeed. However, it is also possible this development, together with the catastrophic tsunami of 26 December 2004, could forge a renewed dialog between the Tamils and the Moors in the eastern region of the island. While these calamities may intensify the jealousies and competition for resources that have divided the two communities in the past, it is also possible they could lead to a renewed appreciation of the vital economic, political, and cultural interests they share as deeply settled neighbors in the Batticaloa region. Once again, Sri Lanka's eastern region is proving to be an unpredictable crucible of conflict.



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## EPILOGUE: FIELDNOTES FROM THE WAR ZONE

From the mid-1980s onward, Akkaraipattu and the larger Batticaloa region experienced two full-scale Sri Lankan Army campaigns against the Tamil guerrillas as well as a military occupation by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). There were brutal operations by the LTTE and rival Tamil militant groups involving widespread assassination, extortion, abduction, and the outright slaughter of Muslims at prayer, as well as repeated round-ups, torture, disappearances, gruesome decapitations, and full-scale massacres of Tamil civilians by Sri Lankan security forces acting with extrajudicial impunity. Although the main theater of military operations shifted north in the 1990s to the Vanni and the Jaffna Peninsula, the east coast has always remained a tenuously held and bitterly contested region in the government's efforts to prevent the establishment of an independent Tamil Eelam in the northeastern quadrant of the island.

A number of scholars have begun to document the personal traumas and cultural resources of both innocent victims and active combatants who experienced this onslaught, but the fate of broader cultural

patterns, caste and kinship structures, and collective identities remains to be seen.<sup>1</sup> Because violence and security problems in the east have made fieldwork difficult and hazardous, the answers to these questions are by no means clear. However an overall solution to Sri Lanka's civil conflict will ultimately depend on the social resilience, cultural adaptability, and political wisdom of the Tamil and Muslim communities in this multicultural, multilingual, multireligious eastern region: Sri Lanka's ethnic crucible. I now offer some impressions of how the Eelam conflict has affected local social and cultural patterns, based on fieldwork I conducted in Akkaraipattu and in other parts of the Batticaloa region in the summers of 1993, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2007.

On my first return trip in the summer of 1993, D. B. Wijetunge had succeeded the assassinated President Premadasa and the government's battle against the LTTE seemed to have reached a fragile and jittery stalemate in the east. There were fortified Sri Lankan Army camps and sandbagged Special Task Force (STF) commando checkpoints everywhere, and although the Tigers were keeping a fairly low profile, their eyes and ears were assumed to be omnipresent. Bus passengers were frequently required to undergo police identification before proceeding (figure 32). The sense of insecurity and fear was palpable in practically every social interaction I had, with people abruptly lowering their voices to a whisper when they referred to the STF or the Tamil Tigers. It was my first experience of what it is like to do anthropology under conditions of military occupation and de facto martial law. It was also my first experience of having my research appropriated for local consumption: I learned that a Mukkuvar caste patriot near Batticaloa had been quoting one of my 1982 publications to glorify the military heritage of the Mukkuvar caste. I traveled as widely as I could in the region, all the way from Batticaloa town south to Akkaraipattu and on to Pottuvil, and also from the coastal settlements of Kaluvanchikkudy and Kalmunai inland to Kokkaticcolai, Palugamam, and Mandur, for a total of fifteen days. In July of 1995 I once again visited the east, but by this time the peace negotiations between the LTTE and President Chandrika Kumaratunge's government had abruptly collapsed and the military situation in the east was getting hotter. My eighteen-year-old son and I drove straight to Akkaraipattu in the company of an old friend, stayed two days on the Muslim side of town, then spent two more days in a Tamil neighborhood, during which time we were briefly "rounded-up" by the STF commandos in a pre-dawn house-to-house raid. Then, on the sensible advice of everyone, we departed on exactly the same road we had come by.





**FIGURE 32.** Sri Lankan police in Akkaraipattu checking bus passengers heading south toward the Tamil villages of Tambiluvil and Tirukkovil (1993).

Rather than any specific ethnographic goal, I intended during my visits to the east in 1993 and 1995 to survey the social landscape generally and to assess whether any features of the local-level Tamil-Moorish society I had studied in the 1970s were still in existence. For me, one of the most astonishing things was to see the rubble of bombed-out homes and shops interspersed between settlements seemingly untouched by battle. There was a new concrete clock tower of unique Islamo-Buddhist design at the main Akkaraipattu junction (figure 33), erected by the late President Premadasa to accompany two new garment factories (one Muslim, one Tamil) that employed local women for a few years before shutting down (Lynch 2007). The visible economic prosperity of the Muslim commercial centers was especially striking in contrast to the depressed or nonexistent mercantile economy of the Tamils, even within the very same town—as in Akkaraipattu, for example. Both the political and the military priorities of recent Sri Lankan government administrations have insulated the Muslim merchants from the embargoes and roadblocks and military restrictions on doing business that local Tamil merchants have been forced to endure in the name of eliminating a potential economic support base for the guerrillas.



**FIGURE 33.** Clock tower erected at Akkaraipattu junction by the late President Premadasa in the early 1990s in conjunction with two new garment factories, which have since closed (1993). The design has a Buddhist dagoba rising above what may be a Muslim mosque dome, but it includes no Tamil Hindu architectural motifs.

During my visits since 2001, however, there have been visible signs of a prosperous agricultural economy and a return to normal life, with new Indian-made paddy-harvesting machines starting to replace manual field laborers in areas around Kalmunai. Private English-language and computer-training classes have sprung up, including a short-lived branch of “Bill Gates Technology” (figure 34). The ruins of shops and homes destroyed in the active phases of military combat in the 1990s have mostly been cleaned up, although the occasional roofless shell of a roadside shop still bears testimony to the earlier carnage. The Moorish towns in particular have enjoyed a construction boom, and Muslim merchants offer a wide range of gleaming merchandise. The Tamil settlements, apart from Batticaloa town, still appear economically deprived, especially in areas closer to LTTE bases, such as Tambiluvil and Tirukkivil.

All of these descriptions, of course, refer to the period prior to the December 2004 tsunami, which caused far greater death and destruction to beach-



**FIGURE 34.** Signs of the private computer classes and English tutorials that have sprung up during the intervals between the Eelam Wars to provide new career options for young people in Akkaraipattu (2001).

front communities—both Tamil and Moorish—than anything during the Eelam Wars (McGilvray 2006). The predominantly Tamil-speaking eastern coastal districts from Pottuvil to Point Pedro took the tsunami waves head-on, accounting for two-thirds of Sri Lanka's 31,000 tsunami fatalities, and in Ampara District alone at least 10,000 lives were lost. In the Tamil villages of Tambiluvil and Tirukkivil directly south of Akkaraipattu, and in the Moorish villages of Nintavur, Sainthamaruthu, Kalmunai, and Maruthamunai directly to the north, there was total destruction of the beachfront neighborhoods. Fortunately, in Akkaraipattu the tsunami damage and lost of life was minimal in comparison, seemingly due to oceanographic conditions and to the fact that the town center is located farther inland (map 7).<sup>2</sup>

#### **THE TAMIL AND MUSLIM DIASPORA**

At the family and household levels, the Eelam Wars have resulted in a massive emigration of Tamils out of the eastern war zone to Colombo and to diasporic communities abroad, with London and Toronto being the most prized destinations. It now seems likely that nearly one-third of Sri Lanka's Tamil

population have left the island since the outbreak of the Eelam conflict in 1983. Sri Lanka's Moors, too, are increasingly traveling abroad, not as refugees, but as housemaids and workers in the Muslim economies of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> In order to understand the current situation of the Tamils and Moors on the east coast of Sri Lanka, it is necessary to realize there is no neighborhood, no cultural institution, no family that has not been in some way affected by the diaspora. The global diasporic Tamil network has been widely cited as a strategic resource for the LTTE guerrilla movement, but the diaspora also provides linkages and connections for ordinary Tamils and Moors in places like Akkaraipattu. Some of this migration has been motivated by violence and the hope for political asylum, while in other cases there is simply the lure of foreign employment. In comparison with Sri Lanka's central and western regions, where Sinhala female labor migration to the Middle East has become a major component of the village economy (Gamburd 2000), my impression is that the east coast has a relatively lower rate of transnational employment. Still, I have been amazed on recent visits to Akkaraipattu to realize how many of my friends and acquaintances, both Tamil and Muslim, have some direct or indirect connection to persons living or working abroad.

The diaspora is a fact of life, but it is not yet clear in precisely what ways these global flows and linkages will ultimately reinforce or transform the regional social structure and patterns of life of the Tamils and Moors in Sri Lanka's eastern coastal region. One recent account of Muslim housemaids who have returned to the Batticaloa District from jobs in the Middle East reports that these women have been able to convert their earnings and their newly acquired "Arab" forms of cultural capital (Islamic *hijāb*, Middle Eastern-style home decorations) into greater personal influence within the household (Thangarajah 2003b). My informal observation in Akkaraipattu is that foreign employment, whether by men or women, is primarily directed to the task of building larger houses that will ultimately become the dowry property of matrilocally married daughters. Foreign earnings, in other words, are principally invested in new dowry homes for daughters, inflating the local real-estate market no doubt, but also reinforcing the east-coast Tamil and Moorish value placed on women's property and female-household clustering that is central to the social structure of the Batticaloa region.

#### MATRILINY AND THE EELAM WARS

It has become increasingly obvious to me over the last couple of decades that the "ethnographic present" is a perishable resource for an anthropologist. By

the early 1990s I was bracing myself for the possibility that my earlier fieldwork data on matrilineal temple and mosque administration, matrilineal marriage alliance, and matrilocal households and dowry would no longer be living ethnography, just quaint ethnohistory. And, frankly, I felt a bit sheepish to have been so absorbed in a matrilineal kinship system while a struggle for national liberation was hatching under my very nose. What I have discovered, however, is that matrilineal institutions still persist in the localities that I know well, and in some cases they have been revitalized by the shocking events of the Eelam Wars. People are pleased to learn that I am still interested in their older cultural traditions, practices that, from their point of view, define the Batticaloa region as a unique society, distinct from the west coast, the Kandyan Hills, or Jaffna. My data on the current situation are necessarily more scattered and anecdotal than my notes from the 1970s, because the region is still under tense occupation by security forces and Tamil guerrillas, and the conditions for relaxed and extended fieldwork simply do not exist. While research in other parts of Batticaloa might reveal greater variation and social change, my impressions from the six trips I have made to Akkaraipattu are reasonably coherent and have been corroborated several times.

### **Role of Matriclans in Revitalized Temples and Mosques**

The High Caste Pillaiyar temple in Akkaraipattu was in a period of stagnation during my fieldwork in the early 1970s (see chap. 7). The building itself was run-down and dingy, and the annual festival—the key dramaturgical setting of Hindu caste status display—had not been performed in several years. The temple board of High Caste matrilineal trustees seemed moribund, its members fond of reminiscing about an earlier age of ritual perfection when subaltern groups like the Smiths and the Climbers had performed their hereditary duties respectfully and without complaint. Yes, there was a lot of exciting popular Hinduism going on among the lower castes—vows, trance-possession, fire-walking—but not at the largest and most prestigious temple in town.

I was astonished, therefore, when I saw the temple in Akkaraipattu in 1993 after a fifteen-year absence, a period during which the entire eastern coastal region had suffered military occupation by the IPKF and renewed bloody fighting between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army. In some places the roads were still lined with piles of rubble where homes and shops had once stood, now demolished by bombs and artillery. The Akkaraipattu Sri Sitti Vinayakar (Pillaiyar) temple, however, was gleaming, and it was not simply a matter of freshly painted red-and-white stripes on the outer walls. Major architectural

additions had been made to the temple, and new subsidiary shrines to other deities had been built inside the temple compound, all paid for by an impressive fundraising campaign. A nationally publicized reconsecration ceremony (*kumpāpishēkam*) had just been performed by priests from Colombo, Tiruketisvaram, and Jaffna. In a nearby lane a new Hindu orphanage had been built for children whose parents had died in the ethnic violence. I also discovered that the leadership for this impressive rebirth of the temple had come from the matrilineal kudi trustees (Vannakkars), each of them representing local matrilineal clans in the very same fashion I had observed two decades earlier (figure 35). None of the newly constructed High Caste temples in the direction of Alaiyadivembu (see map 8 and map 9), however, are administered by the matrilineal kudi system, so it seems to be a pattern that is being preserved primarily at older, larger temples where it has the status of ancient tradition.

During the same visit in 1993, I noticed many other newly refurbished and renovated Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, and Christian churches, often standing in stark contrast to the damaged houses and shops of the civilian population. Surprisingly, the 26 December 2004 tsunami spared the largest and most historic temples and mosques located along the eastern coastline, such as the Kandaswamy temple in Tirukkovil and the Beach Mosque shrine in Kalmunaikudy, further imbuing these shrines with miraculous sanctity.<sup>4</sup> Although many minor religious sites in the Batticaloa region have been damaged or destroyed by the civil war and the tsunami, the general picture shows lavish reconstruction and expansion of temples and mosques. In Makiladitivu near Kokkadichcholai—in June 1991 the scene of an army rape and massacre of Tamil civilians who had sought refuge in the temple of the goddess Kannakiyamman (Lawrence 2000: 182–83)—I noticed that the temple had been handsomely repaired and repainted. In cases like this, local residents attributed their wartime suffering and misfortune to divine retribution, punishment for not fulfilling their vows and ritual obligations to the deity of the temple. As soon as money was available and public security permitted, many Tamil communities undertook to restore and strengthen the protection of their local deities by renewing and renovating their shrines and temples. The conservative nature of local Tamil religiosity has also reinforced the idea that traditional matrilineal forms of Hindu temple administration should be maintained and upheld as well. Likewise, among the Muslims of Akkaraipattu, the management of the three large *jummā* mosques continues to be based on the traditional system of matrilineal kudi Maraikkars (trustees), while at the same



**FIGURE 35.** A younger generation of matrilineal-kudi Vannakkars pose for a photograph beside the newly refurbished and reconsecrated Pillaiyar temple in Division 7 (1993). The Urpodiya stands at the center with a garland, next to the temple priest.

time there is a visible trend toward adoption of the Islamic head covering (*hijāb*) by Moorish women and, in addition, a more modest uniform for Muslim schoolgirls (figure 36). In addition, a totally concealing face mask (*niqāb*) is now being worn by many Muslim girls when walking to and from school.

My impression is that matrilineal temple and mosque organization is a conservative or customary form of religious practice that has been maintained, perhaps in some places even strengthened, during a period of great anxiety, suffering, and violence. What is not yet clear, however, is the nature and extent of active LTTE involvement in temples situated within the zone of Tamil Tiger military control on the western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon. On a short visit to Kokkadichcholai in 1993, I met the priest of the famous Siva temple, a hereditary Virasaiva Kurukkal who wore the silver lingam emblematic of his hereditary priestly matrilineage. People said the Tamil Tigers largely ignored the rituals at this famous “national” temple (*tēcattukkōvil*), and it seemed that wartime damage to this historic shrine was being repaired as quickly as possible. However, in Palugamam, a major Velalar village located nearby (Lawrence 2000: 175–81), there have been reports of LTTE interference with the hereditary mythic drama performed annually at the Draupadi Amman temple. Obviously, there is a potential for conflict between the cultural traditionalism



**FIGURE 36.** A Moorish schoolgirl reads her lesson wearing a Muslim purdah uniform in a classroom in Akkaraipattu (1993).

of older generation Hindu Tamils and the revolutionary mobilization efforts of youthful LTTE cadres, and the outcome is not yet clear.

#### **Matrilocal Marriage in a Time of Danger and Scarcity**

Most of the Tamil families I know have sons or daughters, uncles or nephews living overseas either temporarily (to earn money) or permanently (as asylum-seekers). Those who have remained behind—the elderly, the widowed, the caretakers, the economically and socially disadvantaged, those indissolubly attached to their *ūr* (home place)—must cope with conditions of danger and scarcity. In times of peace the east coast is a fertile zone of intensive wet-rice agriculture, with many areas capable of two crops per year under favorable irrigation. The LTTE, however, has occupied a considerable part of the paddy-growing region west of the Batticaloa Lagoon, as well as the Pattimedu paddy tract southwest of Akkaraipattu. In areas not under their direct control they extort a heavy grain tax from local proprietors. As a result, there are Tamil



and Moorish farmers in Akkaraipattu who have not set foot on their paddy fields in nearly twenty years. The problem of economic scarcity also makes it difficult to compete for bridegrooms in the arranged marriage “market.” Marriage negotiations require from the bride’s family a dowry (*cītaṇam*) consisting of liquid cash as well as real property: matrilocal houses and reasonably accessible paddy lands. Families cut off from their fields have no agricultural income, and fallow paddy lands have no value as dowry. Even dowry-houses may be devalued under wartime conditions if they are situated in vulnerable or exposed locations. I learned of one Akkaraipattu family who was asked to provide a dowry-house forty miles away, in a secure neighborhood of Batticaloa town, because the jittery bridegroom was unwilling to live matrilocally in an “exposed” house with his wife’s parents.

Equally significant is the scarcity of bridegrooms. Because they are more likely to be killed by the security forces, or to be tempted to join the LTTE, as well as being thought of as more self-reliant and capable of earning money abroad quickly, sons are given preference over daughters to be smuggled out of the country. Young men who remain behind may end up dead or in prison; others may join (or be conscripted into) the LTTE. Marriageable men are therefore in short supply, and the dowry levels have risen accordingly (Ruwanpura 2006: 18n21). Tamil women must now wait much longer to find a husband, and Tamil men—particularly those who have found jobs in the diaspora—are in a very strong bargaining position. I witnessed a lavish temple wedding in Akkaraipattu in 2001 where the expatriate Tamil groom, a Swiss candy-factory employee from a lower caste than the bride, had flown back to Sri Lanka to marry his teenage sweetheart. Another Tamil Hindu woman I have known for many years, a local schoolteacher with an undergraduate degree from the University of Colombo, recently got married at the age of forty-two to a Catholic man with no degree and also of somewhat lower caste. These marriages may prove to be blissful, but they are not what most Tamil parents before the Eelam Wars would have wished or anticipated.

The traditional matrilocal-residence pattern, with its ideal clustering of married daughters’ dowry-houses in adjacent compounds, does provide a degree of protection and support to many women under the unsettled conditions of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. With communal violence of the sort seen in Sri Lanka, the matrilocal-residence cluster serves a function similar to that of the pre-colonial militarized Kerala Nayar *taravād* house: a place of security for women and children while the young men of the family are on hazardous

duty elsewhere, whether at war, in prison, or working abroad. It still remains the normal expectation of Tamil and Muslim parents that their children will marry and settle matrilocally, even as scarcities and dangers force them to consider opportunistic matches that will fragment the family or tempt them to leave the Batticaloa region entirely. The matrilocal marriage system and the matrilineal temple and mosque organizational structure have survived two decades of civil war. For those Tamils and Muslims who continue to live in their ancestral villages and towns on the east coast of the island, these matrilineal patterns of life seem to hold as much appeal as ever.

