

**PRISONERS OF OUR OWN ESCAPE:
REFLECTIONS ON BATTICALOA DISTRICT
INTELLECTUALS AND PIERRE BOURDIEU'S
SCHOLARLY POINT OF VIEW**

*O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of
leisure!* Benjamin 1969: 67

*If the learned man sits quietly by, who then
will ask?* Tamil proverb

Wave us away, and keep thy solitude.
Arnold, "The Scholar-Gipsy"

I never met Mr. Jampulingam,¹ though I often tried. I wanted to meet him because of the miracle, and because everyone agreed it was so unseemly that a miracle should have happened to him. But the former roadroller operator for the Batticaloa department of highways was never at home when I called, and he answered none of my messages. After several months of dusty rides down little-known village lanes, journeys that always ended with some bemused, distant kindred of his peeking through a compound gate and telling me to stop wasting my time, I gave up on trying to find the man. Later, I heard a rumor that he had hied off to Jaffna.

But I was hardly alone in wanting to find the elusive Mr. Jampulingam. Other people in Mandur, the Sri Lankan Tamil village where I was studying, also desperately wanted to locate him, especially some of the local "poets" (*pulavar*). Like me, they wanted to know, in detail, just what did happen at, roughly, 10:30 in the morning on the sixth day of the lunar month of *Vaykāci* when a black cobra - and not just any cobra, but a holy,

¹ As is common in ethnography, all names have been changed. I should also take this opportunity to mention that the title of this paper was suggested to me by Mr. D.P.Sivaram.

nākatampirān - fell from a *Naval* tree on to the head of the recumbent, hitherto slumberous, Mr. Jampulingam.² They knew, of course, that the snake had told him, in a clear, cold voice, to construct a temple under that very tree. But they did not know why. Why, that is, the god-snake should fall on a man like Mr. Jampulingam - reportedly a grifter, a drunk, a despiser of god, and a brawling good-for-nothing.³ In the end, alas, neither I nor they ever found Mr. Jampulingam; but I did discover, in looking for him, something about how one sort of Batticaloa District intellectual goes about answering the questions he inspired. In short, I met one such intellectual in action. No. Let me qualify that. I think I did.

I met this intellectual, if that is what he was, in June, 1982, anthropologist's time. It was early in my first year of fieldwork, well before the war, and thus before Mandur's quiet landscape of paddy fields and roadside temples had been reshaped by the enveloping shrouds of war.⁴ His

² Also called a *nākappāmpu*, i.e., a cobra. There is another version of this event, written by a different *pulavar*, in which the snake appears before a more vigorous Jampulingam who has been attempting to clear brush from around the *nāval* tree with a fire. This later account, which leaves out most of the difficulties of Mr. Jampulingam's biography which I will be discussing here, was eventually the one adopted by the temple board, most likely precisely because it sidestepped those issues. However, since this is a paper about the intellectual process of composing problematic origin stories, I have elected to focus on this earlier, closer-to-the-bone (of contention) effort.

³ I cannot emphasize enough that the less savoury details of Mr. Jampulingam's biography were all rumour. As I have said in great detail elsewhere (Whitaker 1999: 85-93), discussions of temple history, especially those which rest on assessments of a particular person's prestige and virtue -- what Batticaloa Tamil people call a person's *kauravam* -- are politically charged, rhetorically complex, and, in the end, dependent on facts that are very much products of the struggles for which they are the weapons. Mr. Jampulingam in fact may have been a very different man from the "Mr. Jampulingam" this poet was struggling with. For more information on the particular temple-political context of the *nākatampirān* temple's formation see *ibid*: 59.

