

# Caste and Matriclan Structure in Eastern Sri Lanka: A Preliminary Report on Fieldwork in Akkaraipattu\*

DENNIS B. MCGILVRAJ

## Setting of the Research

This discussion is based upon fieldwork carried out in the Batticaloa region of the east coast of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) between January 1970 and June 1971. The main research site was the town of Akkaraipattu (population 20,000) located 40 miles south of Batticaloa town and 15 miles east of Amparai. The eastern region has been aptly described by Bryce Ryan as an area of densely populated 'peasant towns' which are located along the coastline between the Bay of Bengal and the open fertile paddy lands which stretch inland.<sup>1</sup> Although situated within the climatic region known as the Dry Zone of the island, the dense settlements in this area are sustained by large scale irrigation schemes, semi-saline lagoons, and thick stands of coconut trees.

Ecologically and culturally the coastal region between Valachchenai and Pottuvil (50 miles) has a degree of unity in the minds of the inhabitants, who generally refer to it as MaTTakkaLappu (Batticaloa). In certain ways the cultural continuity of the region extends even north to settlements on the southern shore of Koddियar Bay (Trincomalee), where matrilineal institutions are found similar to those in Batticaloa. The Batticaloa region features an archaic dialect of Tamil which has attracted the interest of linguists.<sup>2</sup> Taken as a whole the Tamil-speaking population of the region is evenly divided between Ceylon Tamils (Saivite Hindus) and Ceylon Moors (Muslims). Both groups are fully franchised ethnic and religious minorities in Sri Lanka, where the majority of the population is Sinhalese Buddhist. Formerly the Batticaloa region was separated from areas of heavy Sinhalese inhabitation to the west by considerable expanses of Dry Zone jungle and hills, but now there is a sizable Sinhalese colonist population near at hand in the Gal Oya irrigation project.<sup>3</sup>

Towns and villages in the Batticaloa region invariably exhibit a strict residential separation between the Tamils and the Moors. Local bodies such as Village Councils are often organized as homogeneous Tamil or Moorish units, but some settlements, like Akkaraipattu, incorporate both Tamil and Moorish neighbourhoods within a

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1. Bryce Ryan, "Socio-Cultural Regions of Ceylon," *Rural Sociology*, 1950, V15:10n.
2. Kamil Zvelebil, "Some Features of Ceylon Tamil", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 1966, V9 (2):125.
3. Benjamin H. Farmer, *Pioneer Peasant Colonization in Ceylon*, London: O.U.P., 1957.

local governmental framework. In either case the Tamils and Moors live in distinct residential enclaves and actively promote the view that the two are totally separate communities. In Akkaraipattu the Moors constitute 66% of the total population, the Hindu Tamils 30%, and a combined group of Christians and Buddhists 4%. Tamil is the common language of all groups except the few immigrant Sinhalese. The town is arranged in a generally rectilinear pattern and is divided into 9 Grama Sevaka (Government-appointed headmen) Divisions, six of them wholly Moorish and three of them wholly Tamil. Dwellings are situated within rectilinear compounds surrounded by high formidable fences of sharpened stakes, barbed wire, and cadjan. Approximately 75% of the population of Akkaraipattu is engaged in paddy cultivation either as landowner, tenant, or labourer. Farmers often commute as far as 5-10 miles to reach their fields, and a great variety of vehicles are seen on the roads (bicycles, bullock carts, tractors). There is very little fishing in Akkaraipattu, although the sea and the lagoon are close by. There are major fishing villages several miles to the north.

### Caste and Community

The Moors recognize three special groups which are distinguished from the bulk of the ordinary Moorish population: the Bāwā-s (members of a local Sufi Order), the Maulānā-s (patrilineal descendants of the Prophet), and the Ostā-s (hereditary Moorish barbers and circumcisers). Only the Ostā-s can be seen as a "caste" in the formal sense: they have a hereditary occupation, they are endogamous, and they are assigned a rank inferior to the other members of the Moorish community.

The Tamil community is, on the other hand, highly organized on a caste basis. In an opinion ranking survey carried out with methods developed by Freed,<sup>4</sup> Marriott,<sup>5</sup> Hiebert<sup>6</sup> and others, the collective caste hierarchy among Tamils in Akkaraipattu was shown to be ambiguous in two respects: (1) there was considerable confusion concerning how to evaluate the relative ranks of certain peripheral or anomalous groups which may be Christian (Portuguese Burghers, KaTaiyar Limeburners), may not be found locally (Karaiyār Fishermen, Kōvilār Temple Servants), may be recent immigrants (KaTaiyar Limeburners, Sakkiliyar Sweepers), or may be viewed as being of separate racial/ethnic origin (Portuguese Burghers, Kuravar Gypsies); (2) there was not enough unanimity of opinion to generate a perfectly discrete ranking of the three highest groups: VēLāLar, Kurukkāl, and Mukkuvai. Setting aside the problematic peripheral groups, the opinion rank hierarchy of the eight castes fully recognized today as constituting the traditional "core" of the local Tamil caste system is shown in Table 1.

4. Stanley Freed, "An Objective Method for Determining the Collective Caste Hierarchy of an Indian Village," *American Anthropologist*, 1963, V65: 879-891.
5. McKim Marriott, "Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis", in Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (eds.), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Chicago: Aldine, 1968.
6. Paul Hiebert, "Caste and Personal Rank in an Indian Village: an Extension in Techniques," *American Anthropologist*, 1969, V71: 434-453. And also, Paul Hiebert, *Kondu: Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971.