#### **SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG THE TAMIL SPECIALIST CASTES**

A thirty-year perspective shows that Hindu caste membership in the east-coast region remains an important part of Tamil social structure and group identity. Although I do not have current information about the Sandar Climbers, the other specialist castes are still clearly identified in Tamil discourse as well as in the social geography of the town. Three of these (Smiths, Washermen, and Barbers) continue to earn a significant share of their livelihood from their hereditary occupations, and they all maintain endogamous caste boundaries. However, there has been diversity of social change among the traditionally lowest-ranked cluster of the three *kutimai* domestic-service castes—Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers—producing some striking developments I would not have predicted three decades ago.

#### **Washermen: Still Scrubbing**

The Washermen are viewed by High Caste Tamils in Akkaraipattu as closely linked to the Barbers in terms of their rank and their complementary ritual responsibilities. High Caste people would say the Washermen and Barbers are “like cross-cousins” to each other in terms of equality and teamwork (although certainly not in terms of preferred matrimony). In domestic rituals (weddings, funerals, female puberty rites) both the Washerman and the Barber have key roles to play. However, I never heard any Washermen or Barbers themselves proclaim such proud comradeship, and there was evidence of competition and rivalry for precedence in some situations. In formal opinion rankings, the Washermen slightly outranked the Barbers.

The Washermen have a headman, the Tandakkaran, who metonymically represents his entire caste by serving as the official washerman to the god.

When I began my fieldwork in 1970, a very small brick temple to the god Periya Tambiran had already been erected by the Washermen within view of the main High Caste Pillaiyar temple as a sign of their determination to exert more independence and religious autonomy. However, no one seemed to think the Washermen had gained much tangible benefit, apart from improved morale. Today the Washerman temple continues to stand on the site, somewhat enlarged, and remains active as a ritual center primarily during the annual Periya Tambiran festival.

Laundry work was the profession of 85 percent of Akkaraipattu's Washermen caste in the 1970s, and it appears that a high percentage continue to wash clothes today. A major reason for this is the substantial demand for laundry services from the Moors, who outnumber the Tamils in Akkaraipattu two to one, and who are nowadays, in the context of the Eelam War, relatively more prosperous than the Tamils. Every day one can see Washermen from the Tamil side of town bicycling over to the Muslim neighborhoods to pick up and deliver laundry. There are also nowadays more and more commercial laundry boutiques on the main streets of Akkaraipattu run by Tamil Washermen.

My general impression is that the Washermen, perhaps more than any other low-ranking Tamil caste, continue to make a modest but reliable livelihood in Akkaraipattu much as they did three decades ago. They do it by providing a service no one else cares to perform, and their large Muslim customer base gives them a degree of economic independence from the Tamil High Caste Hindu households that formerly dominated them rather harshly. Of all three *kuṭimai* castes, the condition of the Washermen today seems the most stable and unchanged. There may be out-migration and upward social mobility among the Washermen today that I have not been able to discern, but the fact that the Washermen have been recognized as official ritual sponsors (shareholders) in the annual festival at the revitalized High Caste Pillaiyar temple seems to indicate a solid core of Washerman caste families who continue to play a significant role enacting and ritually displaying the local Akkaraipattu caste hierarchy.

#### Barbers: A New Business Model

The Barbers of Akkaraipattu, even in the 1970s, were increasingly cutting hair in western-style barber saloons instead of paying the mandatory house calls that would have been expected a century earlier. This has transformed the Barbers into capitalist proprietors and employees, rather than feudal and subser-

vient “children of the house” (*kuṭi makkaḷ*), while it has also generated a more modern kind of stigma. The barbershop, a males-only establishment, is often suspected to be a place where illicit goods (such as liquor) and services (such as prostitution) can be arranged or procured. This is, of course, in addition to its being saturated with the ritual pollution caused by loose hair clippings that pile up daily. Even today, a barbershop haircut should be followed by a purifying “head-bath” after you reach home. In the 1970s 76 percent of the local Barber caste men were employed in barbering work, and I am not sure whether this has changed a great deal in recent decades.

In comparison with the other castes in Akkaraipattu, the Barbers in the 1970s seemed to have only a minimal degree of matriclan organization and no institutionalized religious activity. There were two unranked Barber matrilineal clans, but there was no Barber caste temple to display this segmentation in a matrilineal administrative structure or a system of ceremonial shares. Furthermore, nearly a third of the Barbers were totally unaware of their matrilineal membership. Even the residential focus of the Barbers was amorphously split between two different neighborhoods on the south side of town.

Customarily, the most important ritual duty performed by the Barber was the conduct of Tamil Hindu funerals. In the 1970s this role was filled by the headman of the Barber caste, the Mullaikkaran, who—just like the headman of the Washermen—served as spokesman and metonymic embodiment of his caste in relation to the higher castes of Akkaraipattu. At Hindu funerals, the Barber Mullaikkaran’s role was to construct the temporary palanquin, shave and dress the corpse, lead the funeral procession to the cemetery, and serve as master of ceremonies for the final rites that are performed by the chief mourner, usually the eldest son of the deceased. This specialized role in High Caste Tamil mortuary ritual was filled by only one man: the Barber headman, although the regular household barber would also be called on to assist.

Nowadays, however, the Barbers have successfully divorced themselves from the stigma of High Caste funeral service. After a dispute with the High Caste Urpodiyar sometime in the 1980s or 1990s the elderly headman of the Barbers, the Mullaikkaran, stopped serving as the chief officiant at Tamil funerals, leaving a key role in Hindu life-crisis ritual unfilled. Given its stigmatic connotations of funerary service, I am told, the memory of the Mullaikkaran’s ritual duties, and even the headman’s title itself, will soon be forgotten by members of the Barber caste. The High Caste solution to the lack of a funeral priest in Akkaraipattu has been to bring down a Barber funeral priest from

Badulla in the Kandyan Hill country. As an Up-Country Tamil from the teastate districts, he is a total outsider who is provided lodging by the High Caste temple trustees and is paid solely to conduct Tamil funerals. This withdrawal by the Barbers has been accompanied by a total cessation of Paraiyar drumming of any kind, radically changing the conduct of Tamil Hindu funerals in Akkaraipattu.

### Drummers: Stop the Music

The Paraiyars, who live in the geographically segregated hamlet of Kolavil on the south side of Akkaraipattu, were clearly ranked in the 1970s at the bottom of the local Tamil caste hierarchy, but their position as *kuṭimai* servants nevertheless entailed constitutional privileges in the High Caste view of things. While ranked lowest, their ritual service was also the most hotly sought after by the upwardly mobile castes, such as the Smiths and the Climbers. Having the honor and authority to summon the Paraiyars to drum at their funerals would put these groups on a par with the Velalars and Mukkuvars, or so it was hoped. Like their south Indian counterparts, the Paraiyars of Akkaraipattu have a strong organizational structure of clans, and they are fastidious about observing the “correct” Tamil marriage categories. Traditionally, the Paraiyars have specialized in a kind of music that induces ecstatic trance-possession and is associated with ferocious Tamil mother goddesses such as Mariyamman, who is their patron deity. In addition to treating snakebites and making public announcements, they are also assumed to be natural experts in sorcery and the occult.

Until their services were supplanted by newly arrived and higher-ranking Melakkarar caste musicians from Jaffna and Colombo, the Paraiyars provided music for auspicious ceremonies such as weddings. But the paradigmatic, and highly stigmatized, duty of the Paraiyars was to drum for Tamil funerals, a public performance led by the Paraiyar caste headman, the Muppan. In the 1970s the Muppan was still the formal headman of the Paraiyar caste, as well as an active musician, but his role and authority were increasingly undermined by a new form of caste organization centered on the new Hindu temple that had been built in the Paraiyar settlement. Whereas the ecstatic and temperamental smallpox goddess Mariyamman continued to be the Paraiyar caste deity, worshiped annually in a temporary pandal, she was now joined by the auspicious elephant-headed Pillaiyar (Ganesha), a male deity of great respectability and popularity among all Tamils, to be worshiped according to middle-

class canons of puja and devotion. By the late 1970s, the head trustee (Talaivar) and the temple board were clearly taking over leadership of the of Paraiyar community, while the Muppan and his musicians were increasingly rejected by the younger men because they embodied and enacted the collective stigma of funeral drumming.

Now, in the early twenty-first century, young men of the caste refuse to perform any drumming whatsoever, and the hereditary musical services of the Paraiyars have become impossible to obtain in Akkaraipattu. Efforts are underway to adopt a new caste name — *Valluvar*, from Tiruvalluvar, the fourth-century low-caste author of the Tamil *Tirukkural* — rather than Paraiyar, which betrays “drum” in the title itself.<sup>5</sup> In addition to having their own Pillaiyar temple, they have constructed an impressive Mariyamman Kovil with a large gopuram tower that is starting to attract some worshipers from outside the Paraiyar caste congregation (figure 37). Instead of caste service and field labor, vegetable cash-cropping has become a major source of increased income for this community. The upward mobility of the Paraiyars in Akkaraipattu first recorded in my 1970s fieldnotes has continued apace, and now the last ritual stigmas are being erased as the younger generation grows up with no experience of hereditary drumming service at all. There is also said to be sympathy for the LTTE in the Paraiyar-Valluvar caste community that can be traced back to early contacts with the guerrillas at forest chena-cultivation tracts in the jungles west of Akkaraipattu. All of this now requires High Caste funeral processions in Akkaraipattu to rely on recorded hymns amplified over portable loudspeakers, rather than live drumming, thus eliminating a symbolic mark of High Caste ranking that was widely cherished in the 1970s. Nowadays, the (former) Drummers of Kolavil have completely ended their symbolic subordination as *kuṭimai* servants of the High Castes of Akkaraipattu.

#### RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS IN A WORLD OF VIOLENCE

The deep collective wounds and personal suffering inflicted on the Tamils and Moors in the Batticaloa region as part of the Eelam conflict seem to have generated a renewed interest in forms of popular religious practice that are, in some ways, both traditional and individually therapeutic. Tamil Hindu responses to individual religious crises, like those of the Sinhala Buddhists (Obeyesekere 1977, 1978, 1981), often tend in the direction of ecstatic vows and trance-possession, traditional acts that take on even greater cultural meaning and emotional resonance in times of violence and terror. Among the Moors,



**FIGURE 37.** New Mariyamman temple erected by the former Paraiyar Drummers, now known as the Valluvar caste, in Kolavil North (2007).

while local forms of religious expression are inextricably connected to the larger trends in global Islamic movements, it is also possible to see some evidence of heightened interest in mystical, and more personal, forms of Muslim religious observance. The trauma of the tsunami disaster may have further intensified these religious trends among the Tamils and the Moors, but it is too early to trace any specific effects.

### **Hindu Trance and Vow Making**

Along with the repair and reconstruction of Hindu temples, there has been a remarkable increase in the popularity of Tamil trance mediums who provide answers about the fate of family members who have been arrested or who have gone missing in the course of the Eelam violence. The research of Patricia Lawrence (1997, 1998, 2000, 2003) has documented the astonishing popularity of local Tamil spirit-possession or trance mediums, many of them female, who provide a way for families to deal with the loss or disappearance of loved ones. A female oracle identified as Saktirani has developed a loyal clientele

of Tamil civilians, as well as members of other ethnic groups, who seek her help in locating, through trance visions, their sons or husbands who may have been incarcerated or subjected to torture (figure 38). As Lawrence's war-zone fieldwork has shown, such Hindu trance mediums provide religious authorization and a culturally acceptable venue for the expression of thoughts and feelings that must otherwise be repressed in a climate of pervasive terror and intimidation. The fact that Saktirani's clients also include Moors and Sinhals demonstrates the widespread need for individual advice, understanding, and catharsis across all communities.

At the level of collective ritual, Lawrence has also reported a huge increase in the level of participation in Hindu firewalking vows at major amman temples near Batticaloa, some of them, presumably, carried out by LTTE cadres themselves (figure 39). Sinhala army officers have also on occasion felt the hypnotic force of these Tamil goddesses (Lawrence 2000: 181). The core beliefs at the center of this phenomenon were clearly displayed to me at the annual festival to the goddess Bhadrakali in Akkaraipattu in the 1970s, when the Eelam conflict had not even begun to inflict its relentless suffering on the people of eastern Sri Lanka. Bhadrakali, and other local *ammaṅ* goddesses like her, such as Peechchiyamman and Mariyamman, are embodiments of primordial feminine energy (*sakti*) who exercise protective power over local villages and the surrounding areas. They are also extremely temperamental deities, sensitive to neglect, and unforgiving when promises and vows are broken. Typically, they are worshiped as unmarried goddesses, a condition that liberates their "symbolic heat" and generates a sacred force field conducive to trance-possession (McGilvray 1998b). Once a year at least, these amman goddesses demand violent forms of worship, often involving firewalking, flagellation, or *mullukkāvati* dancing with hooks in the back. Often, too, they will demand blood sacrifice, which nowadays means slaughtering chickens, or perhaps an occasional goat, at the climax of the festival. In an effort to solve personal problems Tamil devotees will make a vow to sponsor, or to perform, these ecstatic rites annually for a stipulated number of years. It works more or less like a spiritual contract: if the deity fulfills her side of the bargain, then the devotee must fulfill his. It happens, of course, that individuals sometimes forget their promises as time goes by, but when misfortune strikes they are likely to attribute their suffering to the anger and jealousy of the goddess they have ignored. The groundswell of firewalking vows reported by Lawrence at Kali and Peechchiyamman temples in the Batticaloa vicinity in the mid-1990s appears to have been a response of this sort to the death and destruction of the





**FIGURE 38.** Saktirani, a popular Tamil Hindu trance-possession oracle, provides guidance to an anxious Muslim policeman at her home near Batticaloa (1993).

Eelam War (Lawrence 1997). The renewal, since the mid-1990s, of the annual Kataragama pilgrimage on foot (*pāta yāttirai*) southward from Jaffna along the eastern coastline, spearheaded by the American devotee Patrick Harrigan, is another, more general, sign of popular Tamil religious devotion in the face of military occupation.<sup>6</sup> Trance-possession, pilgrimage, and vow making are “traditional” Tamil Hindu religious practices well documented in the Batticaloa region, but the suffering and destruction of the Eelam Wars have given them all new meaning and relevance in the contemporary situation.

#### **Muslim Polarization: Islamic Reformists vs. Sufi Sheikhs**

Among the Muslims of Sri Lanka, including the Moors of the eastern coastal region, the increased influence of strict pan-Islamic reformist movements in recent decades seems also to have been accompanied by a rebirth of Sufi mysticism. This may seem paradoxical, but these two forms of Muslim religiosity seem to have a dialogical or reciprocal relation to each other. The increased self-awareness caused by stringent “fundamentalist” Islamic proselytizing may lead some Muslims to seek an alternative, more tolerant form of worship, one which emphasizes personalized mystical gnosis under the protective tutelage of a Sufi sheikh (figure 40). There has been a Sufi substratum in Sri Lankan Muslim piety for centuries, but only in recent decades have these taken-for-



**FIGURE 39.** These boys made vows at a Pecciyamman temple near Batticaloa (1992). Terror and insecurity from the Eelam violence have prompted greater numbers of east coast Tamils to engage in ecstatic Hindu penances. Photo by Patricia Lawrence.

granted forms of traditional Muslim religious practice been labeled as such and condemned as heretical by reformist or Wahhabi-inspired Muslim clerics. Prior to the eighteenth century, the mainstream traditions of Islam, including those of South Asia, did not particularly distinguish the Sufi or saintly components of Muslim piety from the rest of the religion (Ernst 1997).

In any case, my fieldwork on popular Sufism in Sri Lanka over the past decade suggests that the older traditions of the Bawa faqirs—ecstatic followers of the Rifā'i order—as well as lay Sufi brotherhoods led by charismatic Sheikhs have grown in popularity, while at the same time attracting the opprobrium of the “fundamentalists” and the Islamic reformists for whom veneration of Muslim tombs and allegiance to personal Sufi sheikhs amounts to heresy or idolatry (McGilvray 2004). Recently, in 2004, mob violence broke out in Kattankudy and other east-coast Muslim towns between followers of the conservative clerics and the adherents of Sufi teachers such as Rauf Maulavi and Abdullah Payilvan. The roof and walls of the historic *Kuḷantaiyamma Kaburaḷi* mausoleum of the Periya Maulana lineage were also demolished, evidence it appears of a deeper polarization in the Batticaloa region than elsewhere in the island (figure 41). While it is hard to prove that increased personal devotion to Sufi sheikhs, and performing the ritual *zikr* of their Sufi orders is a response to the insecurities of the Eelam conflict, an appeal to the miraculous



**FIGURE 40.**  
An artist and former schoolteacher, this Sufi sheikh in Akkaraipattu has been designated as the Kalifa of an order originating in the Lakshadweep Islands off the west coast of India (2001).

protective powers of local saintly tomb-shrines does make some sense. This is illustrated in the case of rural tomb-shrines in Akkaraipattu that form a defensive perimeter against incursions by the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE, as well as by wild elephants. Sri Lanka, it turns out, has enjoyed a long history of Sufi influence from South India (Tamilnadu, Kerala, and Lakshadweep in particular), and the availability of jet travel and electronic communication has amplified this pattern. Sufism remains a minority branch of Islam in Sri Lanka, but the Eelam War and ethnic tensions in the east have provided new reasons for Muslims—including Sri Lankan Muslim politicians, all of whom have their Sufi preceptors—to seek personal protection and guidance in mystical forms of religious authority.

**A TALE OF THREE TRANSGRESSIONS:  
TAMIL, MUSLIM, AND SINHALA**

Although they are admittedly partial and incomplete, I will conclude with three troubling ethnographic vignettes from my field trips to the east coast in



**FIGURE 41.** The roof and walls of this ancestral Maulana family mausoleum in Kattankudy were razed in 2004 by a Muslim fundamentalist group, although the graves themselves were not disturbed (2005).

1993 and 1995.<sup>7</sup> The events to which these three stories refer occurred between 1985 and 1990. Two of these events and their physical sites were public, but one was concealed behind the fortified walls of a Sri Lankan Army camp. I was never an eyewitness to any of these incidents, but they have now become such an integral part of local memory that, in some cases, the locations where they occurred have become mandatory stopping points on any foreign visitor's itinerary. What I was shown and was told about these events was obviously conditioned by my status as an outsider, as well as by the interests and perspectives of the various friends and acquaintances, both Tamil and Moor, who shared their views with me. I believe, however, that these three accounts still offer a thought-provoking glimpse of the ambivalence and complexity of Tamil-Moor relations in the Batticaloa region today, a decade or more after they occurred.

### Mosque Martyrs

The first event I was told about was the ghastly massacre of 103 Muslim men who were gathered for prayer at the Miran Mosque in the town of Kattankudy, just south of Batticaloa (map 6), on the evening of 3 August 1990. Although darker theories of secret government involvement have been proposed, the

Muslims with whom I spoke in 1993 clearly believed that the Tamil Tigers had carried out the raid, coming by boat from the west side of the lagoon. My Muslim host, who had offered to show me around Kattankudy, took me to this hallowed site immediately, and I think almost any foreign visitor would be given a similar tour. The mosque has become defined as a site of Islamic sacrifice, with the names of the victims (each identified as a *shahīd*, or martyr for the faith) listed in a roll of honor painted in stark yellow-and-black lettering on the wall beside the doorway (figure 42). Inside the prayer hall itself one can easily see a pattern of bullet holes in the front walls flanking the *mihṛāb* (prayer niche facing Mecca) and explosion cracks in the cement floor, although all blood stains from the victims have been removed. In the cemetery across the lane from the mosque a row of simple Muslim graves serves as the final resting place for these pious and undeserving victims of Tamil fanaticism.