⁴ I conducted fieldwork in Mandur from very late 1981 till August of 1983, and then again for several months in 1984. My more recent fieldwork in Sri Lanka has concerned other topics, although I did return to the village in

name was Mr. Kandan, and I found him at the first tea shop to have sprung up by the newly constructed *Nākatampirān* temple, the very temple Mr. Jampulingam had built partially on, and all about, the *nāval* tree⁵ where he had met his miracle. My assistant, Mr. P., and I initially had gone to this temple hoping to speak to the temple priest about how he was going to handle the impending temple festival, which was starting in a little more than a week. But the priest had been away that day, and the temple grounds deserted, except for one disgruntled washerman caste man. A vitriolic representative of troubles to come, he had been sitting under the shade of the great tree complaining to anyone who would listen that the temple was being built right atop what had once been his dry-land paddy field, and demanding to know what the temple staff was going to do about it. As they were not there, and it was too hot to argue, he eventually went off toward home, allowing us to push on to interview the owner of the tea shop, thinking to get something out of our otherwise (seemingly) meaningless hike of two miles in the mid-afternoon sun.

Now the shop, wavering a bit in the hot wind, consisted merely of a rough, cadjan hut divided by a cloth partition into two rooms. And in the front room, behind a table sustaining pyramids of Lanka colas, water biscuits, and tins of Japanese mackerel, sat the wife of the owner, and Mr. Kandan's parallel cousin. The owner was also the brother-in-law of one of the new temple's new officials, which accounted, I imagined, for the speedy construction of the shop.

As soon as I bought a Lanka cola, however, the owner's wife pensively shrugged off my more mundane questions, and, anticipating my real scholarly need -- as people so often, to my annoyance, did in Mandur -- suggested I ought really to be interviewing her parallel cousin, Mr Kandan, who was, that very moment, in the next room, as she put it, "writing the myth of the *Nākatampirān* temple".

Writing the myth?

Hobsbawm and Ranger's "The Invention of Tradition"(1992)

1993, and to the Batticaloa District in 1997.

⁵ Also called a "Jaumoon tree".

notwithstanding, this was not what graduate school (in the late 1970s) had led me to expect when it came to the origin of myths. However, my curiosity piqued, I pulled out my fieldnotebook (a rupees 5.75 "Monitor's Exercise Book", bought but a few days before in Kalmunai, a market town several miles north of Mandur) and plunged on into the second room. And there, seated at a table, was a short, balding, fat man (looking rather like I do now), whose thick plastic glasses were half gone down his nose, bent industriously over a rupees 5.75 "Monitor's Exercise Book", scribbling away. He looked up, smiled, pulled his imperilled glasses off, pinched his nose to get the blood flowing, and mildly asked Mr. P. and myself if we would like a seat. I felt a certain disorientation. He had "colleague" written all over him. I sat down, nonetheless, and so did Mr. P., and we all began to discuss what he was writing, and why.

But here is the mystery at the heart of this paper, or at least of the several mysteries inhabiting this paper, this is the central one. For although I have fieldnotes enough about our conversation, including a pretty fair idea of what he was writing, my understanding at the time of what his words meant depended entirely upon what I took his task in this circumstance to be. After some initial surprise, I "took" him, at the time, and subsequently, as some kind of "intellectual", whose task it was to make sense of what was going on in Mandur, particularly with regards to this business about Mr. Jampulingam. Moreover, I still think I was pretty much right to see him this way. But in 1990 the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, a major theorist, suggested in an address at the *Freie Universitat*, Berlin, that seeing either the remarks or the actions of people outside of western-style "academia", and particularly tenured academia, in this way, is to radically extend to the meaning of their remarks a coherence, thoroughness, and explanatory intent alien to their real nature (380-391).⁶ I will come back to this notion (which is both good and

⁶ Bourdieu had previously laid out his full analysis of *Homo Academicus* in his 1984 book of the same name. His theory of practice, which might almost be described as a neo-Wittgensteinian critique of structural anthropology, is found in detail in his 1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. See especially page 29. It is important to note, here, that Bourdieu's interest in the difference between the "intellectualist" reasoning of academics and the "practical" moves of people immersed in habitus stems from two interrelated projects that have characterized his career as a thinker. The wider of these is his attempt to use fairly conventional sociological tools in a new, "reflexive" way to force social science practitioners (including Bourdieu