TABLE: 1 Reduced Matrix: Tamil ranking of eight castes fully  
Recognized as part of the local caste system

V	28	35½	46	45	46	46	43	
	18	11½	0	1	0	0	3	
K	30	45	45	45	46	44		High Caste
	16	1	1	1	0	2		Level
	45	43	46	46	42			
M	1	3	0	0	4			
		T		35½	45	45	39	Artisan & Profes-
				10½	1	1	7	sional Castes
		S		39	38	40		
				7	8	6		
		Vn		26	35			Service Castes
				20	11			
		N		35	11			
				P				

*List of Castes*

- V VēLāLāi Cultivator  
 K KurukkaL Priest  
 M Mukkuvar Cultivator  
 T TaTTār Smith  
 S SāNTār Climber  
 Vn VaNNāi Washerman  
 N Nāvitar Barber  
 P Paraiyar Drummer

NOTE: In each cell, the number above indicates the number of respondents who judged the row caste to be of higher rank than the column caste. The number below indicates the number who felt the opposite. Pairs of castes given equal rank by respondents were awarded each ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ). Cells which show a ratio of 2:1 or better in favour of the row caste over the column caste are judged to demonstrate a meaningful rank distinction and are separated from the others by a line. A total of 49 informants supplied opinions, but because their rankings were not always exhaustive, the cell totals are less than 49. Caste of informants is as follows: M & V = 29, K = 3, T = 1, S = 4, Vn = 3, N = 1, P = 5.

The highest level of the Tamil caste system is seen by local informants as consisting of "good people" (*nallārkkal*), "high caste-type people" (*uyarnta sānyārkkal*), or sometimes simply "Tamils" (*TamiṚan*). This is the stratum within which informants might subsequently claim specific "VēLāLar" or "Mukkuvar" or "KurukkaL" identities when questioned. These people, whom I shall call the High Caste, are 65% of the Tamil population of Akkaraipattu.

All castes below this level are referred to by specific caste names in general conversation; they are always Washermen (VaNNār) or Drummers (Paraiyar), etc., never simply "Tamils". The TaTTār Smiths (goldsmiths and blacksmiths) and SāNTār Climbers (cocoanut harvesters and ex-toddy tappers) are seen as producers of special products and are viewed as distinctly superior to the three domestic and ritual service castes, the Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers. All professional and service castes are endogamous, and caste membership is acquired bilaterally (from both parents). These groups reside in neighbourhoods which are homogeneous by caste, although the dense residential patterns in Akkaraipattu mean that these caste neighbourhoods are directly contiguous. Only the Paraiyar Drummers reside in a physically separate hamlet about a quarter of a mile to the south of town.

### Mukkuvar, VēLāLar, and KurukkaL

Of the three High Caste groups, the Mukkuvar-s are the best documented in historical and ethnographic writings. Dutch and British colonial administrators at the end of the 18th century noted the political control which the Mukkuvar-s exercised over the entire Batticaloa region. It appears that the region was divided into a number of sub-kingdoms or vassal states (the cultural model is seven) which owed tenuous allegiance to the Kandyan kings. Legends recount the conquest of Batticaloa by the Mukkuvar-s who, with the aid of itinerant Muslims (sailors? traders?), drove the Timilar caste north to Trincomalee where they are found today. The Mukkuvar-s are said to have rewarded their Muslim allies with women and land in Batticaloa. There is evidence that the Mukkuvar-s did exercise political control of the entire region through a series of feudal sub-chiefs whose office was hereditary in the female line. In present day Akkaraipattu, the *Mukkuvar vannimai* ("reign of the Mukkuvar-s") is still reflected in the office of the *ŪrppōTiyār*, or Mukkuvar chief of the village. This office is increasingly devoid of influence today, but in principle it is the *ŪrppōTiyār* who directs and oversees the lower castes in the performance of their hereditary duties.

The VēLāLar-s, another High Caste group, are well known as the dominant cultivator caste in the Jaffna peninsula and in many areas of Tamilnadu. However, in the Batticaloa region the VēLāLar-s exhibit a pattern of matrilineal clan organization which follows exactly the same principles as the matriclan organization of the Mukkuvar-s. In some villages there is a strong ideology of VēLāLar casteseparateness, but in Akkaraipattu there is a pervasive tendency to appropriate the VēLāLar title and to apply it in a loose honourific way, thus confusing the whole issue of clear caste distinctions. The term "VēLāLar" is used in this sense as if it meant simply "honourable paddy cultivator".

The KurukkaL-s are the third High Caste group. The KurukkaL title is applied widely in Jaffna and in Tamilnadu to denote a Brahman or non-Brahman priestly occupational grade.<sup>7</sup> In Batticaloa, however, there is a distinct hereditary non-Brahman

7. Michael Banks, "Caste in Jaffna," In E. R. Leach (ed.) *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, London and New York: C.U.P., 1960, p. 69. Also, Brenda Beck, *Peasant Society in Koṅku*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1972, p. 71; Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*, New York and London: Praeger, 1972, p. 111.



priestly group known by this general title. Yalman first suggested the possibility of their connection to the south Indian Lingāyat or Vīrasaiva sect,<sup>8</sup> and my subsequent research strongly confirms this. The KurukkaL-s in and near Akkaraipattu are perhaps 50% endogamous and are often seen as an undifferentiated group by the general public ("KurukkaL *KuTi*" or "KurukkaL *Vamisam*"). However the KurukkaL-s are in fact subdivided into three exogamous matriclans (interchangeably *kuTi* or *kōttiram*) which are named and have certain distinctive Vīrasaiva markings. Priests of each matriclan wear a different style of personal lingam. One matriclan is known as *Vīra Makēsvara Kuruliṅka Saṅkamar KurukkaL*, a title which fairly exudes symbols of Vīrasaiva identity. The term *Saṅkamar* itself is cognate with *Jangama*, the title of the Vīrasaiva priest in Mysore. The other two clans, *Tēsāntira KurukkaL* ("foreign KurukkaL") and *Sanniyāsi KurukkaL* ("ascetic KurukkaL") are less obviously linked to known Vīrasaiva titles, but when a variety of life crisis rituals, funeral customs, and legendary material is compared, there is little doubt that there has been a connection with the Vīrasaiva tradition in the past. The KurukkaL-s of Akkaraipattu do not maintain an active link with Vīrasaivas in India today, but they are aware of their Indian origins.