It was clear that the bullet holes in the wall inside the mosque would not soon, if ever, be plastered over, for they spoke more eloquently than any words of the violent attack that had occurred. If the site is a text, its official reading is that the Muslims of Kattankudy are subject to the predations of a violent and irrational Tamil movement whose motives and actions are beyond normal human understanding. Indeed, for many Muslims I met on that trip, the Kattankudy massacre, as well as simultaneous LTTE attacks on mosques in Eravur and Akkaraipattu—the latter repeated in November 2005—was sufficient to prove the vulnerability and innocence of the entire Muslim community, and served to validate an inward-looking belief that the Moors had suffered more than any other ethnic group in Sri Lanka's civil war. As if to refute such an idea, just a few miles from the site of the mosque massacre is a roadside LTTE memorial commemorating their own list of Tamil martyrs (figure 43).

### A Temple Destroyed

Unlike the Kattankudy mosque massacre, which received worldwide press coverage when it happened, the second event I will recount was of interest only in Akkaraipattu. Yet like the mosque tragedy, it, too, is commemorated in architectural remains inscribed with the indexical marks of violence and desecration. In the 1970s I carried out a detailed study of the annual firewalking rituals at the Hindu temple to the fierce meat-eating goddess *Pattirakālī* (Bhadrakali), located adjacent to a Moorish residential neighborhood perhaps a quarter-mile east of the main Akkaraipattu junction (map 9). The temple was



**FIGURE 42.** List of 103 Muslim martyrs massacred by the LTTE while praying in the Miran Mosque in Kattankudy on 3 August 1990 (1993).

administered and the pujas conducted by members of the Tattar Smith caste who regard Bhadrakali as the patron deity of their forges and anvils. However, the annual festival was also very popular with a much more diverse Hindu populace, including Tamil castes both higher and lower in the local hierarchy than the Smiths. On the final days of the annual festival to the goddess, I had often noted nearby Moorish women and children peering over their compound walls to watch the sacrifice of chickens, the completion of firewalking vows, and the virtuoso flagellation which some devotees insisted on receiving while in a trance. The fact that the temple itself was located a half-mile distant from the Smith caste neighborhood only made it more dramatic when nightly processions brought the icons and insignia of the goddess to be installed in the shrine.

When I dropped in to visit with my old Smith caste acquaintances in 1993, however, I was immediately taken to see the catastrophe which had befallen the goddess. Her temple, which had been substantially enlarged since I last



**FIGURE 43.** Roadside shrine to local LTTE martyrs who died fighting for Tamil Eelam, Kallady, Batticaloa (2005).

visited Akkaraipattu in 1978, was now in ruins (figure 44). Only a few walls and columns were still standing. Even the coconut trees inside the temple compound had been chopped down, and the masonry perimeter wall was perforated in many places. However, the coup de grâce, so to speak, was the temple well, which had been filled with cattle bones, ritually defiling this Hindu sacred space in the most radical way possible.<sup>8</sup>

The culprits were said to have been Muslim mobs who attacked this temple, as well as the Sandar caste Pillaiyar shrine nearby, in June or July of 1990 following a series of interethnic attacks on religious buildings. This was at the outset of Eelam War II when the LTTE had totally alienated the Muslims by executing hundreds of Muslim policemen whom they had taken prisoner while releasing most of the Tamil officers they had captured. I was told that first a Hindu temple in Ampara had been smashed by Sinhala mobs, following which the local LTTE cadres sanctioned the destruction of the Sinhala Buddhist *vihāra* in Akkaraipattu.<sup>9</sup> Tamils say that the army and Sri Lankan police then allowed the Muslims to destroy the Bhadrakali temple as a surrogate reprisal for the attack on the Buddhist shrine. A Tamil friend confidently assured me the Goddess Bhadrakali had taken revenge against seven of the Muslims who had helped to demolish her temple: they were all swiftly and silently bitten by cobras and



**FIGURE 44.** Ruins of the Bhadrakali temple erected by the Tattar Smith caste, destroyed by a Moorish mob in 1990 at the outset of Eelam War II (1993).

died. The metal face-image (*tirumukam*) of the goddess herself had not been damaged, because it was always kept in the home of the Smith caste priest until the annual festival, but now, three years later, the growing popularity of this goddess had been clearly derailed and the future of the temple was uncertain. Smith caste elders were still pondering whether to rebuild the temple on the very same site as a matter of principle or to move it to a safer location inside the Smith caste neighborhood, which they ultimately did. Since then, inter-caste rivalries have eroded the Bhadrakali temple congregation, as some High Caste (Mukkuvar and Velalar) devotees have built a new shrine of their own to the goddess Kali, unaffiliated with the local Smiths, in the suburban hamlet of Alaiyadivembu (map 9). In 1993 the Smith caste trustees assured me that, while Bhadrakali has long been their caste deity (*kula teyvam*), her cult has also welcomed the entire Tamil community. As I was discussing the options with one of the Smith trustees at the site of the temple ruins, a prankster from the nearby Moorish neighborhood let the air out of our bicycle tires and we had to trudge back home in the fierce midday sun.

Given the *nonreligious* roots of localized Tamil–Moor rioting in the Batticaloa region over the past half-century, it is very hard to believe that the desecration of the Bhadrakali temple was primarily motivated by religious hatred. My Smith caste friends were equally skeptical of such a theory. They viewed



it as a tacitly sanctioned act of revenge by the local Sinhala security authorities against the Tamil community at large, which also happened to give some opportunistic Moors a way to force a prime piece of undeveloped residential land onto the real-estate market and ultimately into wealthy Moorish hands. The history of Tamil-Muslim “mix-ups” (*kulappam*) in the Batticaloa region since the 1950s suggests that the seizure of adjacent Tamil-owned residential house sites by the Moors has been an underlying motive, or at least a significant and profitable outcome, of many of these local disturbances. Wagering that caste rivalry between the dominant High Castes and the lower-ranked Smiths would impede any collective Tamil response, the perpetrators chose to desecrate the property and then hope for an eventual sale. Interestingly enough, the bleak compound where the temple once stood was still vacant in 2005, suggesting that the Smiths had decided not to betray their goddess through real-estate profiteering.

### **Ethnicity under Torture**

My third and final example is a very different kind of story. It is an oral narrative which recounts the violence inscribed, not on buildings, but on the body and mind of its subject, a middle-aged Tamil man I have known for many years. It is drawn from his personal retelling, at my request, of the events which transpired following the first major Sri Lankan Army sweep and detention of suspected Tamil militants from Akkaraipattu in December 1985, a type of large-scale, indiscriminate “round-up” by security forces which has been repeated on many occasions since then. Whereas my first two vignettes portrayed acts of reciprocal Tamil and Muslim violence, this third story implicates the army and the state security forces, largely but not entirely staffed by Sinhala. My informant originally poured out his tale to me in 1993, when I didn’t have a tape-recorder to capture the vivid colloquial language of his harrowing account, but he repeated it for me in similar detail in 1995 when I came better equipped. His extremely detailed oral narrative runs to over an hour, but here I have the space to quote just a few passages from his full account.<sup>10</sup> His story begins on the night of 27 December 1985, following the army’s full-scale sweep of the Tamil side of town, when a convoy of thirteen trucks loaded with young male suspects were driven to the army camp at Konduvattuvan near Amparai: “It was raining, and the ground was slippery, and we were falling down. They asked us to sit in a small hall. That night they didn’t give us anything to eat. They took two fellows and shot them immediately. People who were too injured were shot. That day they had shot four people in Akkaraipattu, and

they brought those bodies as well. These people had climbed coconut trees, and they were shot and fell from the trees. The army big people came, looked at the injured fellows, and said that the two fellows should be shot. We were *really* scared.”

He then went on to describe how the prisoners were kept from moving or urinating. “‘If you piss, you drink it,’ they said.” Random brutality was common. “Throughout the night they would come and call at fellows who were well-built and dark, and when you asked if they were calling you, they would say, ‘Not you!’ They called in Sinhala, ‘*Adoo, ende!*’ [Hey, come here!] Some people wouldn’t understand, so since I knew a bit of Sinhala, I would tell them, ‘They are calling you.’ Then as soon as they went near, they would punch them in the nose and tell them to go back and sit. After that they would call and punch another person.”

After hearing twenty minutes of his story, I realized that he had only described the warm-up phase of the more excruciating torture eventually inflicted on a smaller number of ninety-three prime suspects, of which my acquaintance was one. He was the only person accused of belonging to the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a left-inspired party, with roots in the Sinhala heartland of southern Sri Lanka, which had some Tamil and Muslim adherents at that time in the Eastern Province, as it does today.

So when I regained consciousness, one army fellow came near me. He asked me to remove the blood clots from around my nose. After a while he came and showed an ID card and asked whose it was. [It was mine.] He asked me to open my mouth and put the ID card in my mouth and then he punched me. The card was stiff plastic, so it lacerated the inside of my mouth. They asked us to get up. Our bodies were aching so much we couldn’t do that. From out of the sixteen hundred [detainees] they selected ninety-three people. I was the ninety-third. They asked us again to get in a line and be seated in another hall, and there they separated us into different groups. There were also some [other] people there. I don’t know exactly what community they belonged to, but we suspected they were Muslims. They are the ones who betray you. There were five of them fingering us. [You see,] there was this [Muslim man] and I was his good pal and he was a JVP member. So they connected me with him [as a JVP member.]

Eventually, after daily and nightly beatings and the abrupt execution by gunshot of two more of his fellow detainees in the days that followed, my ac-

quaintance recounted the arrival of a suave, Tamil-speaking Criminal Investigation Division (CID) police official from Colombo who wore a tailored safari suit and who reassured the prisoners that they could go home after answering just a few more questions. They could choose to answer his inquiries by withholding no secrets, he said, “just like a husband and wife,” or they could choose the sort of dialog that goes on between “a policeman and robbers.” Needless to say, although he would have preferred an affectionate marital tête-à-tête, my friend was treated to a thoroughgoing “police and robber” torture.

We saw that people who went in [for questioning] were not coming back out walking, but were crawling like animals. And you could hear people screaming. . . . As each person came crawling, they were pulled and laid out, and there were two CID persons doing that. These two persons were Sinhala. . . . For the next round they took me. I also got the same punishment: my feet were tied [upside down] and they put chili fumes [in my face]. They will take a small tin and put a small amount of kerosene in it, light it, and add chili powder, and then it will burn. Then they will quickly catch the chili fumes in a bag and tie it around your neck while you are hanging upside-down. Once you breathe that, you really suffer and you faint.

Then, just before he lost all hope, my Tamil informant was unexpectedly released from the Konduvattuvan army base and spared the dreaded trip to Boosa Camp which many of the other Tamil detainees subsequently suffered. Although it was Muslim informers who had originally implicated him as a JVP member, my friend firmly believes that his eventual reprieve came because of strong personal intervention by influential Akkaraipattu Moors on his behalf.

They beat and beat and beat us for five days like this. There was no room on our bodies to beat us more, but still they went on beating us until 10 P.M. For five days it continued. I had some good friends among the Muslims, and I had worked for friendship between the communities. People like [my good Muslim friend], I knew some important Muslim people. In times of trouble I used to work for peace, so for that reason the Muslims liked me. Many of them had phoned on my behalf and had gone to the big MPs [members of parliament] as well. So there were something like sixty-seven phone calls about me, and they kept calling and calling my name. The army fellows were angry, so they came and kicked me and said, “Why are there so many calls about you?” I was kicked so hard I couldn’t walk.

When my Tamil acquaintance was finally dumped from the doorway of a commandeered bus at the Akkaraipattu junction at around 8 P.M., he could barely stand on his feet. He nevertheless insisted on limping to his mother's house without assistance because of what he called a "problem of honor or respect" (*kaurava piraccinai*) in the eyes of some local Moorish youths, who would publicly jeer at any Tamil boys who had gotten into trouble with the army.

#### CONCLUSION: TAMIL-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN AKKARAIPATTU

Today the ethnic fault lines are plain enough to see, starting with the formal bifurcation of a once unified local government in Akkaraipattu into two separate Pradeshiya Sabhas, one Moorish and one Tamil. The apex of local Tamil-Muslim polarization in Akkaraipattu seems to have come in 1990, at the outbreak of Eelam War II, when the Moors, enraged by the perfidious slaughter of hundreds of Muslim policemen and by the summary execution of some local Muslim rowdies by the LTTE command in Akkaraipattu, turned against the Tamils. The army is said to have then hunted down and shot many Tamils at the whim of local Muslim collaborators who were allegedly settling old scores of their own. One way or another, the Eelam violence has destroyed countless families and created a tragic population of war orphans (figure 45).

I certainly heard enough of these atrocity stories on my visits to the east coast in 1993 and 1995 to make me wonder where all the zealots and xenophobes, the embittered betrayers and the hate-filled assassins were to be found. I knew that my old friends and acquaintances were not the sort to commit mass murder or to desecrate holy shrines, but I did meet a lot of ordinary people in both communities who were terrified of the unseen enemy and who would not dream of walking alone into the Tamil or Moorish side of town after sunset. Yet, at the same time, I also heard surprisingly few accounts of inter-ethnic violence which did not acknowledge at some point the ultimate necessity of reestablishing peace and interdependency between the Tamils and the Muslims. In fact the theme of a Tamil-Muslim rapprochement or *modus vivendi* eventually surfaced in each of the three stories I have recounted.

In Kattankudy, after I had been led to the mosque where the LTTE massacre had taken place, I was also proudly told of a recent visit in January 1993 by a Pakistani holy man, a mystic Sufi healer named Maulana Abdul Cader, whose blessings and protective ink-writings (*isim*) were dispensed, along with a free



**FIGURE 45.** Tamil orphans of the Eelam conflict, Akkaraipattu (1993).

lunch packet courtesy of the Kattankudy Muslim authorities, to thousands of Tamil Hindu inhabitants from nearby villages who had been invited to meet him on a special day set aside for non-Muslims. An independent University Teachers for Human Rights account of this holy man's visits to Kattankudy and to Akkaraipattu suggests that Tamil-Muslim animosity was momentarily dissolved during these euphoric inter-ethnic encounters.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, astute political observers pointed out that in the aftermath of the Kattankudy mosque killings, local LTTE commanders and leading Moorish merchants were quick to work out the terms of a pragmatic deal that would keep both parties "in business," so to speak.

In the case of the demolished Bhadrakali temple in Akkaraipattu, the loss to the Smiths in religious terms and in terms of their caste honor is irreparable, but one outcome of the tragedy has been the relocation of the goddess's shrine to a more secure site at the center of the Smith caste neighborhood. The vacant and ruined temple property is still in Smith caste hands, and no one has

illegally seized it. As Patricia Lawrence's research has shown, powerful *amman* goddesses have grown in popularity in the Batticaloa region during the Eelam conflict, and their *sakti*, or divine power, is relied on even more strongly to protect local Tamil villages and territories (2000, 2003). The sacred power of their *place* has, if anything, intensified as a result of the war. While in Akkarai-pattu the goddess Bhadrakali has lost her former seat of power, it was largely an accident of location that made the temple vulnerable to Muslim mob attack in the first place. This temple transgression has not signaled increased religious enmity between Muslims and Hindus, and the Tattar Smiths in particular still enjoy the patronage of their Moorish customers for blacksmithing and auto-repair services.

Finally, the torture narrative of my Tamil acquaintance is hardly a unique or privileged text: at least ninety-three other Tamil youths suffered exactly the same fate as my informant, and those who went to Boosa suffered something very much worse. In fact, it is sobering to imagine how many of the Tamil men one sees in a town like Akkaraipattu must also be carrying deep within them, inscribed on their minds and bodies, similar hidden traumas. And of course this account only describes the first roundup of Eelam War I in Akkaraipattu. Three months later my acquaintance was again arrested, interrogated, and tortured, this time by the Sri Lankan police commandos for whom it was an entirely new project, quite independent of prior interrogations by the Sri Lankan Army. The detail and vividness of my acquaintances' account clearly draws on memories which are forever linked to the very body which endured the pain. Given the strong tendency for terror victims to protect themselves through silence and denial, it was perhaps unusual to hear a detailed retelling of such a gruesome experience. The fact that I had shared a long friendship with this man, and that his torture had receded ten years into the past, seems to have made the retelling easier. However, it struck me as remarkable that his story never once displayed a blind, single-minded hatred directed toward a stereotypic ethnic enemy. His worst inquisitor, after all, was not a brutal Sinhala soldier but a suave, educated Tamil CID officer in a safari suit. Just as noticeable was the way my acquaintance had suffered betrayal by local Muslim informers and yet stated with considerable pride that his friendship and civic work with Akkaraipattu Muslim leaders had moved them to come to his rescue while in army custody. He is a more fair-minded person than most, but his story suggests there is a ray of hope for renewed Tamil-Muslim trust and cooperation if only this war can somehow be brought to an end.

The historical and ethnographic thrust of this book has pointed toward the shared cultural heritage of the Tamils and Moors in the eastern region. This reflects the theoretical bias of my anthropological outlook as well as my personal hope for ethnic reconciliation. The ethnic violence of the past twenty-five years, however, has been disastrous for Sri Lanka, and for the Batticaloa region in particular, where rivalries and resentments have eroded much of the trust and collaboration between Tamil and Moorish villagers, and their Sinhala neighbors to the west. Yet this is precisely the region where a long-term multi-ethnic accommodation must be achieved if Sri Lanka is to have any hope for a stable peace. Ethnographic research can point out the cultural patterns and ethnic identities that are at stake, but it will require enlightened national leadership to forge a stable solution in Sri Lanka's crucible of conflict.