"reflexive" way to force social science practitioners (including Bourdieu himself) to step beyond the Cartesian dichotomies that bedevil their disciplines. Dichotomies, that is, like those most scholars still maintain between subjective and objective knowledge, symbolic and material analysis, theory and research, or even between history's structures and individual agency (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:3). Bourdieu's insight here, made as he is aware by Wittgenstein before him, is that these 'obvious' analytic distinctions are actually products of a particularly sticky scholarly linguistic practice (or "language game"), one that all Western-style scholars have been taught to play. This is the Cartesian "trick" of distinguishing between a perception-observing self and the objective, "extension" it is perceiving itself perceive -- i.e., Rorty's "Mirror of Nature"(1979). But this trick, and the epistemological practices which derive from it, is disturbingly self-replicating, for it inevitably transforms the world it was created to help describe into yet more instances of itself. And this is what Bourdieu claims is at base wrong with the social sciences -- for they, in turn, transform the world of practice most inhabit into the intellectualized "objectifications" of a Cartesian social science. Hence Bourdieu, inspired by Wittgenstein's later philosophy, has tried to show sociologists the way out of their version of this intellectual 'fly bottle' (to use Wittgenstein's image), by forcing their forms of analysis back upon themselves "reflexively", not to dismantle them (a la Derrida), but to reveal even there the "orchestrated dispositions"; that is, the 'habitués', 'social spaces', and 'fields of force' that really shape the social world. And it is important to note here that Bourdieu wishes to do this not to destroy or question the social sciences by undermining their epistemological ground but to demonstrate, rather, a method for displaying how that ground is, and can be better, constructed through careful, empirical, sometimes quantitative, fieldwork. Hence Bourdieu's second project, his analysis of *Homo Academicus*, must be seen as but a part of this larger ambition. In that work Bourdieu tries to map a distinction in the French academy (circa 1968) between conservative "Canonical Professors", who held positions of power within the various institutions of Academia, and "the consecrated heretics", who were the active researchers and writers more publicly recognized as stars of the national intellectual scene. This pattern, he argues, was itself revelatory of a habitus that shaped (and continues to shape) the Academy but which is invisible to the intellectualist scholars who embody it precisely because it is the product of the academic practice in which they are engaged. For additional information about how anthropologists have reacted to Bourdieu's attempt to put social scientists (and all academics) in their place as "dominated among the dominant", and create by contrast a "scientific habitus"(270-271) see Calhoun, Lipuma and

bad) in more detail later, but raise Bourdieu's spectre here to warn you that what I am about to present is, as it were, said under a big question mark.

For what I thought we talked about was how on earth one was to make sense of Mr. Jampulingam's role in the origin of the *Nākatampirān* temple, an issue Mr. Kandan had to solve if he were to write the myth of the temple. But let me backpedal a bit, and explain what I thought, and continue to think, was Mr Kandan's occupation.

When the store-owner's wife informed me that Mr. Kandan was writing the "myth" of the Nakatampiran temple, the word she used was "*kalvuttu*", literally, "stonecutting". Although it is said that the word once referred only to the literally stone-carved, and no longer existent, textual accounts once found secreted away in the most ancient of temples, the word is now generalized by use to mean any written account of the origin of any group or institution, be it a temple or a caste, that was founded by the actions of a deity -- deities being the ultimate creators of social structure in traditional Batticaloa District political thought. Now in 1982 these accounts of origin, or "charter" myths if you will, were necessary to have around because they were important, if not sufficient, evidence of legitimacy that could be used in arguments about social position between different caste groups both within temples and outside them in the general social world of the District. Such arguments, called *kauravam caṭṭai*, or "status battles", occurred frequently there.⁷ And, in this regard, the village of Mandur was no different. With six castes -- of which two, the *cirpatar* and the *veḷḷāṭar*, have been deadlocked in an intense status battle since 1905 -- people there have had to have frequent recourse to the invocation, interpretation, and even, as in Mr.

Postone 1993. To observe how social philosophers have reacted see Shusterman 1999. See especially Charles Taylor's article, 'To Follow a Rule..' which, I think, contains the clearest discussion of the relationship between Bourdieu's notions of embodied knowledge or habitus and Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

⁷ These fights are also called *kauravappiraccanai* or "status problems". *Kauravam* is an extremely complicated political concept that reaches into multiple dimensions of Batticaloa District life. For a fuller discussion see Whitaker 1999: 81-136. For a description of how the political processes found in 1982 have been affected by the war see Whitaker 1997: 201-214.