#### Matrilineal Descent Unit: *KuTi*

The Tamil word *kuTi* is applied by members of all castes and communities in the Batticaloa region to denote a matrilineal clan. The word can also signify a hut or a new settlement colony. I have used the anthropological term "clan" because the *kuTi* is a named unilineal (matrilineal) descent unit the members of which see themselves in principle as kinsmen but have no conception of any specific genealogical connections which might unify the entire group as a true lineage. A few *kuTi*-s were said to have legendary founders, sometimes female but quite often male. Many *kuTi*-s seem to lack any distinct mythical ancestor, sharing instead only a presumption of noble or grandiose historical beginnings which is implicit in the name of the clan, for example *PaTaiyāNTa kuTi* ("Ruler of the Army") or *Rāsāmpillai kuTi* ("Child of the King"). Other *kuTi*-s reveal in their names a putative ethnic or racial origin: *VēTar VēLāLar kuTi* (Veddah or aboriginal hunter) or *SīṅkaLa VēLāLar kuTi* (Sinhalese). The clan names are not incorporated into personal names of individuals. The number seven is repeatedly expressed as the culturally "correct" number of matriclans within a given caste, although empirically the number of *kuTi*-s in a locality is often more or less than seven. For the Moors, the "correct" number is 18, but similar problems occur there as well. Most clan names are in fact caste specific or community specific, so that by knowing a person's *kuTi* one usually knows that person's caste or community as well. There is some overlap between High Caste Tamil matriclan names and Moorish matriclan names which people explain as an artifact of ancient Tamil/Moorish intermarriage or conversion of Tamils to Islam. Today no intermarriage takes place, and Tamils and Moors with the same *kuTi* name act as if the two clans are totally separate.

8. Nur Yalman, *Under the Bo Tree: Studies in Caste, Kinship and Marriage in the Interior of Ceylon*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967, p. 331n.

One immediately thinks of the matrilineal groups of the Malabar Coast in discussing the *kuTi*, and in fact there is a good deal of evidence to indicate that the origins of the Mukkuvar caste were among the ancestors of the present day Mukkuvar Fishermen of Kerala. However, if one examines the features of the Nayar *taravād*, for example, there are very few resemblances with the *kuTi* in the present situation. The *kuTi* is not a property-owning group, although there is some historical evidence that it, or lesser units within it, may have been so in the mid-19th century.<sup>9</sup> In a sense property is transmitted matrilineally today through dowry which, if it is land or immovables, is deeded solely to the daughter or to the daughter and son-in-law jointly. Marriage is initially matrilocal among all groups, but this does not result in a matrilineal extended household like the Nayar *taravād*. Within several years of marriage, either the daughter and the son-in-law are provided with a separate dwelling nearby, or the girl's parents actually relocate, leaving the natal dwelling to the married daughter. Provision of a "house and compound" (*vīTu vaLavu*) is the minimum standard for a respectable dowry.

The *kuTi* has no ancestral home, no formal territorial or geographical foundation. *KuTi* names are widely distributed over distances of up to 60 miles, although some clans are more localized within major settlement areas. There is no cult of *kuTi* ancestors or of tutelary deities. Several major Hindu temples which serve as regional pilgrimage centers (*iēsattukkōvil-s*) are managed by one, two, or three specific *kuTi-s*, but this amounts to a statement of local political dominance rather than serving as the focus for any clan-centered worship. The political role of *kuTi-s* is in fact a very important aspect of *kuTi* traditions which are kept alive today.

Today the *kuTi* is salient in two readily apparent areas: it is recognized as a strictly exogamous unit in the regulation of marriage choice, and it is the basis of mosque and temple administration. Frequently defined as an exogamous unit in the comments of informants, it seems to serve as an additional barrier to terminologically forbidden parallel-cousin marriage, for the operative Dravidian kinship system logically implies that cross-cousins (preferred mates) never arise within the same *kuTi*. Among Moors and High Caste Tamils the position that kinship terms "take precedence" over exogamy ideas<sup>10</sup> was impossible to verify because informants were unwilling to visualize the initial *kuTi*-endogamous marriage which would "generate" a cross-cousin within one's own *kuTi*. In fact, violations of *kuTi* exogamy are exceedingly rare. Marriage within the same *kuTi* never exceeded 3% of the sampled marriages among Moors, High Caste Tamils, TaTTār-s, and SāNIār-s. Within samples of Service Caste marriages the percentages of *kuTi*-endogamous marriages were as follows: VaNNār 26%, Nāvitar 61%, Paraiyar 19%.

Every member of a *kuTi* inherits from his mother membership in the clan as well as affiliation with a specific mosque or temple. Members of a *kuTi* within such a temple or mosque congregation select a *kuTi* leader, known as the *VaNNakkar* in the Tamil case and the *Maraikkar* in the Moorish case. There is no rule of matri-

9. Christopher Brito, *The Mukkuva Law*, Colombo: H. D. Gabriel, 1876.

10. cf. Yalman, 1967, p. 330.

linal succession today, but there may have been one in the past. The *VaNNakkar* or *Maraikkar* sits with the leaders of all other *kuTi*-s from within the same caste or community on a temple or mosque board which supervises all facets of the institution's affairs. It is the *VaNNakkar* or *Maraikkar* who must canvass the *kuTi* membership for financial contributions to support the operation of the temple or mosque and to sponsor religious festivals. *kuTi* leaders have been steadily losing their traditional authority to adjudicate misdemeanours and settle disputes, but some residuum of this power remains.