Chapter Title: APPENDIX 1. Tamil kinship terms in Akkaraipattu

Book Title: Crucible of Conflict

Book Subtitle: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka

Book Author(s): Dennis B. McGilvray

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**APPENDIX 1.** *Tamil kinship terms in Akkaraipattu*

<i>pettappā</i>	Father's father (also <i>appappā</i> )
<i>appammā</i>	Father's mother (also <i>ācci</i> )
<i>pettappā</i>	Mother's father (also <i>appucci</i> )
<i>ammammā</i>	Mother's mother
<i>appā, takappan</i>	Father
<i>ammā, tāy</i>	Mother
<i>periyappā</i>	Father's elder brother, Mother's elder sister's husband
<i>cinṅappā, cittappā</i>	Father's younger brother, Mother's younger sister's husband
<i>māmi</i>	Father's sister, Mother's brother's wife, Mother-in-law ( <i>māmiyār</i> )
<i>māmā</i>	Mother's brother, Father's sister's husband, Father-in-law ( <i>māmaṅār</i> )
<i>periyammā</i>	Mother's elder sister, Father's elder brother's wife
<i>ciṅṅammā</i>	Mother's younger sister, Father's younger brother's wife
<i>puruṣaṅ</i>	Husband
<i>peṅcāti, maṅaivi</i>	Wife
<i>aṅṅaṅ</i>	Elder brother, Elder male parallel cousin (FBS or MZS)
<i>tampi</i>	Younger brother, Younger male parallel cousin (FBS or MZS)
<i>akkā</i>	Elder sister, Elder female parallel cousin (FBD or MZD)
<i>taṅkaicci</i>	Younger sister, Younger female parallel cousin (FBD or MZD)
<i>maccāṅ</i>	Male cross-cousin (FZS or MBS), Sister's husband
<i>macciṅaṅ</i>	Male cross-cousin younger than Ego, Husband's or Wife's younger brother

<i>maccāl, macci</i>	Female cross-cousin (FZD or MBD), Brother's wife
<i>matīni</i>	Female cross-cousin, Husband or Wife's younger sister
<i>attāṇ</i>	Elder sister's husband
<i>aṇṇi</i>	Elder brother's wife
<i>makaṇ</i>	Son, Parallel cousin's son
<i>makaḷ</i>	Daughter, Parallel cousin's daughter
<i>marumakaṇ</i>	Man's sister's son, Woman's brother's son, Son-in-law
<i>marumakaḷ</i>	Man's sister's daughter, Woman's brother's daughter, Daughter-in-law
<i>pēraṇ</i>	Grandson
<i>pētti</i>	Granddaughter

Chapter Title: APPENDIX 2. Moorish kinship terms in Akkaraipattu

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## APPENDIX 2. Moorish kinship terms in Akkaraipattu

<i>müttappā</i>	Father's father (also <i>appacci</i> )
<i>müttammā</i>	Father's mother (also <i>vāppammā</i> )
<i>müttappā</i>	Mother's father (also <i>ummappā</i> )
<i>müttammā</i>	Mother's mother (also <i>ummammā</i> )
<i>pettā</i>	"Granny"
<i>vāppā</i>	Father
<i>ummā</i>	Mother
<i>periyappā</i>	Father's elder brother, Mother's elder sister's husband
<i>cāccā, ciṇṇappā</i>	Father's younger brother, Mother's younger sister's husband
<i>cāccappā</i>	Less formal term for a man's wife's mother's brother
<i>māmi</i>	Father's sister, Mother's brother's wife, Mother-in-law ( <i>māmiyār</i> )
<i>māmā</i>	Mother's brother, Father's sister's husband, Father-in-law ( <i>māmaṇār</i> ), Alternative for a close Mother's brother or Father's sister's husband: <i>ammācci</i>
<i>periyammā</i>	Mother's elder sister, Father's elder brother's wife
<i>cācci, ciṇṇammā</i>	Mother's younger sister, Father's younger brother's wife (also <i>cāccummā</i> )
<i>purushaṇ</i>	Husband
<i>peṇcāti</i>	Wife (also <i>peṇṭi</i> )
<i>kākkā</i>	Elder brother, Elder male parallel cousin (FBS or MZS)
<i>tampi</i>	Younger brother, Younger male parallel cousin (FBS or MZS)
<i>rāttā</i>	Elder sister, Elder female parallel cousin (FBD or MZD)

<i>tañkaicci</i>	Younger sister, Younger female parallel cousin (FBD or MZD)
<i>maccāṇ</i>	Male cross-cousin (FZS or MBS), Sister's husband. Alternative for a wife's sister's husband: <i>cakalaṇ</i>
<i>maccinaṇ</i>	Male cross-cousin younger than Ego, Husband's or Wife's younger brother
<i>macci</i>	Female cross-cousin (FZD or MBD), Brother's wife
<i>matīṇi</i>	Female cross-cousin, Husband or Wife's younger sister
<i>makaṇ</i>	Son, Parallel cousin's son
<i>makaḷ</i>	Daughter, Parallel cousin's daughter
<i>marumakaṇ</i>	Man's sister's son, Woman's brother's son, Son-in-law
<i>marumakaḷ</i>	Man's sister's daughter, Woman's brother's daughter, Daughter-in-law
<i>pēraṇ</i>	Grandson
<i>pētti</i>	Granddaughter

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## NOTES

### 1. INTRODUCTION

1. The word is *īlam*, an older Tamil name for the island that has clear separatist connotations today, as opposed to *ilaṅkai* (or *lanka*), which is used routinely in trilingual Sri Lankan government publications and on postage stamps. The LTTE is the guerrilla army that has dominated the armed Tamil separatist struggle since the early 1990s.
2. The Sri Lankan Tsunami: Societal Resilience in Two Coastal Regions. Dennis B. McGilvray P.I., Michele Gamburd and Randall Kuhn, co-P.I. National Science Foundation research grant SES-0525260.
3. An adequate account of the death and human suffering in the Batticaloa region is impossible for me to provide here, but useful sources include Nissan 1996; Lawrence 1997, 1998, 2000, and 2003; McGilvray 1997; Trawick 1997; Krysl 1993; Whitaker 1997; Thiruchandran 1999; Thangarajah 2003a; and the series of detailed reports filed by University Teachers for Human Rights ([www.uthr.org](http://www.uthr.org)).

### 1. THE RESEARCH SETTING

1. In the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Pridham noted the large number of wind-driven cargo boats (“ballams”) on the Batticaloa Lagoon, many of them operated by Moors from Kattankudy (Pridham 1849, 2:562). Although trucks now carry the major part of goods traffic, in the 1970s these same traditional *vallam* sailboats could still be seen ferrying bricks across the lagoon at Kallar from the kilns on the western shore.
2. Identifying the vine as “a wild plant of the genus *Derris*, in no way special to that locality,” the nineteenth-century antiquarian Hugh Neville preferred to derive the name from *karuṅkōṭṭaittivu*, “black (granite) fort,” after some stone ruins at Palamunai (1887d: 24n).



3. Every European traveler seems to have devised a new way to mangle the name of this village and to mislabel its inhabitants. In Cordiner's (1807) book alone, the name is also rendered as Carrancottadivu and Karengkottotivu. The census of 1827 lists the name as Caroncotty Tivo. The term "Lubbie" refers to Muslims in Orr's account, but it has no such meaning in Batticaloa, where the Tamil term "lebbe" (*ilevvai*) denotes the professional leader of mosque prayers. The term Labbai designates one of the four major subdivisions of Tamil Muslims in South India (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 4:198–205; Fanselow 1989).
4. The Kataragama pilgrimage (Pada Yatra) down the east coast was revived starting in 1992 by an American devotee, Patrick Harrigan, who maintains a website (<http://kataragama.org>).
5. Akkaraipattu's population in the census of 1827 was 1,172. In 1871 it was reported to be 3,785, and in the 1911 census it was 7,543.
6. In 1981 the Sri Lankan government abolished the entire system of village and town councils, replacing them with district development councils (DDCs) having responsibility for an entire district under the authority of a Government Agent (GA) (Oberst 1985). More recently, a system of Pradeshya Sabhas (sub-district units) has replaced the DDCs and the set-up is now closer to the original village-council or town-council system, except for the highly significant fact that the local town government has been clearly bifurcated into a Tamil unit (Alaiyadivembu Pradeshya Sabha) and a Muslim unit (Akkaraipattu Pradeshya Sabha).
7. In anthropological jargon the postmarital residence pattern is technically "matruxorilocal," because the initial joint matrilocal household of the daughter and son-in-law and wife's parents eventually becomes an independent nuclear household living in the dowry-house of the wife.
8. I have discussed the practical operation of this system in greater detail elsewhere (McGilvray 1989), and I offer a historical hypothesis about its origins in chapter 4 in this volume.
9. Castes about which little is yet known include Brahmins (individual families of Jaffna origin at certain temples, such as Tirukkovil and in Batticaloa town, but no distinct Brahmin settlements at all), *Timilar* Cultivators (who also call themselves *cintunātar*, "people of Sind," the dominant matrilineal caste in villages south and east of Mutur in Trincomalee District), *Ceṭṭiyār* Merchants (recorded historically in the region and in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Mānmiyam*, but seemingly absent today except as a matrilineal name), *Paṇṭārappillai* (native militia or lascareens for the Dutch, some reportedly living in Kaluthavalai), *Kaikkōḷar* or *Kaikkulavar* Weavers (in Arappattai near Kattankudy), *Mēlakkārar* or *Naṭṭuvar* Musicians (in Batticaloa town, but hired elsewhere for auspicious events), *Cāyakkārar* Cloth-Dyers (in Kalmunai), *Vāṇiyar* Oil-Pressers (originally in Kaluthavalai and Pandiruppu), *Naḷavar* Toddy Tappers (a caste distinct from the Sandar or *Cāṇṇār* Climbers and who live closer to Batticaloa town), *Taṇakkārar* Elephant-Keepers (the Dutch

called them “tobacco planters,” near Eravur), and *Cakkiliyaṅ* Sweepers (an “Indian Tamil” sweeper caste from the upcountry, recruited by local authorities to empty latrines).

10. According to the Dutch governor W. J. van de Graaff’s proclamation of 2 June 1789 (CO54/123: 201, National Archives, Kew, UK), the chief native headmen of Batticaloa were directed to submit annual lists of all the inhabitants of their districts, indicating the caste and trade of each person. If these registers could be located, they would provide invaluable demographic and caste data from the last decades of the eighteenth century. A memorial written in 1794 by the Dutch chief of Batticaloa, Jacob Burnand, identifies the duties of each Tamil caste to the Dutch East India Company, but does not provide a numerical census.
11. The caste name Kadaiyar is from the verb *kaṭai*, to mash or grind into a paste, as in the preparation of lime plaster and whitewash (Ragupathy 1987: 209).
12. The legendary Fr. Koch, who built a number of churches in the Batticaloa region, was retired and living in Talankudah during my first fieldwork. All of the active priests I met in Akkaraipattu were Tamils.
13. The Sri Lankan Malays are Sunni Muslims who are descendants of Javanese political exiles brought to the island by the Dutch in the eighteenth century (Hussainmiya 1986). There are also some small groups of Bombay and Gujarati traders who have businesses in Colombo: Bohras and Khojas (both Shia Ismailis), and Memons (who are Sunnis). Some schismatic Ahmadiyyas (“*Qāṭiyāṅis*”) are said to be found in the Gampola and Negombo regions, remnants of a group once influential in Colombo as well (Abdul Majeed 1971).
14. Denham (1912: 232n) observed a half-century ago that *Cōṅi* (“Soni” or “Choni,” short for *Cōṅakar*) was commonly used as a term for Muslims in the Batticaloa region, although the term has derogatory implications today. Note that “Lanka Yonaka” was still used as an ethnonym for the Sri Lankan Moors in the 1971 census. Two other negative slang terms are *Nāṅāmār* and *Kākkā*, regionally variant Moorish kin terms for “elder brother,” the latter unfortunately a colloquial homonym for “crow” in Tamil (*kākam*). Additional Sri Lankan terms for the so-called Coast Moors, expatriate Muslim traders from the South Indian coast, include *Marakkala Minissu* (Sinh. “boat-people”), *Hambaya* or *Hambankāraya* (Sinh.), and *Cammaṅkārar* (Tam.), all possibly from Malay *sampan* “skiff” or from Tamil *cāmāṅ* “goods,” and *Tambey* (Tam. *tampi*, younger brother), the last being a British colonial term for itinerant trader. See Ameer Ali 1980: 99 for a general discussion.
15. It is important to note that I encountered almost no cases of intermarriage between Muslims and Sinhalas or between Muslims and Tamils in my research. The one example I documented in the 1970s was a Hindu Tamil woman who had married a Moorish man. She immediately became a Muslim as part of the deal.
16. The massacre was commemorated by the poet Marilyn Krysl (1993).

## 2. PAST AND PRESENT

1. Exactly how and why a putative member of the Kalinga dynasty of Orissa would have recruited sailors and soldiers from Kerala remains a geographic puzzle, but “Tamil and Kerala” mercenaries appear numerous times in the Sri Lankan historical record. In fact, the *Dambadeni Asna* notes that Mukkuvar soldiers served in the army of the mid-thirteenth-century Sinhala ruler Parakramabahu II (Indrapala 1965: 371).
2. The new critical, expanded edition of this unique Tamil chronicle edited by Kamalanathan and Kamalanathan 2005, with an introduction by D. Sivaram, arrived too late to be incorporated in this chapter. It promises to be a significant new primary source for Sri Lankan historical scholarship.
3. *Malaiyamān* is a section of the Udaiyar caste in South Arcot today, but Burton Stein also finds the title in a thirteenth-century inscription identifying Vanniyar subcastes of South Arcot in the left-right caste classification typical of the Chola empire (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 7:206–13; Stein 1980: 182–88).
4. Concerning the twentieth-century mobilization of the Vanniyar caste in Tamilnadu, see Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 49–64.
5. Neville even proposed a far-fetched Arabian origin for the Mukkuvars’ myth of descent from Rama’s ferryman: “I believe them to be a Japhetic race, the descendants of Elisa, son of Javan, their eponymous ancestor in Genesis. This Elisa, as El’isa, I believe to be the Chaldean ferryman Ur-hamsi, who ferried ‘Izdubar,’ and this tradition is perhaps still preserved by the Mukkuvars, who say that their ancestor ferried Rama over the water” (1887b: 70).
6. Pathmanathan (1976b: 4) recounts a less-known Mukkuvar origin myth that identifies the caste as descendants of Lord Brahma, who, in human form, dove to the bottom of the sea to retrieve Vishnu’s conch.
7. The ethnohistorical political chronicle contained in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇmiyam* mentions families of “*Paṭaiyāṭci talaivars*” (army chiefs) from “*Kālikaṭṭu*” (Calicut?) (see Pathmanathan 1978: 134) and “*Kukaṇ Kulam*” (i.e., Mukkuvar) colonists being resettled in Batticaloa prior to the arrival of Magha in 1215 C.E. (Nadarajah 1962: 20, 43). There are also some historical traditions that the Mukkuvars fled from Kerala or Tamilnadu because of oppression or proselytizing by South Indian Muslim rulers (e.g., Muhammad Sūsini ca. 998–1030, in Nadarajah 1962: 47), although one of these sources recounts the subsequent conversion of many Mukkuvars to Islam in the Puttalam region (Casie Chitty 1834: 275–80).
8. Page numbers in Burnand 1794 refer to one of two handwritten copies of the British translation of Burnand’s memorandum that are held in the National Museum Library, Colombo, Sri Lanka. An annotated edition of the Burnand document is in preparation (McGilvray n.d.).
9. Local, district, and provincial administration throughout Sri Lanka has undergone

- a perplexing series of bureaucratic reorganizations since 1978, some of them complicated by the Tamil-Sinhala conflict (Baxter et al. 1987: 324–26; Oberst 1988).
10. The *Periya Kalvettu*, an homage to the thirteenth-century ruler Magha included in the *Mattukkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam*, concludes with a blatantly anachronistic eighteenth-century appeal: “Listen, O wise King of Holland! Know that this is indeed Kukan Kulam! Thus pleased, the reigning foreign king appointed these protectors as the chiefly caste [*vannimai kulam*]” (Nadarajah 1962: 76).
  11. See Dirks 1987 for a detailed examination of the *vamsāvali* genre in Tamilnadu.
  12. Whitaker apparently accepts my suggestion that district Vanniya (i.e., Mukkuvar regional chiefs in the early colonial era) would have demanded, and received, the foremost ritual honors at the conclusion of major regional temple festivals such as at Mandur. Indeed, this is the whole basis for Whitaker’s interpretation (1999: 233–35) of the key ritual conflict in 1924 that sparked bitter caste conflicts and led to legal proceedings at Mandur over the subsequent fifty years. The court testimony of several witnesses (V. C. Kandiah and P. Chinniah) in 1969 even asserts a historical role for the Mukkuvar chiefs in the founding of the Mandur temple (Mandur Temple case No. 1924/Misc., in Batticaloa Kachcheri records).
  13. Abeyasinghe has the fishermen as “Canos,” but they are listed as “Carias” in Braganca Pereira’s 1937 Portuguese edition of Bocarro’s report.
  14. The Tamil term *kalvettu* literally means “stone inscription,” but it is used in the Batticaloa region to refer to an ancient record of local origins, rights, and duties which is inscribed on dried palmyra leaves with a stylus and is preserved in the custody of leading families or major temples. The text on which all published accounts have been based is in the British Museum Library (#OR. 6616.r.), having been copied by Hugh Neville from a palm-leaf manuscript (*ētu*) in the custody of the trustee of the Tirukkovil Kandaswamy temple, who told Neville that the Tamil translation from the original Sinhala had been done in the early nineteenth century. While Neville’s calendrical dating would make it a fourteenth-century document, the inclusion of references to the Kandyan king and to Europeans (*paṛaṅki*) would at least point to a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century origin of the document.
  15. This is the Tamil spelling given in Pathmanathan’s published version of the original text in the British Museum (1976d: 85). Hugh Neville’s English translation calls the place “Tala-wila” but does not locate it (1887c: 138). The present-day Talawila on the Kalpitiya Peninsula near Puttalam seems improbable, so the best guess is Talewala, 3.5 miles south of Kegalla, in Mawata Pattuwa, Sabaragamuva Province, which would have been located within the Kingdom of Sitawaka in the sixteenth century. To further confuse matters, however, the seventeenth-century Portuguese military geographer Antonio Bocarro mentions four Vanniya-ships comprising the Batticaloa district: “Araura [Eravur], Pauluguão [Palugamam], Xabandure [Sammanturai], Taluira” (Braganca Pereira 1937: 410). If the latter territory is the “*Talavillu*” or “Tala-wila” referred to in the *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalvettu*, then Bo-

- carro's southward-moving sequence of place names might suggest it was located somewhere south of Sammanturai. It is also possible that Taluira refers to the province of Nāṭu Kāṭu itself, whose Sinhala noble family came from Talewala.
16. The *Ceylon Almanac* for 1854 listed six colonial district chiefs (Vanniahs), while in 1921 the number is nine, and their territories are considerably different (Canagaratnam 1921: 77).
  17. The term *Pedi* was the standard Dutch mistranscription and mispronunciation of the local word *pōṭi* or *pōṭiyār*. The actual meaning of the Tamil word *pēṭi* is “hermaphrodite” (*Tamil Lexicon* 1936, 5:2889). Literate eighteenth-century Batticaloans may have gotten a chuckle when they saw the official Dutch letter of appointment, written in Tamil, recognizing a local notable named Arumakutti as chief *pēṭi* of Manmunai Pattu under the administration of Governor Iman Willem Falck (1765–1785) (Nadarajah 1962: 113).
  18. Severe landlessness in Batticaloa (58 percent of the agricultural population) was still noted as a problem in the *Report on the Survey of Landlessness*, Sessional Paper No. 13 (1952), cited by Ronald J. Herring (1972: 103).
  19. “I think that one or more fit persons of the Bellala Cast from the Inhabitants may be recommended to be appointed as Chief pedies, as a thing that speaks of itself ought to be done” (Burnand 1794: 288).
  20. Citations with the preface “co” all refer to Colonial Office documents now housed in the National Archives, Kew, UK.
  21. The maritime trading monopoly given to Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians was particularly marked in Kerala, where Brahmanical influence among high-caste Hindus placed a strong ritual taboo on sea voyaging (Wink 1990: 72–73).
  22. One historian has acknowledged that hard evidence for King Senerat's resettlement of the Moors in Batticaloa is lacking. Fr. Queyroz, on whom all later historians have depended, may have misinterpreted sixteenth-century letters between Goa and Lisbon which simply reported that 4,000 Moors were already living in Kandy and Batticaloa at that time (Abeyasinghe 1986: 145n46).
  23. Two of the seven Moorish matrilineal clans mentioned in the *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalvetṭu* still exist among Akkaraipattu Moors today, and one of these (*Paniyavṭṭu*, rendered today as *Paniyetṭu*) might well be derived from the leading Panikkaṇā matrilineal clan of the Mukkuvars. See chap. 8 herein.
  24. Since *Ponṇācci kudi* is inscribed in the *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam* as one of the seven original matrilineal clans of the Velalar caste, perhaps the Moorish headman's lineage mattered more than his religion as far as the temple trustees were concerned. The history of the *Ponṇācci kudi* is certainly vexed. It no longer survives in any Velalar settlements today, but there are clans and sublineages carrying that name among the Kovilar temple-servant caste and among the Moors. The Kovilar in Kokkadichcholai argue the matrilineal name proves them to be Velalars, but the Velalars in nearby Palugamam insist the clan is long extinct. At the big regional

tēcattukōvils such as Kokkadichchola and Tirukkovil, elderly Tamil informants can recall when Moors would step forward to receive their allotted “share” in the ritual distribution of rice-gruel pots (*kañci muṭṭi*) during the annual festival. At Tirukkovil, there is also the vague memory of a ritual gesture called *Paṭṭāṇi paṅku* (Pathan, i.e., Muslim, share), which some informants regarded as identical to the above, but which others thought referred to special offerings (*maṭai*) placed to propitiate Muslim saints.