Kandan's case, the writing, of *kalvuttu* to stave off attacks against their privileges or positions or to attack the privileges and positions of others. Thus, writing of, and about, *kalvuttu*, and even writing *kalvuttu per se* has, since the advent of the printing press and, now, the photocopy machine, edged out the once large role orality played in such arguments. In the 1980s, manuscripts interpreting this or that caste history, this or that temple origin story, grew like rice in a paddy field. Sometimes it seemed everybody was writing them. And those intellectuals, called either pundits or "poets" (*pulavar*), who specialized in the writing of such tracts were therefore as common as chaff. Had I been longer in the field when I first met Mr. Kandan, I would not have been as surprised.

Or perhaps I would have been. For it was his method even more than his problem or authoriality that I think continued to evoke in me the impression of a doppelgänger. But to appreciate why that was so, we must return to Mr. Jampulingam, and come to an understanding of just what was problematic about his miraculous run-in with that cobra.

Although Mr. Kandan had known, vaguely, of Mr. Jampulingam's existence before the miracle -- for, it is important to note, both Mr. Kandan and Mr. Jampulingam were of the *veḷḷākar* caste -- he told me that rather than rely on his own impressions, he had tried to track the man down, and, failing that, had relied on interviews with family members and neighbours to get some sense of what had led Mr. Jampulingam to that tree. So far, so, intriguingly, ethnographic. In any case, what he had found was that Mr. Jampulingam, in one way or another, had never been up to any good. Said, even by his family, to be an inveterate, and inventive, liar, and nearly a thief, he was also known as a brawler, a seducer, and a general rogue among men. People also agreed that he had, before the cobra, as he continued to have afterwards, an extensive thirst for arrack, the stronger the better. He also had, people agreed, a rather childishly nasty sense of humour. He had once decided, for example, to drop the "Jampu"⁸ from his name and just go by "lingam", saying, according to Mr. Kandan, that while he did not want to be known by any god's name, he did not mind being named after a penis. Pretty much, then, what I believe my Mandur village friends used to call a "loose case".

⁸ "Jampu" or *campu* implies Shiva.

His high-jinx finally landed him in trouble, however. While on an extended trip to Jaffna he got into a fight in a bar -- or, rather, a tea shop that served "special" teas -- and broke one of his fists. With one wing out of action, and the police apparently unhappy about his presence, he made his way back to Batticaloa to skulk unhappily about and bother his family. In desperation, some distant relation got him a position with the Batticaloa Highways Department, at first driving a roller, and when he proved too unreliable for that, finally, guarding it whenever it might be parked for the night or for a day or two awaiting some job. He had ended up in Mandur because the Department of Highways, which had initially decided to widen the road to the irrigation colony hamlets north of the village, had gotten second thoughts after the battered yellow roadroller was already there to start the job. And so, at shortly after 10 a.m. on a hot June morning, the surly Mr. Jampulingam, a hard night's boozing banging round his brain, settled down between the idle roadroller and the fateful *nāval* tree for a little nap. Then the cobra dropped.

I do not know why, but according to my notes neither I, nor anyone I talked to, doubted that a cobra had, indeed, dropped, despite the source of this intelligence being the untrustworthy Mr. Jampulingam. Certainly this was not a question that puzzled Kandan. He did not address it, either by word or gesture. Perhaps the spectacle of a man running as fast as he could, with his sarong up about his waist, the mile and a half from the Neval tree to the *ve//ā/ār* part of Mandur in the mid morning sun, a sure killer of speed under normal circumstances, was enough to inspire credence. Even the *Cirpater* pundits, the competing caste's intellectuals, who were ready enough to doubt the divinity of this particular snake, did not doubt that some kind of snake had fallen on the problematic Mr. Jampulingam. In any case, the basic facts of the story were, by the time I arrived, pretty much agreed by all, even up to what the snake said (or was reputed to have said) to the unlucky rogue: "Jampulingam", it intoned, "I'll do you no harm if you build me a temple."