Although the practice is considered somewhat old fashioned today, *kuTi*-s and whole castes are traditionally accorded certain "marks of honour" (*varisai*-s) which are ritual prerogatives families can display at domestic ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. The different (but specific) numbers of decorated pots (*vīTTu-muTi*-s) or knotted saris which are placed outside the house, the different types of lamps and paraphernalia, etc., are all known as *varisai*-s. Access to the services of each of the Service Castes is counted a *varisai*. Moorish *kuTi*-s seem to have participated to some extent in this system, although there has been a recent effort to erase these Tamil-linked traditions. There is some evidence that a few Moorish *kuTi*-s were once denied the services of the VaNNār Washerman, for example. Among the TaTTār Smiths, only one *kuTi* was said to have originally had the services of the Paraiyar Drummers at funerals, although now all TaTTār-s are served. The SāNTār Climbers renounced their ritual role in High Caste Hindu temple ceremonies and constructed their own temple elsewhere in response to the refusal of the High Caste leaders to allow SaNTār families the *varisai* of Paraiyar drumming at their funerals. These examples indicate the importance which has been traditionally placed on outward signs of clan and caste status in this society. The primary justification which is given for these ritual distinctions is that they formed part of an over-all political organization of society in which the ŪrppōTiyār (and by extension, the Mukkuvar kings) assigned and regulated the rights and obligations of all groups.

The *kuTi* exhibits practically no sign of systematic internal subdivisions (lineages, sublineages) except in a few Moorish *kuTi*-s, and even here tracing such matriline is extremely difficult and vague. A few interesting examples of conflict within the *kuTi* were noted where special distinctions of descent had been put forward in support of claims to temple office or temple lands, but such assertions would seem to be dormant under ordinary conditions.

In general, the *kuTi* seems to express a rather weak principle of matriliney. The common expression for matriliney is *tāy vaRi* or *peN vaRi* (lit. "mother-way" or "woman-way"), and there is the well known adage: *vērōTi viLātti MuLaittālum tāy vaRi tappātu*, or roughly, "Even though the wood-apple tree sends out roots which sprout up, the maternal connection is never lost". Having heard this sort of thing often enough, one is still faced with the fact that in ordinary conversations with informants there is frequently a lack of explicit awareness of the formal requirements of matrilineal descent. People will mention *tāy vaRi* and in the same breath go on to speak with evident lack of rigour about male ancestors and vague descent from "father to son" within the *kuTi*. When an objection is raised, people always see the

point and rephrase the statement in matrilineal terms, but it is clear that thinking is not always consistent in these matters.

Samples of households within each of the major Tamil castes as well as within the Moorish community were investigated to see what patterns of *kuTi* affiliations existed. The Moorish *kuTi*-s, the High Caste Tamil *kuTi*-s, and the *kuTi*-s within the TaTTār and SāNTār castes tend to have magnificent if somewhat enigmatic names which have connotations of eminence and feudal honour. The Tamil Service Castes have simple *kuTi* names which refer to specific villages or areas within the Batticaloa region. The Moorish population is distributed in significant numbers over 8-10 different matrilineal groups, and the same is true of the High Caste Tamils. However, among both the Moors and the High Caste Tamils there is one *kuTi* which is appreciably larger numerically than any other, accounting for 20-25% of all *kuTi* affiliations within my household samples. Tamil castes below the High Caste stratum generally show strong numerical representation in only two or three *kuTi*-s. The High Caste matrilineal pattern seems to be a model for emulation by the lower castes, and lower caste informants were sometimes apologetic for what they saw as deviation or lack of rigour (for example, *kuTi* exogamy violations).

#### Problems of Interpretation

Yalman's brief analysis of the matrilineal *kuTi* system as it was described to him by informants in Panama and Tambiluvil is predicated on the assumption of a set of ranked exogamous matrilineal groups and a pattern of hypergamous marriage centered on concepts of ritual status.<sup>11</sup> Yalman's conclusion is to interpret the system along Nayar lines as a strongly unilineal (matrilineal) pattern of caste-like groupings. Bilateral caste descent is seen as less important than matrilineal descent. Thus Yalman explains the confusing remarks of informants who seem to be jumbling up categories of *kuTi* and caste interchangeably.

On the basis of my own research I can verify that local discussions of *kuTi* and caste can be extremely confusing, but the confusion is centered on the High Caste stratum rather than on the lower castes or the Moors. Affiliation with any of the Professional or Service Castes (TaTTār Smiths, Nāvitar Barbers, etc.) is clearly conceptualized in bilateral terms by local informants, and all such lower castes are strongly endogamous. Within the High Caste stratum, however, people often identify their matrilineal groups as being either one of the several traditional "VēLāLar" *kuTi*-s or "Mukkuvar" *kuTi*-s. Quasi-historical traditions of conquest and local sovereignty are often cited by informants to verify the "caste" affiliation of a given matrilineal group. There are a number of lesser *kuTi*-s whose "caste" affiliation is more ambiguous, but the prominent VēLāLar and Mukkuvar claims are said to be validated by ancient temple manuscripts (*ēTu*-s, *kalveTTu*-s). I was frequently treated to impromptu songs and recitations from these sources.

Not all High Caste matrilineal groups in Akkaraipattu fall unambiguously into either the Mukkuvar or the VēLāLar categories. The KurukkaL clans are recognized to be

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 313-315 and 325-331.

distinct, and there are several *kuTi*-s which celebrate *VēTar* (Veddah, aboriginal hunter) or *Sin̄kaLa* (Sinhalese) origins. There are also a number of very small clans which incorporate the "VēLāLar" title but which are recognized to be marginal and not linked with the VēLāLar caste in any formal tradition. All *kuTi*-s are exogamous, and there is said to be no formal restriction on marriage between all *kuTi*-s in the High Caste stratum (both within and between putative "caste" groupings). Such marriages were verified in the survey data, and thus the whole meaning of bilateral caste affiliation at the highest level of Tamil society was thrown into some doubt.