25. The late Gate Mudaliyar M. S. Kariapper, former member of Parliament for Kalmunai, is said to have traced his family back to the Muslim village of Kotabowe in Monaragala District of Uva Province, where they initially fled to escape the wrath of the Sinhalese for having remained loyal to the British during the Kandyan Rebellion of 1817–1818 (de Munck 1993: 10, and personal communication). However, the fact that a Kariapper headman was holding office under the Dutch in 1676 poses a seeming anachronism. For the modern Kariapper dynasty, see Phadnis 1979: 46; Mohan 1987: 47; and chap. 11 herein.
26. The caste name is from *timil* (a small boat), and it is generally understood to have been a fisher caste originally. In early accounts the Dutch referred to the Timilars near Trincomalee as “Sinthanadars” (*cintunāṭar*, people from Sind), following a Timilar caste origin myth. Timilattivu, a village on the lagoon near Batticaloa town, also preserves the caste name.
27. J. B. P. More (1997: 21–25) notes that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in South India, most Tamil Muslims were conventionally referred to as “Turks” (*tulukkar*).
28. *Catturukoṇṭāṇ*, “[place where] the enemy was killed”; *Cantiveḷi*, “field where [the victors] met”; *Vantārumūlai*, “corner where [the victors] came [to heal their wounds]”; *Ērāvūr*, “uninhabited place [where the Muslims settled]” (*Batticaloa Handbook and Directory* 1907: 12–13; Nadarajah 1962: 7–8).
29. Denham reports that the “Mohammadan Mukkuvers” of Puttalam used to maintain a distinct dress and hairstyle and follow a religion which was “a mixture of Koran and the worship of Ayanar” (1912: 225).
30. Whitaker’s Cirpatar caste informants assert—and the Velalars deny—that there exists a “*Cōṇa Vēḷāḷar*” (Muslim Velalar) matriclan in Mandur, descendants of male Jaffna Velalar teachers who married Moorish women from Kattankudy (1999: 227). This is the only account I have heard of such marriages, which seem to go hypogamously in the “wrong direction” and which also contravene the rule of matrilineal caste and clan membership.
31. Karaikal is a town on the Tamilnadu coast east of Thanjavur. The location of Marunkur is uncertain, although Alvapillai Veluppillai suggests it may correspond to Marunkāpuri in Trichy District (1990: 97).
32. Varipattananchenai, a Muslim village near Irakkamam on the Akkaraipattu–Ampara road, preserves the name of this medieval Hindu temple-service caste.
33. Whitaker contends that the Mandur temple was an exception to Mukkuvar hege-



defined in the *Tamil Lexicon* (1982, 3:1867) as a name of the all-seeing four-headed Hindu god Brahma.

42. Publication of a critical edition of the *Vīrākamam* has been under consideration by the Department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs, Colombo (K. Shanmugalingam, personal communication, 22 June 1993). For sources on Virasaiva agamic texts, see Michael 1992: 2–8.
43. Blowing the conch on ceremonial occasions (including funerals) and intoning a mantra which ends with the syllables “*arakarā, arakarā, arakarā*” seem to be elements of a distinctive Sangamar liturgical tradition (see also the Sangamar folksong quoted by Kanapatipillai 1977). This further separates them from orthodox Brahmins, for whom blowing the conch is taboo (Hornell 1942: 123).
44. Viz. Akōramaya tēvar kōttiram, Paṇṭitarccuṇa tēvar kōttiram, Irāvaṇa cittaiyā kōttiram, and Maruḷ cittaiyā kōttiram. In the Virasaiva literature these are given variously as Ekoramārādhyā, Panditārādhyā, Rēvanārādhyā or Rēnukācharyā, and Marulusiddha or Maruḷārādhyā (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 1:51, 6:264; Nanjundayya and Anantha Krishna Iyer 1928–1935, 4:91; Parvathamma 1971: 89). The Brahmin-sounding gotras are Sri vaṭcara kōttiram, Parattuvacā kōttiram, and Kācipa kōttiram.
45. One informant said that Paṇṭitarccuṇa tēvar kōttiram was the same as “Sangamar kudi” and that Akōramaya tēvar kōttiram corresponded to “Tecantara kudi.” Another person linked Kācipa kōttiram with “Sanniyasi kudi,” but it appears that this group is of too recent origin to be accorded any gotra identity by most Kurukkals.
46. The *Maṭṭukkaḷappu Māṇṇimiyam* traces the village name from Tambaṭṭar Brahmins (*antaṇarkaḷ*) settled there by a local ruler who also founded the village of Tambiluvil in honor of his queen, Tampi Nallāl (Nadarajah 1962: 28).
47. If the Tambaṭṭars settled at Tampaddai were affiliated with the Arādhyā Brahmins, they might have been perceived as both Brahmins and Virasaivas.
48. Although this Jaffna guru, Sivasri Aiyampillai Kurukkal, received his Lingayat initiation in Kumbakonam and Ramesvaram, a published account claims that the Virasaivas in Jaffna originally came from Tirukkovil, Tampaddai, and Trincomalee. The ashram at Kirimalai is affiliated with Virasaiva preceptors tracing back to Renukacharyā, whose “throne” is located at Balehalli in Koppa Taluk, Karnataka (Kumaracami 1977; Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 4:264).
49. In the *Vaiyā Pāṭal*, a Jaffna ethnohistorical text of problematic origin and reliability, there is a reference to the arrival of a group of religious servants or devotees called *tātar caṅkamar* (Raghavan 1954: 147).

### 3. ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

1. Dart also encountered the “Vanniyār” title farther north in Vakarai, among two small descent groups of the Coast Veddās (1985: 119–20).
2. Of Canagaratnam’s “Vellala” clans (1921:35), only *Vayittiyānā, Attiyā, Periyā*



*Kavuttan*, and *Siṅṅa Kavuttan* are generally accepted. The remaining three are considered to be Mukkuvar clans: *Kōppi*, *Caṅkarappattan*, and *Pōkkan*.

3. For information regarding the Pandarappillai Lascoreens of Kaluthavalai, I thank D. Sivaram (personal communication).
4. As matrilineal, some kudis are distributed widely across the Batticaloa region, but the members have little awareness of themselves as a group. Murdock might have preferred to classify the locally effective kudi unit as a “matri-sib,” the members of the matrilineal who reside in the same area and who are represented by the same Vannakkar or Maraikkar clan elder.
5. There are some vestiges of corporate kudi landholding in other parts of the Batticaloa region, but the historical implications are not clear. See my discussion of the Mukkuvar Law later in this chapter.
6. The *Tamil Lexicon* (1936, 6:3542–43) supplies twenty-one additional meanings to the word *vali* besides “way” or “path,” including [2] “origin, source,” [8] “posterity, descendants,” [9] “race, family, lineage,” and [13] “series, line, succession.”
7. The views represented are primarily those of high-caste Tamil Hindu men. A quarter (9 of 35) of these informants, including the only two Moors, were full- or part-time non-Western curing practitioners; a handful (4 of 35) were Virasaiva Kurukkal temple priests; and a similar number (6 of 35) were lower-caste Tamil informants (1 Tattar Smith, 1 Vannar Washerman, 4 Paraiyar Drummers). Not every informant could answer all of the specialized questions I asked, but the sample consisted of the most knowledgeable people I could find in these areas of inquiry.
8. Arabic Islamic terms such as *najīs* (filth), *janāba* (sexual pollution), and *nifās* (childbirth pollution) are available (Ahmad Lebbai 1873) but are rarely used by Akkaraipattu Muslims.
9. I have argued this elsewhere in much greater detail (McGilvray 1982b).
10. This interpretation, which was adduced by only two informants, is based on the theory that the sex of the child is determined by the relative amounts of maternal semen versus paternal semen that are ejaculated into the uterus at conception. It fits nicely with the idea that pollution is transmitted through shared bodily substance: *tuṭakku* will affect more of the father’s relations if the deceased is male, more of the mother’s relations if the deceased is female. Despite the logical ingenuity of this theory, however, it was highly divergent from the views of other informants.
11. My conclusions in the following analysis are totally dependent on Brito’s categories and definitions; there is no other published source for the Mukkuvar law.
12. According to nineteenth-century colonial documents, a traditional system of matrilineal inheritance was also followed in the Tamil settlements south of Trincomalee (CO54/123: 137–40; CO416/4, A27, National Archives, Kew, UK).
13. The courts ruled in each case that the matrilineal heirs to these bequests were not adequately defined in law and that the Mukkuvar inheritance system was defunct. However, I learned of one successful effort in Akkaraipattu to establish such matri-

lineal property by testamentary deed. Several generations back, Tillainayaka Kurukkal left a tract of paddy land to his sister and her female descendants in perpetuity, and the matrilineal women are still in possession of it today.

14. Please note that I am not making an evolutionary argument here about the universal decline of matriliney, nor claiming an adaptive teleology for the nuclear family. Kinship and domestic organization, like everything else, responds to specific cultural and historical factors.
15. Dowry (*cīṭaṇam*) is not the same thing as Islamic bride price (*mahr*), which is a token payment (often only pledged, and ultimately refundable in divorce) from the groom to the bride that is necessary to validate a Muslim marriage. *Mahr* is legally and ritually important, but it is not a vehicle for the transfer of wealth.
16. There are limitations in Islamic law on gifts and bequests made after the onset of “death sickness” (*marad al-mawt*), but they are not well understood or closely followed in Akkaraipattu.
17. The three temples most commonly identified as *tēcattukōvils* are in Kokkadichcholai, Mandur, and Tirukkovil. Whitaker suggests adding Mamangam and Sittandi (1986: 38). V. C. Kandiah states that Tirukkovil was the foremost *tēcattukōvil* and that temples at Verugal and Periya Poraitivu were also included on the list (1964: 434).
18. At the Mandur temple, the honorific garland is a bar of wood wrapped in white cloth and decorated with flowers that is tied to the front of the turban of the leading dignitary (Whitaker 1999: 150).
19. A survey of forty-five Kovilar marriages in Kokkadichcholai I conducted in 1976 revealed that 51 percent had spouses with Mukkuvar matriclan names.

#### 4. VIEWS OF THE TAMIL CASTE HIERARCHY

1. See also chap. 3 herein.
2. While in the field I had occasion to re-read, wistfully, the following lines from Marriott’s classic article on food transactions and caste ranking: “I now asked simply, ‘which caste is high, which is low?’ repeating this question for each pair of castes. Villagers found this a natural kind of questioning and often replied with grave interest. They seemed to take care in answering” (Marriott 1968: 138).
3. I have elsewhere explored the unique history and ethnic identity formation of the Portuguese Burghers (McGilvray 1982a).
4. For some Akkaraipattans, including myself, wild boar and legal drinks were the two most alluring items on the menu at the nearby Government Rest House at Sinnamuhattuvaram in the 1970s.
5. I was told that Hindu Tamils did not attend the *kandoori* feasts held at Muslim mosques, where beef was always served. However, until recently, it was a common Muslim practice to employ Tamil Paraiyar Drummers as musicians at these mosque festivals, and it is possible that they received food as part of their normal payment.

6. In a fascinating research note Karthigesu Indrapala (2005: 299–301) suggests that the etymological roots of this popular Tamil word may not be from *iḷam* (young) but from *iḷam*, an ancient name for Lanka.
7. The *kuṭimai* service pattern has been documented in Jaffna (Pfaffenberger 1982) and more recently in Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu (Mines 2005), where it is explicitly understood as a system of removing polluting substances from upper-caste households. While *kuṭimai* castes in Akkaraipattu also remove polluting substances, the actual rhetoric of High Caste domination strongly emphasizes the status honor and political authority of the Mukkuvar and Velalar patrons who enjoy *kuṭimai* services.
8. The two priests at the Bhadrakali temple controlled by the Tattar Smiths are members of the Smith caste. The priest employed by the Sandar Climbers at their temple to the god Pillaiyar was the son of a well-known deceased High Caste Kurukkal priest.
9. I did observe the non-Brahmin priest from the High Caste temple performing a Vedic-style *hōma* fire sacrifice at the Smith caste's Bhadrakali temple festival, but this was a gesture of Hindu ecumenism that had practically no connection to the main public events, the ecstatic Bhadrakali firewalking, possession, and blood-sacrifice rites.

## 5. THE TAMIL HIGH CASTE ALLIANCE

1. Over half the Tamil carpenters (57 percent) in my survey were members of the High Castes, and the remaining 43 percent were distributed evenly between the Sandar Climbers, Portuguese Burghers, and Paraiyar Drummers.
2. Moorish kinship terms are slightly different. I document them in chapter 8 and appendix 2.
3. One local historian (D. P. Sivaram, personal communication) has compiled evidence from different versions of the texts contained in the *Maṭṭakkalappu Māṇmiyam* indicating that the canonical “seven kudis” of the Mukkuvars at one point included *Vilvarācaṅ* kudi (extinct today), *Taṇaṅcaṅā* kudi (rarely found today), and *Maḷuvaracaṅ* kudi (regarded as a “Velalar” matriline today). The same local texts are said to distinguish between Velalars who never perform temple service (*Vaṭuka*, *Pūtūr*, *Marunkūr*, *Vīraccōlai*, *Kārakāṭṭu*, *Mēli*, and *Koṅku* Velalars) and those Velalars who do perform such ritual duties (*Kaṇṭaṅ*, *Caruvili*, *Kaṭṭappattan*, *Kavuttan*, *Attiyā*, *Vaiṭṭiṅā*, and *Ponṇāci* kudi).
4. A new critical edition (Kamalanathan and Kamalanathan 2005) invites renewed attention to these key texts of Batticaloa history.
5. *Kōvilars* are temple servants at Tirukkovil and Kokkaticcolai. *Paṇṭārams* are a non-Brahmin caste of priests and flower-garland makers found on the upcountry tea estates and in Tamilnadu. *Vāṇiyars* are south Indian oil pressers.

6. Indeed, in the nearby hamlet of Kolavil South three familiar Mukkuvar matrilineal (Padaiyanda, Kalinga, and Panikkana kudi) predominate in the local population, and both Maluvarasan kudi and Vedda Velalar kudi are barely represented.
7. I heard four oral versions of this legend in Akkaraipattu and Kokkadichcholai. An apparently related story about Kantan's bringing of sacred objects for the Kannaki cult from Ottukuṭā in Jaffna—note the homonymy with Ottuvarā in Canagaratnam's story (1921: 38)—is found in the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Māṇṇiyam* (Nadarajah 1962: 61–62).
8. The legends of the Mandur Kandaswamy temple likewise credit the temple Velalars imported from the Tirukkovil (Koraikkalappu) with bringing the first entourage of *kuṭimai* domestic-service castes to Mandur (Whitaker 1999: 4, 13). The ethno-historical parallels with Nicholas Dirks's study (1987) of warrior caste (Kallar and Maravar) political dominance, coupled with vestiges of Velalar ritual honors, in Pudukkottai, Tamilnadu, have been noted in chap. 3.
9. A few Kurukkal informants argued that under such circumstances it was proper only to marry with “lunar” (*chandra* vamsam) rather than “solar” (*suriya* vamsam) matrilineal. Operationally, I was told this meant “Velalar” kudi rather than “Mukkuvar” kudi, but no such pattern emerged from my survey data.
10. This also agrees with the findings of Lester Hiatt, who lived in Tambiluvil for four months in early 1970 (Hiatt 1973: 238).
11. Whitaker reports an unequivocally and consensually ranked set of nine matrilineal in the Karaiyar caste village of Kottai Kallar (1999: 76). This is the only clear and comprehensive kudi hierarchy I have heard of in the entire Batticaloa region.
12. For complete details see McGilvray 1974: 188.
13. The slow but steady tendency for upwardly mobile Tamil warrior castes (*Kallar*, *Maravar*, *Akampaiyar*) to gradually acquire the Velalar title over time is acknowledged in a well-known South Indian aphorism (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 7:377; Dumont 1986: 10; Dirks 1987: 248).

## 6. THE KUDI IN ACTION

1. Six of the twelve kudi in Tambiluvil are also found in Akkaraipattu: Maluvarasan, Panikkana, Vedda Velalar, Kurukkal, Chetty, and Sinhala.
2. Caṭṭi kudi, not Ceṭṭi (Chetty). Informants insisted there was a difference. The word *caṭṭi* can mean a shallow clay pot, a lotus, or a professional wrestler (*Tamil Lexicon* 3:1237).
3. There were two Kovilar marriages with “Sinhala,” one with a Karaiyar, and one with a Jaffna person of unstated caste.
4. See McGilvray 1974: 139–41 for a tabulated list.
5. The matriline was identified as *vaṇṇakkar pētti tatti*, “the *tatti* of the matrilineal headman's (i.e., the temple trustee's) granddaughter.”

6. Another term, *kūṭṭam* (crowd, bunch, assembly), occasionally turned up on the surveys conducted in villages on the west side of the Batticaloa Lagoon.
7. The proper spelling of *pettāṇṭa* is presumably *perrāṇṭa* (from *perram*, “greatness,” plus the verb *āl*, “to rule or reign”).
8. When the anomalous marriages are subtracted, the cross-cousin marriages amount to 26.1 percent of the total.
9. See table 9, note B.
10. There is some slender corroboration of this tradition in S. O. Canagaratnam’s *Monograph of the Batticaloa District* (1921: 32, 82).