Indeed, none of this was mysterious. Nor was it puzzling, since it did not give Mr. Kandan pause, that within the month, led on by various dreams and strange visitations, Mr. Jampulingam was able to get the *ve//ā/ār* of Mandur, and even some of the other castes, interested enough to, in fact, build the temple. What was odd enough to raise Mr. Kandan's eyebrows and crease his brow, though, was the fact of it having been Mr. Jampulingam at all.

For although Mandur's local mythology is shot through with tales about the hidden spiritual depths of the seemingly unworthy, there is no way that Mr. Kandan could regard Mr. Jampulingam as being blessed with such

depths. Generally such tales illustrate the spiritual mobility that one kind of Tamil, Hindu society foregrounds in contrast to the social mobility it hides. Hence, the "heroes" of such tales come to a new understanding, a new spiritual rebirth, while remaining socially the same. Arjuna on the field of truth is the high paradigm here. But Mr. Jampulingam, Mr. Kandan was quick to point out, came to no such new understanding -- or if he did, it did not reveal itself to the people who knew him. If he had raised hell before, he raised worse hell after the cobra dropped -- once, that is, he got that temple built. So why? Why would the god pick Mr. Jampulingam as the medium of its message -- supposedly so unworthy, childish, nasty, even "loose", Mr. Jampulingam? Mr. Kandan raised the issue...

...and dropped it without an answer.

Without batting an eyelid, Mr. Kandan started talking about the snake. He knew, of course, the general significance of such a cobra. The Cobra was one of the 16 thousand forms Vishnu could assume. A *nākatampirāṇ*, as well, was a bed to Vishnu, an ornament for Shiva and Uma, the true identity of the planets Raku and Keethu, the source of the bead within the bell of the Goddess Pattini's anklet, and, of course, it was with a cobra that the gods spun the ladle that whipped up the nectar of eternity out of the ocean. Yet he had worried about the local and particular identity of the snake, and had wondered if it could be related to another snake that he had once seen in the village of Pandaravelli, that was also black, like the one that fell on Mr. Jampulingam. So he went to that village and interviewed a number of people, passing up the unreliable witnesses who knew things only by their own experience in favour of those, more trustworthy, who remembered the time-tested, and therefore more likely, stories of dead relations. Thus he discovered that there had once been a white snake in Pandaravelli called "*canku pālakan*" that had married a black snake, whose name was now unknown, and that this union had produced another white snake, equally sacred. The married snakes, together, and their daughter had each had their own temple, and the income from these temples had been good, until some "rogues" from far away across the Batticaloa lagoon had come by boat to use a secret "medicine" to cause the youngest white snake to flee its temple. After looting the young snake's temple, the rogues had taken their loot to boast of their deed in the temple of the parent snakes. When the father snake, the black one, had attacked them, the rogues had shot him. This so enraged the white snake, that she had, first, blinded them all, and then, for good and all, cursed their families, causing all their relations to die off, and their clans to

die out. But this still left the white snake, *Canku pālakan*, alone in her grief. Thus, when a new, black snake, named "Katkotakum",⁹ tried to wed her, she fought with him and drove him off. It was this black snake, then, driven off by the white cobra *Canku pālakan*, that had come to Mandur many years before, only much later to manifest itself to the world, by means of Mr. Jampulingam.

And this was the end of what Kandan had to say. Was this, then, a kind of explanation? Would it be committing an error to read it that way? On the other hand, would it be fair not to? Just what, in the end, does it mean? Above all, what was Kandan doing here? Or what am I allowed to say he was doing...?

But before answering any of these questions in the ways anthropologists have generally been accustomed to answer them, I need to know whether I can consider what Mr. Kandan was trying to do as a kind of scholarly act, even a kind of specifically Batticaloa District, Tamil, scholarly act, or whether I should consider it something else entirely. And that, willy-nilly, leads me back to the question I embedded earlier in the text -- Bourdieu's question: does my being, however imperfectly, a kind of scholar make it impossible for me to understand, or even see, non-scholars? Am I the prisoner of my study, even in the field?

We need to ask what an intellectual is.