### *KuTi* Hierarchy and Hypergamy

One of the initial tasks of the fieldwork was to see whether *kuTi* hierarchy and hypergamous marriage were actually found in Akkaraipattu. No exhaustively ranked series of matriclans was found to exist among the High Caste Tamils. Instead, only two *kuTi*-s were identified as having a distinctly superior position among local clans: *PaNikkanā KuTi* and *MaRuvarasan KuTi*. A similar situation was found by Hiatt to exist in nearby Tambiluvil, where the two high-ranking *kuTi*-s are *KaNTan KuTi* and *KaTTappattān KuTi*.<sup>12</sup> Neither Hiatt nor I found it possible to obtain a ranking of High Caste matriclans beyond the isolation of these foremost *kuTi* pairs. Among the lower Tamil castes there was some willingness to isolate certain *kuTi*-s as more prestigious than others, but this tendency varied from caste to caste. Consensus was perhaps strongest among the *TaTTār* Smiths and the Paraiyar Drummers. The idea of *kuTi* hierarchy was recognized in all castes except the Nāṭivar Barbers, where apathy on such questions was greatest, but there was often a discrepancy between remnants of a traditional hierarchy and present day demographic realities.

I pursued the question of *kuTi* hierarchy a bit farther with the Moors of Akkaraipattu, who seemed slightly more willing to carry out formal opinion rankings of the Moorish *kuTi*-s. No Moorish informants were able to give an exhaustive ranking of all the 22 *kuTi*-s on the list, but there was clear definition of one *kuTi* (*RasampiLLai KuTi*) as superior to the rest. There was a non-discrete tendency to rank another nine *kuTi*-s below *RasampiLLai KuTi*, an undifferentiated bloc of 11 more *kuTi*-s, and one *kuTi* which was ranked at the bottom of the scale. The Moorish *kuTi* ranking data are severely weakened by the fact that respondents refused to rank *all* the *KuTi*-s listed in the questionnaire. When the data were retabulated to eliminate ranking judgements regarding clans with which Ego, spouse, Ego's parents, and spouse's parents were known to be affiliated, the sample was further reduced but the ranking profile was essentially the same. Because of frequent abstentions by respondents, the great majority of ranking comparisons in the Moorish *kuTi* matrix show cell totals which amount to only a fraction of the total possible response.

All this attention to possible ranking of Moorish matriclans was necessary in order to conduct a statistical test of *de facto* hypergamy which it was thought might

12. L. R. Hiatt, "The Pattini Cult of Ceylon: A Tamil Perspective," *Social Compass*, 1973, V20: 237.

exist despite informants' denials of such a pattern. No one in Akkaraipattu seems to recognize even the principle of hypergamy; in fact, it is difficult even to discuss it because of the absence of an appropriately convenient Tamil word or phrase for hypergamy. Nonetheless, a computer programme using a log-linear model for contingency tables was used to generate a set of expected marriage frequencies between a provisionally ranked set of the eleven largest *kuTi*-s in the Moorish sample, assuming conditions of strict exogamy and no hypergamy. A comparison of expected versus observed marriage frequencies confirmed the absence of hypergamy in behavioural terms, thus corroborating the absence of hypergamy as a cultural ideal.

#### Marriage Alliance between *KuTi*-s

In place of hypergamy and strict *kuTi* ranking, there was found to be a strong tendency toward reciprocal marriage exchange between the two highest ranking High Caste *kuTi*-s and a much weaker tendency toward favoured intermarriage between the single highest ranking Moorish *kuTi* and one or two other Moorish *kuTi*-s.<sup>13</sup> The question of specific marriage alliances among the lower caste matriclans is greatly constrained by simple demographic factors, since no more than three numerically important *kuTi*-s are usually found in these lower castes.

A number of Tamil expressions are used to indicate the idea of reciprocal marriage exchange between two *kuTi*-s, such as *koNTān koTuttān* ("receiving and giving"), *maccān macciran* ("brothers-in-law"), or *sōTi sōTi* ("paired up"). It accords with a feature of the Dravidian kinship system shared by both Tamils and Moors whereby marriage both generates and reaffirms affinal (marriageable) ties between bilateral cross-cousins. The terminology also logically implies that affines of affines (cross-cousins of cross-cousins) are classificatory kin, in Ego's generation viewed as siblings, hence not allowed to intermarry. Although some degree of disregard for these sort of terminological distinctions has been noted elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> in Akkaraipattu people seem to take them very seriously. Therefore, when people of Clan X marry people of Clan Y, and Clan Y has simultaneous marriage ties to Clan Z, it is recognized by local people that there will be a logical tendency to restrict marriage between Clan X and Clan Z. The logic of the terminology, which applies initially only to specific individuals in specific marriage situations, is sometimes transposed onto the level of whole *kuTi*-s, where expressions like *koNTān koTuttān* are matched by terms like *aNNan tampi* ("elder brother—younger brother") or non-marriageable *kuTi*-s. In actuality these idealized relationships between *kuTi*-s are only found in a few cases where an over-all preference in marriage choice is clearly evident. The only clear examples among the High Caste population are marriage alliances between *PaNikkanā KuTi* and *MaRuvarasan KuTi*, *PaNikkanā KuTi* and *VēTa VēLāLar KuTi*, and

13. This pattern of marriage alliance has been described at length in C. Levi-Strauss, *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949, and Louis Dumont, *Hierarchy and Marriage Alliance in South Indian Kinship*, Occasional Paper No. 12, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1957; and in many others. This marriage alliance pattern was explicitly recognised by many High Caste Tamil informants but somewhat less often noted by Moorish informants.

14. cf. Beck, 1972, p. 213.



between the three KurukkaL matriclans. The public recognition of specific *aNNan tampi* (non-marriageable) *kuTi*-s was not as consistent as the recognition of the *koNTān koTuttān* (allied) *kuTi*-s, but when data on marriage was collected the predicted tendency toward reduced intermarriage between certain *kuTi*-s was noticeable, for example between *VēTa VēLāLar KuTi* and *MaRuvarasan KuTi*.