## 7. A PROFILE OF THE TAMIL SPECIALIST CASTES

1. Another word for blacksmith in this area is *kollar*, while *por̥kollar* (gold kollar) is a title preferred by some goldsmiths with whom I spoke. Other terms used occasionally by Smiths were *pattar* and *ācāri*.
2. *Ōṭāvi* means, literally, a “boatwright.” The common Tamil word for carpenter, *taccan*, is seldom heard in the Batticaloa region.
3. Although the brass workers of Ondachchimadam did not appear to have much work when I visited the village in the early 1970s, I commissioned a replica of a *kuttu viḷakku* oil lamp belonging to my Tamil landlord and found their craftsmanship to be excellent.
4. For a matrix with full data on Smith matrilineal marriage patterns, see McGilvray 1974: 169.
5. Strong connections between goddess Bhadrakali and the goldsmith caste are evident in Rohan Bastin’s vivid account of the Munnesvaram temple complex (Bastin 2002), while Tanaka’s study of Bhadrakali and Draupadi temples in Udappu, not far from Munnesvaram, documents the dominance and patronage of the Karaiyar fishing community (Tanaka 1991).
6. The Nalavar (*Naḷavar*) are a large caste found in Puttalam and Jaffna, and are associated with palm-tree climbing but are also reported to have shared with Pallans the status of chattel slaves to Velalar landlords (Casie Chitty 1834; Banks 1960: 72).
7. A passage in the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Mānmiyam* identifies the Sandar cattle brand as the knife (*katti*) (Nadarajah 1962: 87). When I asked a High Caste temple official what the Sandar cattle brand might be, he could not resist joking for the benefit of onlookers that “it must be the toddy pot” (*kaḷḷu muṭṭi*). The lotus is a common motif in High Caste (especially Velalar) cattle brands, which may suggest why it was proposed.
8. For a matrix with full data on Sandar matrilineal marriage patterns, see McGilvray 1974: 185.
9. Apart from one person in the Mandur kudi, all of the other toponymic Washerman matrilineals I had heard about seemed to have no members at all in Akkaraipattu, viz., *Īccantivu*, *Karavāku*, *Kaḷutāvaḷai*, *Malvattai*, and *Miyāṅkoṭai* kudis. The latter,

- like the Miyangoda Velalar clan among the High Castes, identifies the feudal domain of a Sinhala nobleman in the vicinity of Panama.
10. Out of the sixty marriages I hoped to document in my survey, I was able to obtain complete matrilineal affiliations for only forty-six (76 percent). For a matrix with full data on Vannar marriage choice, see McGilvray 1974: 203.
  11. The common colloquial term for Barber is *nācuvan*, or sometimes the English word *barber*. The Tamil word *ampaṭṭan* is also recognized but is seldom used.
  12. Burial is the standard mortuary practice in this non-Brahmin Tamil region, although cremations are occasionally conducted as a high-status marker for wealthy families.
  13. A small group of Muslim barber-circumcisers (*Ostā*) also shaves beards and hair for more traditional Moorish men (see chap. 9 herein).
  14. Mullai, a forest or pastoral tract associated with the jasmine flower, is one of the five poetic landscapes in classical Tamil poetry (Ramanujan 1985). In Akkaraipattu the word commonly refers to low-lying, fertile, irrigated paddy land.
  15. For a matrix with full data on Navitar marriage choice, see McGilvray 1974, 216.
  16. I am referring here to the caste society of Batticaloa in the twentieth century. Historical texts such as the *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Mānmiyam* suggest that a wider array of musicians and dancers may have been patronized in the precolonial chiefdoms of the region. Graceful female temple dancers were noted at Tirukkovil in 1800 by a British traveler (Cordiner 1807, 2:137).
  17. Fresh beef is widely available in Muslim butcher shops in Akkaraipattu. I assume that both Muslim and Hindu cattle end up there, one way or another. As a result, there may not be much need for cattle-scavenging services.
  18. Caste members generally used the informal *Paraiyan* rather than the more formal *Paraiyar*.
  19. One individual explained to me that after he fled Tamil-Muslim rioting in Kalmunai, he resettled in Kolavil and “joined” the Karavaku kudi because it seemed appropriate given his geographical origins.
  20. The only two cases of intercaste marriage I came across in the Drummer community in Kolavil were between Paraiyar women and Sinhala men whose social background I was not able to ascertain.
  21. Moffatt (1979b: 253) offers a neat mythological argument to explain why some Paraiyars in Tamilnadu, too, worship only an icon of the head of Mariyamman. The goddess is said to have been created from the head of a Brahman and the body of an untouchable Cakkiliyan, so the worship of her head is a cult of “her pure, high, Brahmanic part.” However, for simple reasons of economy and portability, not only Mariyamman but many other goddesses without split personalities are worshiped in the form of small metal faces by many castes in eastern Sri Lanka.
  22. No formal status of hereditary agrestic labor, such as the *paṇṇaiyāḷ* (field man) relationship described by Michael Moffatt (1979b), Kathleen Gough (1960), and

others for Tamilnadu, or the *aṭimai* (slave) category noted by Michael Banks (1960) and others in Jaffna, exists here; nor do the Paraiyars constitute a significant share of the agricultural labor force in the Batticaloa region as a whole.

23. Matrilineal descent organization is also absent from the Kadaiyar Limeburners and the Kuravar Gypsies, both of which are Christian groups in the Akkaraipattu area.
24. Because the western side of the Batticaloa Lagoon has largely been under LTTE control for two decades, I have not yet conducted follow-up fieldwork on the Drummers of Tivukkudi.

## 8. THE MOORS: MATRILINEAL MUSLIMS

1. Matrilocal marriage is also practiced by most Sri Lankan Muslims and their cultural cousins, the Marakkayar Muslims of the Tamilnadu coast, and matrilineal descent and inheritance is followed by the Muslim population of the Lakshadweep Islands (McGilvray 1998a; Dube 2001b; Vijayakumar 2006). Although they have social-structural similarities with the Mappilas of Kerala, the east-coast Moors of Sri Lanka have none of the tradition of violent *jihād* uprisings that were characteristic of Mappila society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dale 1980).
2. All of my information about landlessness is based on self-reports in a structured household questionnaire. A more detailed study would have to consider the possibility of underreporting and the immense variation in the quality of agricultural lands in different locations.
3. This category would include government administrative and technical officers, teachers, postal employees, co-op managers, office clerks, policemen, lawyers, and notaries.
4. The word *kantūri* is Persian, literally referring to a kind of tablecloth, and metonymically to the feast that is served upon it. The Arabic word *ūrs*, a “wedding” of the saint with Allah at the time of death, is the term more commonly used in North India and Pakistan. See Ernst and Lawrence for a concise overview of Sufi saint festivals (2002: 90–98).
5. The power of Sufi saints to stall vehicles, freeze-up machinery, and paralyze beasts of burden is a widespread theme in Sri Lankan Muslim folklore. Examples include the Kandyan king’s elephant that refused to intrude on the meditation of Bawa Kufi near Gampola, the horse of a colonial Englishman that balked at the grave of Saint Sahabdeen at the Meera Maccam Mosque in Kandy, and a World War II English officer’s horse that fell and died after jumping over Saint Muttaveli Appa’s tomb in Trincomalee.
6. Although no one made the comparison, I also thought of the local Hindu tradition that says a lingam will eventually sprout up from the site where a saintly Virasaiva Kurukkal has been buried (chap. 3 herein). I should also mention an example of treating buried saints in exactly the opposite fashion: when the Grand Mosque in

Nintavur was renovated and enlarged, the preexisting tombs of three saints were obliterated when the new concrete floor was poured right over them.

7. As of June 2006, the kudi Maraikkār system was functioning at the Qadiriya Palli, Baduru Palli, and Nooraniya Palli. There is an enduring etymological debate about the origin of the word *Maraikkār*, which is a title and a personal name among Moors of Sri Lanka, and also the name of a Muslim trading community (*Marakkāyar*) in coastal Tamilnadu, South India. Proponents of Arab ethnic identity prefer to derive the term from *markāb* (Arabic, “boat”). Others derive it from *mārkkam* (Tamil and Malayalam, “religion”). J. B. P. More reports that Marakkayars today favor an etymology derived from *marakkalarāyar* (ruler of the boats) (1997: 22). Besides being a Sinhalese term for Indian “Coast Moors,” the term *Marakkala* is similar to a caste title found among the Moger coastal fishermen in South Kanara. See D’Souza 1955 (41–47) and Ameer Ali 1981 (68–70) for exhaustive discussions.
8. The Muslims of Sri Lanka have their own statutory Islamic marriage and inheritance law, a central board of Wakfs in Colombo to oversee Muslim religious properties, and a system of governmentally appointed Muslim magistrates (*Qāzi*) in local communities across the island who hear cases involving Islamic (primarily Shāfi’i) personal law. For an overview, see H. W. Tambiah 1972, chap. 17.
9. There are some towns, such as Nintavur, where the kudi Maraikkars no longer administer the mosques, serving instead only to authenticate the kudi membership of brides and grooms at Muslim marriage ceremonies.
10. Father, *vāppā*; mother, *ummā*; elder brother, *kākkā*; elder sister, *rāttā* or *tāttā*. For the Mappila kin-terms, see Gough 1961 (439–42) and Puthenkalam 1977 (228–32). In the absence of a full list of Marakkayar kin-terms, I do not know what other kin-terms they may share with the Moors of Sri Lanka. Muslims in Colombo and southwestern Sri Lanka recognize as a substitute for *kākkā* (elder brother) the term *nānā*, which is also a Singaporean term for the wealthier Tamil Muslims who come from coastal Marakkayar towns such as Karaikal and Nagapattinam (Mani 1992: 341).
11. Canagaratnam’s list of Moorish matrilineal clans consists of *Ponnācci* kudi, *Ucaviṭumirālevvai* kudi, *Varicainācci* kudi, *Pūmālaikaṭṭi* kudi, *Kinikkaruṭaṇ* kudi, *Paṇṇaiyavīṭu* kudi, and *Mukāntiramnācci* kudi.
12. Burton Stein noted that eighteen was a highly conventional number for the enumeration of social groups in medieval South India (1980: 11, 218). In Batticaloa the Velalars were legendarily said to have arrived with an entourage of eighteen “slave” castes.
13. In a survey of 450 Moorish marriages in Akkaraipattu Division 3, respondents acknowledged only five instances of marriage within the same matrilineal clan. Four of these were within the largest Moorish clan, Rasampillai.
14. The term *vakuttavāy* was used mainly by older Moorish informants; younger people had seldom heard the expression. The Tamil word *kiḷai* (branch, fork), a common



term for sublineages in South India (Karve 1968: 213, 239), turned up in the name of one Moorish sublineage, but was not generally used in Akkaraipattu.

15. *Podiyar* refers to a major landowner, *Mullaikkaran* identifies a cultivation overseer, and *kostāppar* is a Dutch-derived term for a colonial village official.
16. Vadugedara was said to be on the Kadugannawa-Nawalapitiya Road south of Kandy, where I could only locate a village named Welagedara. The second location suggests a “waterfall” in Tamil, so perhaps it is located in the Kandyan Hills.
17. *Kuñcam Pettā* (little granny), *Ainiyam Pettā* (Ainiyār is a man’s name), *Kūnam Pettā* (bent, or hunchback, granny), *Pokkaniyam Pettā* (paddy mortar, or large navel, granny). Some of these nicknames could refer to the woman herself or to a closely related male.
18. The degree of awareness of submatrilineages among Tamils living near Kokkadichcholai on the west side of the Batticaloa Lagoon was roughly the same as among the Akkaraipattu Moors.
19. It would be interesting to conduct the same type of research with a sample of Moorish women to see if their matrilineal awareness is different, or deeper. However, that project will require a female anthropologist.

## 9. MUSLIM ELITES AND SPECIALISTS

1. One of these remaining sons, Yehiyappa Maulana (“Hajiar Appa,” d. 27 February 1882), is buried as a saint next to the Meerappalli Mosque in Matara.
2. Not to be confused with the famous *jinn*-taming Periya Maulana who is buried in Kattankudy and is discussed in the next section.
3. This antinomian Sufi order is well known in north India, with a south Indian base in Penukonda, Andhra Pradesh. The shrine of their founder, Zindashah Madar is located at Makanpur, U.P. (Khaja Khan 1923: 187–95; Fallasch 2004).
4. See Khaja Khan 1923: 193 for a discussion of similar faqir organization in Penukonda, Andhra Pradesh.
5. The formal Tamil name of the islandwide Bawa organization is the *Akila Ilankai Jamiyattul Muslim Pakkīr Jamāt*.
6. Rifā’i is often considered a branch of Qadiriya, despite a lack of historical evidence, according to Trimmingham (1971). I collected from Bawa informants a number of additional Sufi orders, including Jalaliya, Naqshbandiya, and Aidurusiya. The latter is a Yemeni order whose founder is buried in Aden (Ho 2006).
7. Although saliva is a notoriously polluting substance for Tamil Hindus, its beneficial use to transmit sacred power (*baraka*) in Sufi ritual is well attested in Tamilnadu (Bayly 1989: 127–28) and in Morocco (Westermarck 1926, 1:93).
8. *Chillā* is a Persian term for a 40 day period of religious seclusion and meditation, and by extension, to the chamber in which it is performed.
9. Further fieldwork on Sri Lankan Sufism is currently in progress.
10. Although it is not mentioned in the Quran, male circumcision is performed and

celebrated in a variety of ways by Muslims worldwide (Denny 1985: 297–300). The corresponding form of “circumcision” for Muslim girls varies greatly by local culture and region of the world, and it is not sanctioned in all Muslim legal traditions. According to John Alden Williams, the practice is most strongly associated with the Shafi’i legal school to which most Sri Lankan Muslims belong (1994: 105). Among Sri Lankan Muslims it is said to consist of only a minor symbolic cut or laceration of the skin of the baby girl’s clitoris by the “*Ostā māmi*,” or wife of the Moorish circumciser (Hussein 2007: 74–77).

11. This is a variant of the Tamil word *ārati* (the waving of lamps before Hindu images).
12. A number of my male Moorish friends felt that Islamic rules of defilement would classify urine as more polluting than feces. Elaborate precautions are taken to prevent urine from soiling a clean sarong, particularly prior to prayers.

#### 10. ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

1. See, for example, Wriggins 1960; Stanley J. Tambiah 1986; Spencer 1990b; Dharmadasa 1992; Kingsley M. de Silva 1998; Wilson 2000; DeVotta 2004; Richardson 2005.
2. The Tamils were often referred to as “Malabars” in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century colonial writings.
3. Even without a Tamil identity, Muslims living in Sinhala areas have been vulnerable to ethnic violence. An anti-Muslim riot in Mawanella in early May 2001 resulted in three Muslim deaths and widespread destruction of Muslim homes, shops, and mosques (British Refugee Council, *Sri Lanka Monitor*, no. 159, 2001; Nuhman 2007: 135–46, 154–55).
4. On the Sinhalese and Tamil racial constructions, see Gunawardena 1990, Rogers 1995, and Hellman-Rajanayagam 1995.
5. The Tamil spoken by the Moors of the Batticaloa region contains a number of Arabic-derived words as well as alternative kin-terms that are distinctive to Muslim usage. Batticaloa Moorish pronunciation is noticeably different from the Tamil spoken by Muslims in Galle and the southern coastal region (Nuhman 2007: 50–91).
6. According to Mappillai Alim’s treatise, Imam Shafi’i encouraged the consumption of meat for masculine strength (Ahmad Lebbai 1873: 467).
7. Mappillai Alim’s treatise commends the use of perfume before attending Friday prayers and at other times as well (Ahmad Lebbai 1873: 274, 467).
8. Neighboring Muslim towns such as Nintavur and Sammanturai are said to have even greater concentrations of landed wealth in the hands of Moorish podiyars.
9. Interestingly enough, E. B. Denham, the government agent in Batticaloa, reported “no trouble of any kind in this Province” at the time of the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots (Denham 1915, E5).

10. “Muslims claim that they are neither Sinhalese nor Tamils, but are Arabs. They use this in pursuit of their selfish aims. . . . They are Tamils. They study in Tamil at Tamil schools. Their culture is not Arab. . . . [W]e did not rape them or loot their property. We only sent them out. . . . We made several promises to the Muslims. . . . On the contrary, they joined forces with the Sinhalese army and the Sri Lankan state and set about destroying us. . . . The Muslims must accept that they are Tamils. They must understand that they are descendants of Arabs who married Tamil women” (University Teachers for Human Rights 1991: 42–43).
11. There is reasonable speculation that the Batticaloa-born Tamil journalist D. P. Sivaram, who was assassinated on 28 April 2005, was the victim of agents sympathetic to the Karuna faction. For deeper background, see Whitaker 2007.

#### EPILOGUE: FIELDNOTES FROM THE WAR ZONE

1. See Lawrence 1997, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2007; McGilvray 1997; Thangarajah 1997; Thiruchandran 1999; Trawick 1997; Whitaker 1997; Winslow and Woost 2004.
2. Total tsunami fatalities in Akkaraipattu were in the range of thirty to forty, but fully half of them were Portuguese Burghers and Kadaiyar Limeburners whose seaside settlements at the fortieth milepost south of town were washed off the map (McGilvray 2006).
3. This is a topic for a different project, one that entails an entirely different research design, although some very interesting work is already in print (McDowell 1996; Fuglerud 1999, 2003).
4. A much-photographed exception is the Tiruchendur Murugan Kovil near Kalladi, Batticaloa, which was undermined by the tsunami, leaving it tilted at a dramatic angle like a shipwrecked vessel.
5. Valluvan is a priestly subcaste of, or a higher-ranking endogamous grade within, the Paraiyar caste in Tamilnadu. The Valluvans in the untouchable colony studied by Michael Moffatt explicitly model their behavior on the Brahmin domestic priest, the *purohit* (1979b: 102–9).
6. For more on the annual pilgrimage, see <http://kataragama.org>.
7. This section draws on material presented in McGilvray 1997.
8. I also heard one uncorroborated rumor of an earlier desecration by Muslims who, it was whispered, had murdered a Tamil devotee at the temple and secretly buried his body under the ashes of the goddess’s ritual fire pit. The temple authorities, however, made no such allegations.
9. University Teachers for Human Rights 1991: 26–27 gives a short account of the attack on the Buddhist vihara in Akkaraipattu in June 1990. All University Teachers for Human Rights reports are available at <http://www.uthr.org>.
10. I am grateful to the late D. Sivaram for translating this taped narrative.
11. University Teachers for Human Rights 1993b: 32.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>amutu</i>	Tamil Hindu household food offering for the spirits of the dead.
<i>avuliyā</i>	Generic term for a Muslim saint.
Bawa, <i>pāvā</i>	Muslim religious mendicant or faqir, typically a member of the Rifā'i order of Sufism, who performs ecstatic devotional zikr at mosque festivals across the island.
Burgher, <i>paṛaṅkiyar</i>	Eurasian community of Portuguese and Dutch descent that maintains a tradition of Portuguese Creole language and folk culture.
<i>cīrpātar</i>	Tamil caste, often rendered in English as Seerpadam, with local strength in the vicinity of Mandur.
<i>cītaṅam</i>	Dowry property, typically including a house and agricultural land, given by the bride's parents to their daughter, or to their daughter and son-in-law jointly, at marriage.
Eelam, <i>īlam</i>	An ancient Tamil name for the island of Lanka. "Tamil Eelam" is the northeastern territory of the island claimed as a historic Tamil homeland by the LTTE.
Gotra, <i>kōttiram</i>	Typically in Hindu South Asia, an exogamous patrilineal Brahmin clan. In the Batticaloa region non-Brahmin Virasaiva Kurukkals use this term, instead of <i>kudī</i> , to refer to their own exogamous matrilineal clans.
Grama Sevaka	Recently redesignated as Grama Niladhari, the lowest-level officer of the Sri Lankan civil administration, who oversees a division ( <i>kuṛicci</i> ) or ward.