If I were to ask you to sit back, close your eyes, and imagine, for a moment, a typical Western-style intellectual -- not any particular intellectual but, as it were, the archetype, the kind of icon one could use in an advertising campaign for an expensive whiskey, or as a talking head for a BBC documentary on something fairly serious and tweedy -- what would spring to mind? I would imagine a whole context: books, stacks of paper, fireplace, desk, and a man (significantly a male) with ruffled hair, slightly bent spectacles, a quizzical expression more than half amused, a twinkling in eyes less than completely calm, and that kind of aloneness Westerners like me tend to settle over intellectuals like a cassock (especially over those sequestered in the Academies) to set them apart from people more mired in the bustling,

⁹ My fieldnotes do not reveal the Tamil spelling of this name. I just copied down what I heard.

hard-knocking, lucre-mad, and, above all, partisan, midst of things.

This ghostly reflection, of course, is not an accurate portrait of Western intellectuals; there are too many Susan Sontags and Norman Mailers running about for any such picture to fit. Nor is it one in whose reality many Westerners still believe; even "thirty-something", an American TV programme that was a kind of early 1990s whelming up out of the US Boomer *mundi*, presented its single academic hero as more beclouded by his fragile employability than by the joys and terrors of the life intellectual. And for Sri Lankans the notion that the hallmark of what Bourdieu calls the "scholarly point of view" is sequestered seclusion must be laughable -- one only need think of the career and recent, tragic assassination of Neelam Tiruchelvam. But it is a picture of "the intellectual" that most can, at least, recognize, and which harks back to a tradition in the West of monastically isolating the thinker from the life she (though, originally, "he") reflected upon, very much as if that thinker were a "mind", (surely an apt metonym for intellectuals), that must be detached from its distracting "body" (body politic?, body of opinion?) in order to obtain enough disinterested, solitary, purity of motive to wrest valuable thought from a world otherwise all too beguiling.

A corollary to this kind of decapitation, of course, is the question of how one is to keep *nous* down on the farm once it has seen "Parce" -- though perhaps "Wall Street" or "inside the beltway" (as Americans say of those who catch Washington D.C. fever in the US) would fit better here. Matthew Arnold's concern with the pollution of "fresh wits" by "this strange disease of modern life", which caused him to advise his Scholar Gipsy to "Wave us away, and keep thy solitude", is but a 19th century expression of a traditional nostalgia for a metaphysically pure, wholly scholarly, form of life, free of all worldly distraction. It is, I think, a nostalgia for a kind of life that has not left us to this day, however much we may have criticized it as the dream of an elite, and however rarely it is now, or ever really was, true in practice. It has not left us, I believe, because for a very few, very privileged people, the detached life of the mind, whatever one may determine about the complex problem of its value, still goes on -- at least as a very stubbornly held ideal.

Especially, perhaps, in France. Hence, in this regard, Pierre Bourdieu has made his intriguing argument. He claims to be able to discern, in all intellectuals and *especially* in professional academics (1990: 381), a uniquely scholastic point of view, which he sees as made possible by the

Procrustean, "institutionalized situation of studious leisure" characteristic of academia (381). Academics, for Bourdieu, are people who have been "paid to play seriously" (381). That is, as people freed by their institutional settings from the onerous and time-consuming necessities of survival, academics can play with words, ideas, and objects, in ways that people who must use such things for immediate, practical ends cannot. So, when a policeman, on the job, says, "Stop right there!", he means, and can only survive by being taken as meaning, one thing. However, that same sentence, perused by a time-rich academic, can be played around with enough to reveal many things: a prescriptive grammar, a depth grammar, various socio-linguistic properties, a disciplinary technology, a kind of cultural rhetoric, and so on, till all changes are rung, and the ringers are exhausted. The scholarly view is a cornucopia of understandings.

Now, according to Bourdieu, there is about all this, as the old joke goes, some good news and some bad news. The good news is that the academic vision *Homo Academicus* has (as a product of her withdrawal from necessity into the cocoon of the academy) allowed her to develop, to the fullest, what Bourdieu calls her "universal anthropological possibilities" -- that is, her abilities to develop logical arguments, Kantian aesthetic perceptions, and to "perform perfectly rigorous moral acts" (whatever they are!), all of which things Bourdieu sees as nefariously limited social privileges that all should have, and that *Homo Academicus* is lucky to have obtained (386). *Homo Academicus* is especially lucky to have obtained these privileges because development of them is one way to gain entrance into the academic arena where the "struggle" to obtain, what Bourdieu calls, "a legitimate monopoly over the universal"(386) goes on. The bad news, and it is news particularly bad for social scientists, is that the above virtues of the scholarly view are the very rocks upon which social scientific analyses founder, time and time again.