Thus, rather than a unidirectional tendency to transfer women along hypergamous lines as Yalman's data would predict, the data from both Akkaraipattu and Tambiluvil indicate reciprocal exchange of women in both directions between certain pairs of high-prestige matriclans. One of the major hindrances to comprehension of the underlying principles of caste and matriclan organization in this area is the apparent absence of any well articulated "ideology of descent" and the lack of concern with ethnophysiological concepts such as blood, semen, milk, and the like. This is puzzling in view of the recent amount of work which has been done on defining indigenous ideologies of "common substance and code" in South Asia.<sup>15</sup> Yalman's analysis of his own Kandyan Sinhalese data from Terutenne benefits considerably from a discussion of indigenous concepts of bilaterally transmitted "caste blood" and patrilineally transmitted "aristocratic blood", two rather inconsistent ideas which were nonetheless put forward at the same time in Terutenne.

If anything, informants in Akkaraipattu found the word "blood" (*irattom*) somewhat coarse and impolite, and no one happily stuck to the topic for long. Except among the KurukkaL-s, the idea of substance is virtually absent from High Caste discussions of marriage and *kuTi* affiliation. When questions of specific caste affiliation are raised, informants often reason backwards from the name of a person's matriclan to his or her putative "caste" membership: "He is a man of *PaNikkanā KuTi*, so he must be a Mukkuvar". The clan name often has traditional caste connotations, but the assertion of caste membership is too facile. When informants are then pinned down to the question of "pure" versus "mixed" *VēLāLar* or Mukkuvar caste identity, they tend to waffle or they shrug off the question as Scholastic and meaningless. Some say, "VēLāLar or Mukkuvar, what is the difference?" and others say, "There is no such thing as a pure *VēLāLar* or a pure Mukkuvar".

#### Two Possible Analogies: "Aristocratic Pedigrees" and "Micro-caste"

One interpretation might be to see the Akkaraipattu High Caste situation as analogous to Yalman's description of the gradations of status within the large high-ranking Goigama caste in the Kandyan region.<sup>16</sup> The large unnamed High Caste stratum in Akkaraipattu would then serve as a parallel to the Kandyan Goigama, and the internal distinctions of "Mukkuvar" or "VēLāLar" could be seen to resemble the gradations of *wamsa* (aristocratic descent lines) in the Goigama example. Both

15. McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden, *An Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems*, Paper presented at the 1972 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Toronto. Also, Ronald Inden and Ralph Nicholas, *The Defining Features of Kinship in Bengali Culture*, Mimeographed paper in the Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, n.d. and Yalman, 1967, pp. 136-149.

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Goigama and Tamil High Caste are defined as bilateral endogamous groups. Additional gradations of rank are transmitted patrilineally as *wamsa* in the Kandyan case and through matrilineal clans in the Akkaraipattu case. In perspective, however, the analogy suffers in two ways. First, there is no indication in Akkaraipattu of any dogma of unilineal substance as there is in the Kandyan example. Second, in Akkaraipattu the distinctions within the High Caste stratum are not "aristocratic pedigrees" or feudal titles which are appended to individual names like the Kandyan *vasagama* or *gedera* names Yalman reports from Terutenne. The distinctions in Akkaraipattu are based upon affiliation with larger groups (castes and ethnic/racial groups). The whole idea of "descent from" someone is relatively minimal in the Akkaraipattu case.

A second possibility is that Yalman's concept of the ideally endogamous bilateral kindred or "micro-caste" could be applicable to the Akkaraipattu data, particularly to instances of strong marriage alliance between certain *kuTi*-s. In Yalman's Terutenne, the *pavula* (kindred) fosters an ideal of endogamy, considers itself to be a clearly demarcated group, and evaluates its own status and the status of other *pavula*-s in terms of purity and pollution.<sup>17</sup> The "micro-caste" idea, although built on a different ethnographic pattern, does help to unravel some of the issues in the analysis of *kuTi* alliance, particularly when some of the obvious differences between a highland village of 1200 people and a coastal town of 20,000 inhabitants are kept in mind. There are two problems, however, which should be noted. In the first place, there is a straightforward problem of "real" versus "ideal" endogamy. In Akkaraipattu the image of the *koNTān koTuttān* marriage alliance between *kuTi*-s is not necessarily visualized as endogamy. Most informants see it as a distinct tendency or as a customary connection of long standing, but with at least 50% of the *kuTi* members' marriages falling outside the alliance, it is quite difficult to maintain an ideology of strict endogamy. In fact, there is little evidence of such an ideology.

The second difficulty with the "micro-caste" analogy is a more tentative and theoretical one based on the Dravidian kinship structure. Yalman's picture of the Kandyan *pavula* lays great stress on the ideal of equality among all *pavula* members in terms of wealth, commensality, and marriage. As Yalman has noted, the exchange of women in both directions is an evident sign of equality between groups. If one looks at the two high-ranking *kuTi*-s in Tambiluvil or at the clan structure of some of the lower castes in Akkaraipattu, the pattern of marriage exchange can be seen to occur between two matrilineal clans of approximately equal size. Among the foremost High Caste *kuTi*-s in Akkaraipattu, however, *PaNikkanā KuTi* appears to be significantly larger than its traditionally allied *kuTi*, *MaRuvarasan*. Actually, *PaNikkanā KuTi* is found to have a significant *de facto* marriage exchange link with *VēTa VēLāLar KuTi* as well. There are thus three clans, rather than only two, linked by strong marriage ties, and a similar pattern of three linked clans is found among the KurukkaL-s. There is a problem of asymmetry here as marriage exchange cannot be general between all three clans without terminological contradiction. The two

17. *Ibid.*, p. 190.



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17. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

clans for which intermarriage is curtailed are, in the Dravidian dichotomy, "kin" (or parallel relations) rather than "affines" (or cross relations). As Dumont and others have argued, there is a difference in the sort of behaviour and respect one shows to kin versus affines.<sup>18</sup> There is a sense of closeness and reciprocity between affines which is lacking between kin and which is symbolized, cemented, and even generated by the marriage tie. In cases of three or more strongly intermarrying clans, then, there is a built-in factor of inequality or distance between two of the clans.