<i>jummā</i> mosque	Any mosque that is used for community-wide Friday prayers.
<i>kālīfā</i>	Caliph, leader of a Sufi order or chapter thereof. Also the leader of a group of Bawa faqirs.
<i>kalvetṭu</i>	Literally “stone inscription,” referring in the Batticaloa region to a category of pre-modern Tamil texts, preserved in palm-leaf manuscripts, that expound on local temple legends and caste traditions.
Kandoori, <i>kantūri</i>	Annual celebration of the death anniversary of a Muslim saint, involving a public feast. Equivalent to <i>ūrs</i> in other parts of South Asia.
<i>karaiyār</i>	Tamil sea-fishing caste, cognate with Sinhalese Karava.
<i>kaṭaiyar</i>	Tamil Christian Limeburner caste.
<i>koṇṭāṇ koṭuttān</i>	“Receiving and giving,” one of several east-coast Tamil expressions for the reciprocal exchange of marriage partners—what anthropologists call “marriage alliance”—between two matriclans over several generations.
<i>kōvil</i>	Tamil term for a Hindu temple.
<i>kōvilār</i>	Tamil temple-servant caste in the Batticaloa region.
Kudi, <i>kuṭi</i>	Generic term for an exogamous matrilineal clan among the Tamils and Muslims of the Batticaloa region. The kudi is the largest unit of matrilineal descent organization, with local strength in specific areas.
<i>kuḷappam</i>	Literally “mix-up,” the colloquial Tamil term for an inter-ethnic riot or mob disturbance.
<i>kūrai muṭi</i> , or <i>vīṭṭu muṭi</i>	“Roof crown” or “house crown,” referring to ceremonially decorated brass pots that are displayed above the doorway of high-caste Tamil houses as honorary markers ( <i>varicai</i> ) of one’s caste or matriclan.
<i>kuṛavar</i>	Telugu-speaking “Gypsy” caste/tribe of former hunters and snake charmers, now living in an agricultural resettlement community at Alikambai.
<i>kurukkaḷ</i>	Honorific plural form of <i>kuru</i> (guru), a Hindu title often applied in Sri Lanka to non-Brahmin priests who have received their qualification or ordination in non-Brahmin lineages or seminaries.
<i>kuṭimai</i>	Literally “householdship,” referring to the hereditary domestic-service castes—Barbers, Washermen, and Drummers—and to the privileged access to their ritual performance at high-caste rites of passage.

Lebbe, <i>ilevvai</i>	Official leader of prayers in an east-coast mosque, equivalent to <i>katib</i> . There is no connection with the Lebbai or Labbai subsection of Muslims in Tamilnadu.
<i>mantiravāti</i>	A sorcerer, one who can recite mantras to control spirits and demons, either for good or for evil purposes.
<i>Maraikkār</i>	A male Muslim mosque trustee who represents a matrilineal clan ( <i>kudi</i> ), usually on a mosque committee with <i>maraikkars</i> from other <i>kudis</i> .
<i>mārṛukkaliyāṇam</i>	“Exchange marriage,” a permitted union in which a brother and sister from one family simultaneously marry a sister and a brother from another family.
<i>maṭṭakkaḷappu</i>	Tamil word for Batticaloa.
<i>maulānā</i>	Sayyid, a patrilineal descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali, or through one of his close male relatives.
<i>maulavi</i>	Muslim cleric or teacher with some formal education in Islam, but with less advanced training than an <i>ālim</i> .
Moor	An older term for Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Muslims, derived from the Portuguese word for North African Muslims, <i>mouro</i> . It corresponds to the Tamil term <i>cōṇakar</i> .
Mukkuvar, <i>muṛkukar</i>	Tamil matrilineal land-owning caste of Kerala origin that has exercised political dominance in many parts of the Batticaloa region from pre-colonial times.
<i>mullaikkāraṇ</i>	Traditional title of the headman of the Navitar Barber caste, the customary officiant at Tamil Hindu funerals.
<i>muḷukku</i>	Muslim term for ritual pollution, roughly equivalent to Tamil <i>tutakku</i> .
<i>muṇṇiṭu</i>	The ritual and political honor of being first to receive the deity’s blessing after the climax of a Hindu temple festival puja.
<i>mūppaṇ</i>	Traditional title of the headman of the Paraiyar Drummer caste and leader of the Paraiyar drumming troupe.
Muslim	Sri Lanka’s third-largest ethnic community (8 percent), also known as Moors or <i>cōṇakar</i> (Sonahar), who are predominantly Tamil-speaking Sunni Muslims of the Shafi’i legal school. As a purely religious designation, the term Muslim can be enlarged to include Sri Lanka’s small Malay and Gujarati Muslim communities.
<i>mutucom</i>	Category of inalienable ancestral property in the now

	defunct system of matrilineal Mukkuvar law enforced in Batticaloa until the mid-nineteenth century. Contrasts with acquired property, <i>teṭiyateṭṭam</i> .
<i>nāvitar</i>	Tamil Barber caste.
<i>ostā</i>	Hereditary Sri Lankan Muslim barber-circumciser. A semi-endogamous caste-like community.
<i>paḷḷi, or paḷḷivācal</i>	Sri Lankan Tamil term for a Muslim mosque.
<i>paṅku</i>	A “share,” or a recognized right to a standard portion of something, ranging from legal shares of paddy-cultivation rights to collective shares of sponsorship of rituals at temple festivals.
<i>paraṭiyar</i>	Tamil Drummer caste historically associated with funeral service.
<i>paṭuvāṇ karai</i>	The semi-isolated western “sun-setting shore” of the Batticaloa Lagoon, site of more conservative Tamil customs and a region long under LTTE control.
Podiyar, <i>pōṭiyār</i>	A significant proprietor of agricultural lands in the Batticaloa region, whether Tamil or Muslim. Dutch colonial documents identify the term Podiyar with high-caste matrilineal Tamil political chiefs who monopolized most of the paddy fields.
<i>qāzi</i>	Local Muslim magistrate who is consulted on matters of Islamic personal law, e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance.
<i>rātib</i>	An ecstatic group performance of devotion to a Muslim saint or to the founder of a Sufi order (e.g., Rifā’i ratib).
Sandar, <i>cāṅṅār</i>	Tamil Climber caste whose traditional work was to pick coconuts and to tap the palm-flower sap to make jaggary sugar and alcoholic toddy ( <i>kaḷ</i> ).
Sangamar, <i>caṅkamar</i>	A title in the Virasaiva or Lingayat sect of Hinduism for a category of peripatetic Saivite priests (Jangama).
Sheikh, <i>shēku</i>	Among Sri Lankan Muslims, a Sufi religious guide and preceptor to whom a personal vow of loyalty and discipleship is made.
Sinhalese, <i>sinhala</i>	Sri Lanka’s majority ethnic community (74 percent), predominantly Theravada Buddhist in religion, and also the name of the Indo-Aryan language that they speak.
<i>taikkiyā, takkiyā</i>	A small structure for Muslim meditation and prayer, often associated with a Muslim saint’s tomb ( <i>ziyāram</i> ) or with the local chapter of a Sufi order.



<i>tāli</i>	Tamil and Muslim bride's emblem, a gold ornament and necklace that is tied as part of the wedding ritual.
Tamil	Sri Lanka's second-largest ethnic community (18 percent), predominantly Saivite Hindu in religion, and the name of the Dravidian language that they speak.
<i>taṅṭakkāraṅ</i>	Traditional title of the headman of the Vannar Washerman caste.
Taravād, <i>taravāṭu</i>	Until the twentieth century, the effective land-holding matrilineal descent unit—and joint matrilineal household group—among the Nayar warrior/landlord caste of Kerala.
<i>taṭṭār</i>	Combined goldsmith and blacksmith caste among the Tamils.
<i>tāy vaḷi</i> , or <i>peṇ vaḷi</i>	Common Tamil expression for “matrilineal descent” or “female line” in the Batticaloa region.
<i>tēcattukkōvil</i>	“Regional temple” that serves as a ritual and political center for a larger area of high-caste Tamil Hindu dominance in the Batticaloa region.
<i>timilar</i>	Matrilineal Tamil caste found today mainly in the region just south of Trincomalee, where they claim legendary origins as people from Sind.
<i>tuṭakku</i>	The most common term among east-coast Tamils for ritual pollution of any kind.
<i>urimai</i>	Hereditary or customary right of any kind.
Urpodiyar, <i>ūrppōṭiyār</i>	Traditional office of the high-caste Mukkuvar village chief in Akkaraipattu.
<i>vakuttuvār</i> , <i>vayirruvār</i>	Batticaloa vernacular terms for what anthropologists would call a matrilineage or submatrilineage, a smaller segment or branch within a larger matrilineal clan ( <i>kudi</i> ). Alternative terms are <i>kattarai</i> , <i>kūṭṭam</i> , and <i>tatti</i> .
Vamsa, <i>vamicam</i>	Sanskritic term for lineage, caste, or ancestral line, applied in Akkaraipattu to the semi-endogamous Hindu Virasaiva Kurukkals and Muslim Maulanas.
<i>vaṅṅakkar</i>	A male Tamil Hindu temple trustee who represents a matrilineal clan ( <i>kudi</i> ), usually on a temple committee with Vannakkars from other <i>kudis</i> .
<i>vaṅṅār</i>	Tamil Washerman caste.
<i>vaṅṅimai</i>	Chiefship, a pre-colonial concept of regional power and military control by a dominant caste or lineage.
<i>varicai</i>	Any of a series of traditionally recognized and politically

Vedda, <i>vēṭar</i>	sanctioned high-caste “marks of honor,” especially publicly displayed symbols of caste or matrilineal rank. Literally “hunter,” the Tamil term for the aboriginal inhabitants of the Bintenne forests.
<i>vēḷāḷar</i>	A high-status matrilineal Tamil land-owning caste in Batticaloa, rivals of the Mukkuvars in some parts of the east coast, but intermarried allies of the Mukkuvars in Akkaraipattu.
Virasaiva, <i>vīracaiva</i>	Also known as Lingayats, a twelfth-century non-Brahmin sect today centered in Karnataka. The Virasaiva Kurukkals of eastern Sri Lanka are a historical offshoot of this tradition.
<i>virutu</i>	Insignia of specific castes and matrilineal clans, commonly seen in cattle-brand designs.
<i>vīṭu vaḷavu</i>	“House [and] compound,” a common expression for the unit of matrilineal residential real estate in both Tamil and Muslim neighborhoods.
<i>zīkr</i>	The distinctive devotional practice of a Bawa troupe or a lay Sufi order, typically conducted in a group led by a Sheikh or <i>kalifā</i> .
<i>ziyāram</i>	Sri Lankan term for the tomb-shrine of a Muslim saint ( <i>avuliyā</i> ). Equivalent to <i>dargah</i> or <i>mazar</i> in other parts of South Asia.

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## INDEX

- Agriculture, 26–27, 31–32, 255, 268, 274, 302, 321, 334, 340–41. *See also* Land tenure
- Ambilanturai, 192–98, 260–65
- Andhra Pradesh, 47, 57, 88–89, 93, 178, 299, 386 nn. 3–4
- Buddhism: in Akkaraipattu, 45–46, 334, 355, 388 n. 9; Dighavapi dagoba, 9, 57, 66; Tamil, 57–58
- Burghers (Eurasians), 30, 42, 46–47, 49, 63, 149–66, 212, 379 n. 3, 388 n. 2
- Burnand, Jacob, 59, 63, 65–71, 74–75, 83, 85, 102, 122–25, 134–36, 237, 371 n. 10, 372 n. 8, 374 n. 19
- Caste system of the Tamils, 33, 39–44; caste neighborhoods, 41–42, 167–68, 211, 221–22, 229, 239–40, 242, 249, 309; cattle brands and insignia, 106, 201, 217, 226, 230, 242–43, 255–56, 258, 261–62; endogamy of lower castes, 116–17, 184–85, 259–60; headmen of lower castes, 215, 219, 226, 236–37, 243–45, 250, 253–54, 258–59, 263, 265, 342, 344–46; honors (*varicai*) and shares (*panku*), 133–52, 164, 201–9, 219–20, 343; household service castes (*kuṭimai*), 41, 78–79, 82, 106, 111, 149–50, 152, 156, 160–66, 175–76, 206–7, 217, 220, 230–33, 249, 260–65, 283, 342–46; household service duties, 214, 230–35, 240, 244–45, 248–49, 253, 260–63, 342–46, 380 n. 7; Indian *jāti* vs., 98–101; intercaste food transactions, 160–63, 166, 379 n. 5; kingly warrior ideology, 57–71, 77–84, 93–96, 106, 117, 142–45, 150, 152, 182–83, 261–62, 332; membership ascription, 86, 99, 116–18, 168, 182–88, 191; mobility and conflict, 17, 163–65, 202–6, 212, 219–20, 222–24, 227–28, 230–33, 238–39, 243–45, 248, 250, 253–54, 256–65, 339, 341–46; Mukkuvar Urpodiyar, 42, 77–79, 133–34, 176–78, 194, 198, 202–3, 209, 219–20, 253, 291; Muslim patronage, 213, 229–31, 240, 248, 250, 252, 343, 362, 379 n. 5; non-Brahmin traditions, 84–96, 101, 182–83; political dominance (*vannimai*), 17, 51–52,

Caste system of the Tamils (*cont.*)

- 56–71, 75, 77–79, 95–96, 143, 176–78, 182–83, 208–10, 260–65, 326–27, 375 n. 33; ranking by Muslims, 157–60; ranking by Tamils, 149–57; regional assembly (*nāṭṭu kūṭṭam*), 134–35; replication of high caste organization, 17, 56, 61, 66, 73, 79, 81–82, 102–3, 168, 215, 219, 226–28, 238–39, 244–45, 254, 265; territoriality and, 100–101, 182, 260; theories of, 16, 84, 111–16, 119, 151, 160–66, 182–88, 191, 260, 309–10. *See also* Marriage
- Castes: Brahmin priests, 58, 84–85, 88, 92–95, 196, 211–12, 375 n. 32, 376 n. 39, 377 n. 43, 377 n. 47, 388 n. 5; Cakkiliyar sweepers, 37, 42, 149–66, 370 n. 9; Cayakkarar cloth dyers, 370 n. 9; Cettiyar merchants, 140, 174, 187, 207, 370 n. 9; Cirpatar (Seerpadam), 41, 85, 132, 174, 179, 191, 207, 244, 375 n. 30; Kadaiyar limeburners, 30, 43, 49, 101, 103, 149–66, 249, 267, 371 n. 11, 384 n. 23, 388 n. 2; Kaikkolar weavers, 370 n. 9; Karaiyar sea fishermen, 41, 70, 149–66, 196, 373 n. 13, 376 n. 36, 381 n. 11, 382 n. 5; Kovilar temple servants, 41, 51, 81, 138, 141, 149–66, 173, 192, 374 n. 24, 379 n. 19; Kuravar gypsies, 47–49, 103, 149–66, 249, 384 n. 23; Melakkarar (Nattuvar) musicians, 252, 345, 370 n. 9; Mukkuvar cultivators, 16, 40, 56–71, 74–84, 98–99, 102, 149–66, 171–96, 201–9, 372 n. 7, 377 n. 2, 380 n. 3; Nadar traders, 222; Nalavar climbers, 222, 370 n. 9, 382 n. 6; Navitar barbers, 17, 41, 68, 82, 101, 149–66, 202–7, 212, 219, 239–47, 265, 267, 283, 305–10, 342–45; Nayars of Kerala, 103–4, 106–7, 109–10, 121, 124, 127, 132, 144, 183, 283–84, 341–42, 376 n. 40; Pandaram priests of south India, 93, 173, 380 n. 5; Pandarappillai lascoreens, 65, 103, 370 n. 9, 378 n. 3; Paraiyar (Valluvar) drummers, 17, 41, 52, 82, 103, 139, 149–66, 202–6, 212, 220, 236, 247–65, 279, 283, 320, 345–46, 379 n. 5, 383 n. 29, 388 n. 5; Sandar climbers, 17, 41, 149–66, 202–7, 211–12, 219, 221–28, 337, 342, 355, 380 n. 8, 382 n. 7; Tanakkarar elephant-keepers, 370 n. 9; Tattar goldsmiths and blacksmiths, 17, 41, 85, 149–66, 202–6, 210–22, 265, 267, 320, 337, 353–57, 361–62, 376 n. 35, 380 n. 8, 382 n. 1; Timilar (Sindu Nadar), 75–76, 370 n. 9, 375 n. 26; Turumba Vannar “unseeable” washermen, 236; Vaniyar oil-pressers, 370 n. 9; Vannar washermen, 17, 41, 82, 149–66, 202–7, 219, 224, 228–39, 255, 265, 283, 288, 320, 342–43, 376 n. 35; Vanniyar warrior caste of Tamilnadu, 59–60, 372 nn. 3–4, 372 n. 7; Velalar cultivators, 16, 40, 49–51, 57, 79–84, 98–108, 118, 132, 138–44, 149–66, 171–92, 195–96, 255, 339, 374 n. 19, 374 n. 24, 375 n. 30, 377 n. 2, 380 n. 3, 381 n. 13; Virasaiva Kurukkal priests, 16, 41, 43, 57, 84–96, 138, 144, 149–66, 171–88, 179, 182, 186–87, 190, 203–6, 220, 228, 293, 339, 376–77 nn. 41–49
- Christians, 27, 43–49, 61–62, 325, 371 n. 12, 384 n. 23
- Curing and healing specialists, 111, 170, 223, 227, 240–41, 250–51, 269, 293, 302, 307, 320, 360, 378 n. 7. *See also* Ethnomedicine
- Dirks, Nicholas, 16, 80, 82, 106, 183, 373 n. 11, 381 n. 8, 381 n. 13
- Dowry (*cītanam*): among Muslims, 38–39, 129–31, 144–45, 268, 302, 336, 341;