Basically, the problem is this: when social scientists, being scholars, "naturally" see the human actions they are studying from a scholarly point of view, they grant what are, in fact, practical, context-bound, univocal and particular activities a "meta", context-free, multivocal and "universal" significance that they do not have for the agents who did them. As Bourdieu would say, "the fundamental anthropological fallacy consists in injecting the meta- into practices"(382). Thus, for example, what would be, in Tamil Sri Lanka, plans to marry one's son to the mate with the largest dowry and the most prestigious relations would get reread at "another level" by Bourdieu's

straw anthropologist, as the completion of the social algebra of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. And so on. Always the scholar moves beyond the limited meaning of the act in the eyes of the participants, to all the things the act could possibly be *made to mean* if only said participants had the time and freedom from necessity that, by and large, only academics have, to play with it. What is worse, social scientists can never see the nature of their error because the very social preconditions that have made them the scholars they are -- the years and years of protection from immediate economic want, the emphasis on careful analysis rather than rushing to judgement, the time for the working out of all possible angles, and the fear of having one's cultural products rejected by the special "market" of academia for not meeting scholarly tests of logical neatness and coherence -- have bred in them a set of unconscious dispositions, what Bourdieu calls "scholastic doxa"(381), that are precisely opposite in character from the pragmatic doxa underlying most of the practices scholars are trying, and failing, to understand. Thus does Bourdieu hoist academia by its own petard.

Now there are any number of problems with Bourdieu's interesting thesis. For one thing, of course, the picture he paints of the world is not only appallingly depressing, but also, somehow, innocent. Imagine it: "here", in the academy, the elite band of anthropologically actualized scholars, isolated in ludic reverie, carry on their various, glass bead games in coherent irrelevance; "there", out in the world, driven by hunger and spite, the vast mass of incomplete humankind continues the practical business of getting on, however fuzzy, incoherent, limited, and dull that might be, or might make them. Aside from being something of a cartoon, this portrait of western society could probably not be maintained by anyone with a grisly, first-hand knowledge of gipsy-scholar life there in the new global economy, or, for that matter, anyone who has made a careful reading of, say, the competitive combat Watson describes so well in the *The Double Helix* (1976). Some of the scholastic (if not epistemological) *doxa* that Bourdieu does not discuss are political and economic: the need to appeal to deans, the need to compromise with the board of trustees, grantsmanship, worrying either about accuracy in Academia or "political correctness", worrying about taxes, the car loan, or whether one will get medical coverage next year. And so forth.

Ethnographic verisimilitude aside, Bourdieu's picture has other, deeper, problems that become exposed as, as it were, clues to his distemper, when we try to see where assuming he is right about the divorce between the worldview of the scholar and the worldview of those in practice would leave

us. For one cannot avoid, in this, the question of whether any kind of analysis can escape from injecting the "meta" into practice, given that analysis or even description *per se* seems to require a certain amount of nipping and tucking of experience even to be understandable. Is not the alternative to be struck dumb? One clue is here. Along the same lines, one has to wonder how the notion of "practice" itself eludes being an injection of the "meta" into the worldly things Bourdieu applies it to. For a practice-- say, volleyball or writing a *kalvuttu* - is not, in a sense, a *practice* to a practitioner -- it is, simply, playing volleyball or writing a *kalvuttu*. For the doers of the above to be also doing a "practice", in Bourdieu's now overdeveloped sense, would be for them to be doing something else as well as pushing a ball over a net or crafting a polemical myth. And although this very thing was, I know, Bourdieu's original point, I think it got lost to the very dynamic he warns us about: practice has become the "meta-" of a theory of practice.

What a shame.