A concrete example of this turns up in the fact that *VēTa VēLāLar KuTi* is generally ignored in discussions of the marriage alliance patterns of *PaNikkaṇā KuTi* despite the fact that *VēTa VēLāLar KuTi* comes fairly close to matching *MaRuvarasan KuTi* in terms of number of marriage links to *PaNikkaṇā*. A second example is seen in the case of the KurukkaL-s where there is a tendency for informants to discuss the issue of marriage alliance either with emphasis upon the *Tēsātira/Saṅkamar KuTi* pair or with emphasis upon the *Tēsātira/Samiyāsi kuTi* pair. These two orientations appear to be related to some factional rivalry within the KurukkaL group as a whole. These examples have been introduced to illustrate the point that reciprocal marriage exchange between matrilineal clans is "most equal" when only two clans are involved. Therefore, the analogy of the "micro-caste" is fulfilled to a greater extent in certain *kuTi* alliances than in others.

In addition to what has been said in the way of theoretical difficulties, of course, there are a number of ways in which the Kandyan *pavula* and the Akkaraipattu *kuTi* alliance are empirically dissimilar. The *kuTi* alliance has no obvious tendencies toward equality of wealth, proximity of residence, economic cooperation, or restricted commensality, to name a few factors cited in the Kandyan case.<sup>19</sup> However, some of these factors would be quite difficult to isolate within as large and heterogeneous settlement as Akkaraipattu.

#### **Bilateral Caste Descent and Matrilineal Office**

At the outset it must be made clear that "*kuTi* alliance", the phenomenon we are discussing here, is not a general feature of all or even most marriages in the Akkaraipattu area. It is, however, a distinct tendency among certain matrilineal clans which claim special status. The problem which I propose to discuss, then, is the nature of these rather special alliances and the cultural idioms which they express. Demographic constraints, such as the numerical strength of each *kuTi* within a given locality, have an important influence on the actual distribution of marriage choices, since everyone needs a spouse. However, the *kuTi* alliances being discussed here all show a significantly higher percentage of marriage exchange than numerical representation of these *kuTi*-s in the marriage pool would predict.

In my own view, the pattern of *kuTi* alliance can be seen as a setting within which two different kinds of status ideology are expressed, either separately or conjointly.

18. Louis Dumont, *Une sous-caste de L'Inde du Sud*, Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1957 and Louis Dumont, *Hierarchy and Marriage Alliance in Indian Kinship*, Occasional Paper No. 12, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1957.

19. Yalman, 1967, pp. 195-196.

The first is the ideology of bilateral caste descent, of gaining a share of some substance or metaphysical quality from both parents. This is unambiguously present in all discussions of marriages among the Professional and Service Castes, and it is why these lower castes are endogamous. It is seen among the Moorish community and among the Tamil High Caste stratum as a whole, both of which are themselves loosely named bilateral endogamous units. Finally, it is seen in certain *partially* endogamous groups, such as in *kuTi* alliances and among religious elites like the Bāwā-s, the Maulānā-s and the KurukkaL-s.

Members of the KurukkaL matriclans acknowledge that "pure" or "unmixed" KurukkaL ancestry is the ideal qualification for the hereditary priesthood, even though competing attractions persuade at least 50% of KurukkaL matriclan members to marry non-KurukkaL spouses. In Tambiluvil, the largest *kuTi*-s assert an ideology of "pure VĒLāLar" caste descent, for which appropriate textual support is quickly adduced. The spokesmen of this ideology are particularly found among *KaNTan KuTi* and *KaTTappattān KuTi*, the two highest-ranking matriclans which express a cultural model of marriage exchange. This marriage alliance is only partially fulfilled in practice (30-50% of marriages), but the endogamous tendency is evident.

On the Moorish side, there are three small groups which illustrate the bilateral descent idea. The weakest example is the Maulānā-s, who have a patrilineal model of descent from various persons close to the Prophet (Fatima, Abubakkar, *et al.*). No one seems to bother to differentiate these specific ancestries in ordinary contexts, and the general title of Maulānā, which covers them all, is inherited in the male line. However, there is some tendency for Maulānā-s to exercise special care in contracting marriages, and it is said that if both parents are Maulānā-s (offspring of a Maulānā father) their children will possess extra saintliness. Most Maulānā-s are ordinary farmers and businessmen, but a number of them make protective copper talismans (*accaram*-s) engraved with Islamic symbols.

The Bāwā-s, who are members of a local Sufi Order, say that anyone can become a Bawa through study and dedication, but the son of a Bāwā father inherits a naturally saintly constitution which is conducive to a career as a Bāwā. If both parents are offspring of Bāwā-s, then the child has even greater saintliness. As in the Maulānā example, there is a initial tendency to think in terms of patrilineal descent (only men can be Bāwā-s), but the bilateral aspect of descent is readily revealed. Membership in Maulānā and Bāwā groups is not linked in any way to matriclans, although matriclan affiliation is present as well. Participation in the whole Moorish *kuTi* system makes it impossible for these groups to argue for strict "purity" of descent, but in both cases there is the principle of bilaterality and the tendency toward endogamy (particularly among the Bāwā-s).

The Moorish Ostā Barbat/Circumciser group exemplifies bilaterality and endogamy carried to its logical extreme: strict caste boundaries. There is no way, in fact, in which the Ostā-s of Akkaiappattu differ sociologically from a low caste among the Tamils except that Moors are usually less anxious than the Tamils to discuss such low-ranking groups. Like the lower castes among the Tamils, the Ostā-s show

that the strictest endogamy occurs at the bottom rather than the top of the social hierarchy.

There is an ambiguity or vagueness about group prestige among the bulk of the Moorish population which shows up both in a relative lack of status ideology (*kuTi* traditions, caste identities) and in a less pronounced pattern of *kuTi* alliance. Among the Moors, the idea of a marriage alliance between matriclans is understood in a hypothetical sense, but specific matriclan marriage alliances are neither culturally idealized nor are they strongly evident in the marriage data. Several Moorish *kuTi*-s are commonly recognized to be "big" or important in mosque administration, and there is a tradition of succession to the office of *lebbe* (*levvai*, leader of prayers) within one matriclan at one mosque, but none of these traditions compare with the High Caste Tamil ideologies of caste descent, political succession, or priestly office.