- among Tamils, 38–39, 127–32, 144–45, 264, 336, 341
- Dress and adornment, 319, 322–23, 336, 339–40
- Dumont, Louis, 16, 84, 106–7, 111, 113, 144, 170, 183, 309–10, 376 n. 35, 381 n. 13
- Ecology and settlement patterns, 21–27
- Education, 4, 9, 46, 48, 252, 259, 262, 269–71, 317, 320–22, 325, 334–35, 339–40
- Endogamy: among Maulanas, 293–94; among Ostas, 308–10
- Ethnomedicine, 110–16, 170, 185, 223, 227, 240–41, 250–51, 269, 293, 302, 307, 320, 323–24, 387 n. 6
- Fieldwork, 13–15, 19, 202–4, 218–19, 322, 332, 337
- Fishing, 26, 30, 169, 268–69
- Gujarat, 301
- Hinduism: Bhadrakali, 202, 218–21, 224, 248, 257, 267, 320, 326, 348, 353–57, 361–62, 380 nn. 8–9, 382 n. 5, 388 n. 8; burial in, 240, 244–45, 344–46, 383 n. 12; karma in, 151; Kannaki (Pattini), 49–51, 85, 198–200, 338, 381 n. 7; Mariyamman, 202, 248, 257–59, 264, 345–48, 383 n. 21; Nagatambiran (cobra deity), 238; Periya Tambaran (Siva), 238–39, 343; Pillaiyar (Ganesha), 201–9, 227–28, 257, 259, 264, 337–38, 343, 345, 355, 380 n. 8; purity and pollution in, 49, 87–92, 95, 109, 111–16, 150–51, 156–57, 182, 184–85, 241, 248–49, 260, 262, 323–24, 344, 355, 378 n. 10, 380 n. 7, 386 n. 7; Saivism, 43, 325; Sanskritization theory, 84–85, 319; trance-possession and vows in, 218–21, 248, 262, 346–50, 353–54, 380 n. 9; Vairavan, 264; Virasaiva (Lingayat) heritage, 84–96, 376 n. 42. *See also* Sorcery and mantras
- Hindu temples: Kokkadichcholai temple, 51, 71, 80–81, 94, 96, 98–99, 132, 138–42, 195, 263, 339; kudi Vannakkars' administration of, 40, 104–5, 198–209, 215–20, 226, 228, 238–39, 243, 337–39; Mandur temple, 41, 52, 64, 71, 80–81, 85, 98–99, 105, 136–38, 173–74, 179, 195–96, 201, 236, 248, 252, 373 n. 12, 375 n. 33, 379 n. 18, 381 n. 8; matrilineal temple affiliation, 203–4; Muslim ritual shares, 374 n. 24; regional temples (*tēcattukkōvil*), 71, 136–37, 200, 379 n. 17; ritual shares and honors, 16, 40–42, 105, 135–45, 149, 201–9, 219, 228, 263, 379 n. 18; Tirukkovil temple, 51, 65–66, 71, 73, 80–81, 85, 95, 98–99, 105, 142–44, 200–201, 338, 373 n. 14, 374 n. 24, 379 n. 17
- History: of Batticaloa region, 55–96; Colonial impacts on, 9–13, 24, 28, 61–79, 102, 108, 126–29, 134–35, 172–73, 183–84, 373 n. 10, 374 nn. 16–17; of Kandyan kingdom, 9, 61–63, 65, 67, 73–74, 96, 102, 132, 135, 374 n. 22, 375 n. 25, 384 n. 5; Kerala matrilineal connection in, 16, 56–61; *Kōṇēcar Kalveṭṭu* text in, 64, 80, 376 n. 39; Magha and Chola impacts on, 56–60, 82, 85–86, 372 n. 3; *Maṭṭakkaḷappu Māṇmiyam* text in, 58–59, 64, 73, 75–76, 78–79, 82, 96, 100, 135, 139, 141–42, 172–74, 190, 215, 370 n. 9, 372 n. 2, 373 n. 10, 374 n. 24, 377 n. 46, 381 n. 7, 382 n. 7; of Mukkuvar-Muslim alliance, 75–77, 328; of Muslim settlements, 10, 28, 56, 65–66, 68, 71–77;

- History (*cont.*)
- Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalveṭṭu* text in, 65–66, 73–74, 125, 373 nn. 14–15, 374 n. 23; of Sinhala settlements, 5, 9, 21–23, 26, 57, 65–67, 73–74; Vanniah (*Vaṇṇiyār*) title in, 59–61, 63–64, 156, 173
- Hocart, Arthur Maurice, 84, 136, 182
- Houses, 37, 267–68, 336
- India: Andhra Pradesh, 47, 57, 88–89, 93, 178, 299, 386 nn. 3–4; Gujarat, 301; Karnataka (Mysore), 87, 89, 91, 107, 377 n. 48; Kerala, 16, 56, 58, 60, 72, 77, 109–10, 134, 144, 266, 273, 280, 283–84, 301, 305, 310, 341, 372 n. 1, 372 n. 7, 374 n. 21; Lakshadweep and Androth Island, 272, 296, 301, 305, 310, 384 n. 1; Tamilnadu, 8, 57–61, 72, 77, 79–83, 93, 100, 107, 131, 137, 145, 176, 178, 183, 186, 211–12, 215, 222, 247–49, 260–61, 264, 280, 286, 295, 299–300, 314, 372 n. 4, 372 n. 7, 375 n. 31, 381 n. 8, 383 n. 22, 385 n. 7, 388 n. 5
- Inheritance, 38–39, 128; under Mukkuvar Law, 16, 118–33, 144–45, 196, 378 nn. 11–13; Muslim, 129–31, 379 n. 16. *See also* Dowry; Marriage
- Jaffna, 6, 9–11, 33, 79–83, 85–86, 61–62, 93–96, 112–13, 116, 186, 214, 222, 250, 319, 321–22, 328–29, 337–38, 377 nn. 48–49, 382 n. 6, 383 n. 22
- Kandyan kingdom, 9, 61–63, 65, 67, 73–74, 96, 102, 132, 135, 374 n. 22, 375 n. 25, 384 n. 5
- Karnataka (Mysore), 87, 89, 91, 107, 377 n. 48
- Kataragama, 29–30, 86, 300, 349, 370 n. 4, 388 n. 6
- Kerala, 16, 56, 58, 60, 72, 77, 109–10, 134, 144, 266, 273, 280, 283–84, 301, 305, 310, 341, 372 n. 1, 372 n. 7, 374 n. 21
- Kinship terms: of Muslims, 38, 279–80, 376–68, 385 n. 10; of Tamils, 38, 170–71, 176–82, 365–66
- Kokkadichcholai, 51–52, 98–99, 118, 192–98, 233–38, 260–65, 386 n. 18
- Kolavil, 69–70, 78, 166, 191–98, 202–4, 206–9, 229, 247–60, 265, 345–47, 381 n. 6, 383 n. 20
- Kudi. *See* Matriclans (kudi), matrilineal descent
- Lakshadweep and Androth Island, 272, 296, 301, 305, 310, 384 n. 1
- Land tenure, 38–39, 67–71, 73–75, 78, 104, 118–33, 199, 203, 212, 224, 229, 241, 250–51, 261, 268, 321, 326, 340–41, 374 n. 18, 387 n. 8
- Lawrence, Patricia, 15, 328, 338–39, 347–49, 362, 369 n. 3
- LTTE, 5–7, 11, 16–17, 19, 30, 34–35, 51–52, 96, 104, 138, 202, 221, 255, 271, 274, 313, 321, 326–42, 346–49, 351–63, 346
- Makiladittivu, 52, 191–98, 338, 375 n. 33
- Mandur, 41, 52, 64, 71, 80–81, 85, 98–99, 105, 136–38, 173–74, 179, 195–96, 201, 236, 248, 252, 373 n. 12, 375 n. 33, 379 n. 18, 381 n. 8
- Marriage: alliance between matriclans, 17, 44, 86, 99, 133–34, 139, 142–44, 168, 175–92, 208–9, 217, 226, 237–38, 245–46, 256–57, 284; arranged marriage criteria, 178–79, 284; bride-price (*mahr*) among Muslims, 379 n. 15; cross-caste, 17, 86, 92, 98–100, 117–18, 141, 144, 175–88, 192, 226, 242, 246–47, 341, 379 n. 19, 381 n. 3; cross-cousin, 44, 168, 176–82, 196–98, 218,



- 226–27, 238–39, 246–47, 257, 263, 265–66, 285, 302, 322; endogamous, 293–94, 308–10; exchange marriage (*mārrukkaliyānam*), 197, 285; exogamy of matriclans, 86, 178, 190, 192, 199, 217, 226, 238, 245–46, 256, 266, 285, 308; “incorrect,” 197–98, 263–64, 285; isogamous vs. hypergamous, 98, 179–88, 217, 226, 238, 244, 284; matrilocal residence and, 16, 38–39, 174, 268–69, 297, 302, 336, 341–42, 370 n. 7; mother-in-law avoidance among Muslims, 280, 286; polygynous, 286, 294; Sinhala-Muslim intermarriage, 371 n. 15; Tamil-Muslim intermarriage, 38, 73, 76–77, 130, 283, 321, 371 n. 15, 375 n. 30; Tamil-Sinhala intermarriage, 46, 66, 226, 381 n. 3, 383 n. 20. *See also* Dowry
- Marriott, McKim, 16, 84, 112–13, 144, 151–52, 160–63, 166, 379 n. 2
- Matriclans (kudi), matrilineal descent, 38; anthropological theories of, 103–18, 170–88, 196–98; conflicts within, 176–78, 195–96, 198–201; founding ancestors and legends and, 103, 175–78, 194–96, 284, 286–91; kudi organization lacking in, 101, 103, 264, 308; land and property and, 104, 110, 132–33, 378 n. 5; male and female sublineage names and, 194–96, 218, 225–27, 286–91; matrilineal vs. bilateral concepts and, 16–17, 108–45, 194, 264, 290–93, 302; matrilineal rights (*urimai*) and, 119, 133–45; membership and boundaries of, 40, 45, 203–4, 275–76, 378 n. 4; Muslim eighteen-kudi model and, 280, 385 n. 12; Muslim hereditary *lebbe* succession and, 288–91; Muslim kudi privileges and honors and, 282–83, 290–91; Muslim kudis and, 45, 275–91, 302, 308, 374 nn. 23–24, 385 n. 11; Muslim sublineages and, 193, 195, 266, 285–91, 308, 385 n. 14; ranking of kudis and, 175, 179, 205, 215–17, 225, 244–45, 254, 277, 282–85; Tamil kudi privileges and honors and, 105–6, 201–9, 216–17, 234, 265; Tamil kudis and, 40, 86, 92, 99–118, 171–209, 215–18, 224–27, 235–38, 242–47, 254–57, 264–65, 289; Tamil seven-kudi model and, 59, 61, 65–68, 73, 79, 82, 102, 171–75, 185, 190–91, 225, 239, 245; Tamil sublineages and, 192–96, 199–201, 209, 217–18, 225–27, 238, 246–47, 257; toponymy and, 235, 244–47, 254–55, 265, 382 n. 9. *See also* Sinhala kudi
- Moffatt, Michael, 100, 247, 254, 260–61, 264, 383 nn. 21–22, 388 n. 5
- Mukkuvar Law, 16, 118–33, 144–45, 196, 378 nn. 11–13
- Music, 247–48, 252–53, 262–64, 301, 345–46, 383 n. 16. *See also* Castes: Paraiyar (Valluvar) drummers
- Muslim mosques and shrines, 36, 271–79, 385 n. 7; Beach Mosque shrine, 52, 299–300, 338; Daftar Jailani shrine, 300, 304; festivals (*kantūri*) at, 105, 231, 252, 271, 273, 279, 297, 299–301, 307, 379 n. 5, 384 n. 4; kudi Maraikkars’ administration of, 17, 45, 104–5, 266, 275–79, 338; local political role of, 276–79; matrilineal mosque affiliation, 204, 275–76, 290; Nagoor dargah (Tamilnadu), 295, 300; ritual shares and honors and, 279, 282–83, 374 n. 24; saints’ tombs (*ziyāram*), 17, 52, 266, 272–75, 294–96, 299–301, 320, 338, 350–51, 384 nn. 5–6; Sufi chapels (*taikkyā*), 36, 104, 272, 296–97
- Muslims: Ahmadiyyas (*Qādiyāni*), 371

- Muslims: Ahmadiyyas (*Qādiyāni*) (*cont.*)  
 n. 13; Bawa faqirs, 18, 45, 269, 271, 297–304, 310, 324, 350, 386 n. 8; Bohras, Khojas, and Memons, 44, 371 n. 13; circumcision by, 213, 231, 252, 269, 304–7, 319, 386 n. 10; conversion and, 321, 372 n. 7; ethnic identity of, 10–11, 44–45, 78–79, 313–29, 388 n. 10; ethnic stereotypes and, 268–70, 319–25; ethnonyms for, 10, 44, 72, 314–16, 371 n. 14, 375 n. 27; female genital scarification and, 304, 306, 386 n. 10; *jinn* and *tāymār* spirits and, 295, 320; kinship terms of, 38, 279–80, 376–68, 385 n. 10; Madari order, 297, 386 n. 3; Malay, 44, 371 n. 13; Mappilas of Kerala, 72, 77, 110, 266, 280, 384 n. 1; Marakkayars of Tamilnadu, 77, 280, 384 n. 1, 385 n. 10; Maulana sayyids, 18, 45, 273–74, 292–96, 309–10, 325, 350, 351, 360; occupations of, 44, 211–12, 268–71, 290, 293, 295, 305, 307, Osta barber-circumcisers, 18, 45, 269, 303–10, 323, 325, 386 n. 10; purity and pollution and, 112, 114, 303–10, 323–24, 378 n. 8, 386 n. 7, 387 n. 12; reform movements, Islamization, and, 252, 270–71, 304, 320, 323, 339–40, 349–52; Rifāʿi order, 18, 297–304, 350, 386 n. 6; Sufi sheikhs and tariqas, 18, 272, 292–304, 349–51, 360; Sunni and Shāfiʿi heritage among, 44–45, 322, 385 n. 8, 386 n. 10. *See also* Muslim mosques and shrines
- Obeyesekere, Gananath, 3, 27, 30, 51, 66, 84, 133, 198, 346
- Okanda, 52, 94
- Panama, 52, 66, 183, 382 n. 9
- Panankadu, 78, 175, 198–200
- Patrilineal descent, 293–94, 302
- Puttalam, 76, 102, 120, 224, 372 n. 7, 373 n. 15, 375 n. 29, 382 n. 6
- Sinhala kudi, 174, 187, 207, 215–17, 235, 255, 281, 289, 382 n. 9. *See also* Marriage; Matriclans (kudi), matrilineal descent
- Sinhalese, 4–5, 7, 10, 12, 43, 55, 116, 174, 185–86, 196–98, 207, 240, 255, 273, 336, 346, 348, 363, 372 n. 1; in Akkaraipattu, 35, 42–46, 169, 321, 355, 357
- Sorcery and mantras, 165–66, 227, 250–51, 302, 320
- Sri Lanka: Ambilanturai, 192–98, 260–65; Jaffna, 6, 9–11, 33, 61–62, 79–83, 85–86, 93–96, 112–13, 116, 186, 214, 222, 250, 319, 321–22, 328–29, 337–38, 377 nn. 48–49, 382 n. 6, 383 n. 22; Kataramgama, 29–30, 86, 300, 349, 370 n. 4, 388 n. 6; Kokkadichcholai, 51–52, 98–99, 118, 192–98, 233–38, 260–65, 386 n. 18; Kolavil, 69–70, 78, 166, 191–98, 202–4, 206–9, 229, 247–60, 265, 345–47, 381 n. 6, 383 n. 20; Makiladittivu, 52, 191–98, 338, 375 n. 33; Mandur, 41, 52, 64, 71, 80–81, 85, 98–99, 105, 136–38, 173–74, 179, 195–96, 201, 236, 248, 252, 373 n. 12, 375 n. 33, 379 n. 18, 381 n. 8; Okanda, 52, 94; Panama, 52, 66, 183, 382 n. 9; Panankadu, 78, 175, 198–200; Puttalam, 76, 102, 120, 224, 372 n. 7, 373 n. 15, 375 n. 29, 382 n. 6; Tampaddai, 30, 70, 92, 94, 144, 377 n. 46; Tirukkovil and Tambiluvil, 49–51, 70, 83–85, 90, 92, 118, 141–44, 173, 179, 183, 189–93, 222, 318, 333–35, 375 n. 33, 381 n. 10; Trincomalee, 6, 9, 11, 23, 47, 52, 58, 62, 71, 75–76, 85–86, 127, 318, 376 n. 39, 378 n. 12, 384 n. 5
- Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, 4–10, 14–15,

- 313–14; diaspora, globalization, and, 15, 20, 335–36, 340–42, 388 n. 3; irrigation, Sinhalese colonization, and, 5–7, 21–24, 26, 32, 199–200, 203, 249, 273–74, 313, 318; LTTE, state violence, and, 5–7, 11, 16–17, 19, 30, 34–35, 51–52, 96, 104, 138, 202, 221, 255, 271, 274, 313, 321, 326–42, 346–49, 351–63; mosque massacre and, 352–54; Muslim politics and, 10–11, 44–45, 314–18; Sinhala-Muslim conflicts and, 314, 387 n. 3, 387 n. 9; Sinhala-Tamil conflicts and, 319, 357–60, 388 n. 9; Tamil-Muslim conflicts and, 11, 18–20, 79, 229, 242, 249, 267, 313–29, 352–63, 383 n. 19, 388 n. 8, 388 n. 10; temple destruction and, 353–57; torture narrative and, 357–60
- Tamil language: Tamil dialect, 24, 170–71, 365–66; Muslim dialect, 279–80, 319, 367–68, 387 n. 5; “Tamil-speaking peoples,” 316, 327–28
- Tamilnadu, 59–60, 372 nn. 3–4, 372 n. 7
- Tamils: ethnic identity of, 55, 313–29; ethnic stereotypes and, 319–25, 322; kinship terms of, 38, 170–71, 176–82, 365–66; occupations of, 167–70, 210–14, 221–24, 228–33, 239–42, 247–54, 265, 342–46, 380 n. 1. *See also* Castes; Caste system of the Tamils; Hinduism; Hindu temples
- Tampaddai, 30, 70, 92, 94, 144, 377 n. 46
- Tirukkovil and Tambiluvil, 49–51, 70, 83–85, 90, 92, 118, 141–44, 173, 179, 183, 189–93, 222, 318, 333–35, 375 n. 33, 381 n. 10
- Trautmann, Thomas, 44, 113, 170–71, 178, 196–98
- Trincomalee, 6, 9, 11, 23, 47, 52, 58, 62, 71, 75–76, 85–86, 127, 318, 376 n. 39, 378 n. 12, 384 n. 5
- Tsunami (2004), 7, 25, 30, 47, 51, 94, 222, 329, 334–35, 338, 347, 388 n. 2, 388 n. 4
- Vedda, 47, 49, 67, 77, 85, 135, 153, 174–75, 181–82, 187, 207, 377 n. 1. *See also* Matrilineans (kudi), matrilineal descent
- Whitaker, Mark, 12, 56, 64, 81, 105, 133, 136–38, 195–96, 201, 236, 248, 369 n. 3, 373 n. 12, 375 n. 30, 375 n. 33, 379 n. 18, 381 n. 8, 381 n. 11, 388 n. 1
- Yalman, Nur, 3, 16, 30, 44, 49, 66, 83–84, 86, 97–98, 115–16, 142, 170, 179, 182–93, 197–98, 284, 305, 376 n. 35
- Yemen, 294–95, 386 n. 6

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*Crucible of Conflict* is an ethnographic and historical study of Hindu castes, matrilineal family structure, popular religious traditions, and ethnic conflict. It is also the first full-length ethnography of Sri Lanka's east coast, an area that suffered heavily in the 2004 tsunami and that is of vital significance to the political future of the island nation. Since the bitter guerrilla war for an independent Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka broke out in 1983, the easternmost region of the island has emerged as a strategic site of conflict. Dennis B. McGilvray argues that any long-term resolution of the ethnic conflict must accommodate this region, in which Sinhalese Buddhists, Tamil Hindus, and Tamil-speaking Muslims are each a significant share of the population.

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COVER ART (FROM TOP): Tamil women bringing puja supplies for the Bhadrakali Temple festival, Akkaraipattu, Sri Lanka; Muslim women returning from field labor carrying their day wages in paddy, Akkaraipattu, Sri Lanka. Photos by Dennis B. McGilvray