Turning to the question of High Caste Tamil *kuTi* alliance, we can see that while bilateral descent concepts are present, there is also a strong set of ideas which celebrate political power, particularly as it is symbolized in the matrilineal clan. The alliance between *PaNikkanā KuTi* and *MaRuvarasan KuTi* does have underlying connotations of "purity" in the sense that the *VēLāLar*-s as a group are evidently accorded superiority to *Mukkuvar*-s as a group (see Table 1). However, there is a significant element of political symbolism as well. Legends of the founding of Akkaraipattu recount that the *VēLāLar*-s were the original "possessors" of the Service Castes (Washermen, Barbers, and Drummers) collectively known as the *kuTimai*. The *Mukkuvar*-s applied pressure to the *VēLāLar*-s, and after two of the *VēLāLar* leader's daughters had been enticed into marriage with the *Mukkuvar*-s, the *VēLāLar*-s capitulated, handing over the control of the *kuTimai* castes to the leader of the *Mukkuvar*-s. This leader was the *ŪrppōTiyār* whose office is hereditary in *PaNikkanā KuTi* and the *VēLāLar* women whom he and other *PaNikkanā KuTi* men married were said to have been of *MaRuvarasan KuTi*. Thus the alliance between the two matriclans is given a "charter" in terms of both purity and power. *VēLāLar*-s do assert intrinsic superiority to *Mukkuvar*-s in terms of caste purity, but the *Mukkuvar* kings are said in legend to have held sovereignty over all castes in the Batticaloa region. The giving of women from *MaRuvarasan KuTi* to *PaNikkanā KuTi* is a sort of symbolic trade-off between purity and power, and it enables people today to argue *kuTi* alliance status in two ways. *PaNikkanā KuTi* informants often point with pride to their alliance with "*VēLāLar*-s", while *MaRuvarasan KuTi* informants boast of their intimate connection with the "*ŪrppōTiyār*'s *kuTi*". Informants scoff at the idea of "pure" *VēLāLar* or "pure" *Mukkuvar* descent, because they recognize that the *PaNikkanā/MaRuvarasan* alliance is itself a mixing of castes. The legendary *PaNikkanā* clan could be said to have gained more than the *MaRuvarasan* clan from this arrangement, since *PaNikkanā* gained both substance and power from the capitulation of the *VēLāLar*-s. Needless to say, people in the strongly *VēLāLar* village of Tambiluvil tend to denigrate the *MaRuvarasan KuTi* in Akkaraipattu as being no longer a "true" *VēLāLar* matriclan. In Akkaraipattu, however, both *PaNikkanā KuTi* and *MaRuvarasan KuTi* are given equal status by most people, who say that the

alliance is based on a sharing of both substance and power which is beneficial to both matriclans.

Under closer examination, many of the *kuTi* alliance patterns in Akkaraipattu and Tambiluvil show that politics and the succession to matrilineal office are a second factor, in addition to bilateral descent, which consolidates the alliance. When people are asked about the connection between *PaNikkaṛā KuTi* and *VēTa VēLāLar KuTi*, for example, the reply often incorporates both dimensions. Symbolically it consists of Mukkuvar-s marrying Veddahs, who are said to be the original inhabitants of the land and therefore of high birth. At the same time it can be given a political interpretation: Mukkuvar-s (the conquering kings) intermarry with Veddahs (original rulers of the land).

The strength of the political idea in the way people look at the *PaNikkaṇā/MaRuvarasan* alliance is reflected in the whole pattern of succession to the post of *ŪrppōTiyār*. Ideally, succession should be from father to sister's son, but a second condition of legitimacy is that the *ŪrppōTiyār*'s wife *must* be of *MaRuvarasan KuTi*. The most perfect successor would in fact be a sister's son who was also a daughter's husband, and this was often pointed out to me in spite of the fact that such "perfect" successions have never occurred in the last five generations. The point here, however, is that *MaRuvarasan KuTi* has an acknowledged *right* to supply the wife of the *ŪrppōTiyār* and that, like the office of *ŪrppōTiyār*, the "wife-hood" itself has the seed of matrilineal office implicit in it.

In a broader context *kuTi* affiliation is a "multivocal" symbol which permits of more than one primary interpretation.<sup>20</sup> In a certain sense the most important "thing" which is inherited matrilineally is the matriclan name. Given the name, it is then possible to argue two lines: (1) since *kuTi*-s have legendary associations with particular castes (*VēLāLar*, Mukkuvar, Veddah, etc.), *kuTi* affiliation can be used to say something about bilateral caste substance; (2) since *kuTi*-s transmit unilineal rights to certain offices (*ŪrppōTiyār*, *VaNNakkar* of a *tēsattukkōvil*, *Sanṅkamar* versus *Tēsārtiram* KurukkaL priesthoods, etc.), *kuTi* affiliation can be used to say something about hereditary power and authority. If both aspects of the *kuTi* symbol (purity and office) can be brought together, so much the better for the assertion of unique status. This is actually seen most clearly in Tambiluvil, where each of the two high-ranking allied *kuTi*-s has the hereditary right to appoint a chief trustee of one of the two main Hindu temples. However, throughout the Batticaloa region there is a certain ambivalence about power and purity which seems in some ways to be the heritage of the Mukkuvar kingship. Keep in mind that the KurukkaL-s seem never to have truly played the role of the Brahman as a rival of kingly power; in fact, informants today would deny claims to KurukkaL superiority on the grounds that KurukkaL-s are traditionally employees (=servants) in temples managed by High Caste non-KurukkaL-s. The ideology of power, feudal sovereignty, and matrilineal succession to office thus is shown to be a strong rival of bilateral descent concepts throughout the region.

20. V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Aldine, 1969, p. 41.