But Bourdieu's *ur* point, that scholars tend to add the meta- to what they are analyzing, costing them any real understanding of what the actors they hope to comprehend are really doing, if such a comprehension is their aim, continues to have real muscle, partly, I suppose, because it is a very old point. This is pretty much what Geertz (1977) was getting at when he wrote about those "turtles all the way down." It was, even more, the still point at the center of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and the reason why he thought modern philosophy, as it was being done when he wrote, was really a kind of disease to be gotten over rather than something worthy of being carried on. Indeed, Wittgenstein's point of view is really more radical than Bourdieu's. The very kind of ludic exercises that Bourdieu sees as the highest form of anthropological actualization (however limited they might be in thinking about humans) involve precisely what, for Wittgenstein, is most wrong with modern epistemological inquiry; that it is, to quote him, like "a wheel turning without reference to the rest of the machine". For Wittgenstein, then, no further description, however cleverly agent-minded and mindful of life's limitations, could comprehend life. One can only do that by, as it were, living with one's eyes open, comparing, contrasting, thereby trying to gain a "perspicuous representation", or a "view over the whole", from within the to

and fro of things (Wittgenstein 1953: 49c).¹⁰ And perhaps, for related but even harsher reasons, this is why Dorinne Kondo, in a quotation from her work that George Marcus selected as a comment on Bourdieu's article on the scholastic view, just could not see the "presumed distinction between the academy and the real world" but only "a battleground and a site of struggle" (Marcus 1990:393).¹¹

All fine and good. But how does any of the above help us to understand Mr. Kandan's *kalvuttu*? The problem, as I remember, was as follows. Mr. Kandan, first, seemed to have posed a question: how could the

¹⁰ See also Whitaker 1996:1-13.

¹¹ This, of course, gives the impression that I am highly critical of Bourdieu's whole project. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, in one way, this essay itself might be read as an example of "reflexive sociology" and, thus, a kind of subtle homage to Bourdieu. And, indeed, my own work has attempted, in a much humbler way, something similar -- even to the extent of being inspired by the same philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (See Whitaker 1999,1996). My concern here is that Bourdieu's attempt to surmount the social sciences' Cartesian dichotomies, and his critique of their intellectualist misreadings of practice, run the risk of themselves bringing into play a new dichotomy, a new "objectivist" shoal upon which the befogged social scientist might run aground, and at the risk of wrecking more than merely her own accuracy. Careful ethnography, as a kind of "fieldwork in philosophy", to borrow another of Bourdieu's phrases (Brown and Szueman 2000: v), reveals, I think, not the sharp divide between privileged and practical worlds that Bourdieu assumes but incoherences and multiple practices everywhere. It is a key feature of Bourdieu's analysis of *Homo Academicus* that this is so for their world; that, indeed, is the whole point of his analysis. It should be no surprise then that the same complexity of possibilities should be found outside France, outside the Academy, and among those denied the privileges of the life intellectual. Nor is this to deny Bourdieu's critique of the volunteerist illusions of American "rational choice" theorists. I agree with them; but even socialized agents are capable of moving strategically (if not freely) between a multiple (if finite) number forms of life. Indeed, it is hard to see how the rough and tumble of social life would be possible without this multiplicity. Nor should we be surprised if some of these various social spaces, as hidey-holes within the vaster structures of more stultifying fields of force, bear a certain family resemblance to what we Academics do.

god have used such a disreputable person as Mr. Jampulingam to communicate its need for a temple to the *veḷḷālar* people of Mandur? Then, apparently dropping the question, Mr. Kandan went on to tell a long tale about the origin of the holy snake that dropped on the fellow. Now, if one accepts Bourdieu's thesis in unmodified fashion, one must stop the enquiry, for Mr. Kandan is cast out into the world of practice, and becomes unreachable. Not being, by definition and *doxa*, a scholar, even if he is regarded as such in Mandur, one cannot impute a scholarly disposition to his raising of the initial point. So Mr. Kandan is struck dumb, and his words are effaced. What happens, then, if we ignore Bourdieu altogether, accept Mr. Kandan's struggle as all of ours, and impute to him the same drive for coherence and the whole story that any scholar should have? What, then, if we absorb him? Well, we could do this -- by, for example, reading the story of how the snake got to Mandur as, somehow, a comment on how Mr. Jampulingam did as well. Indeed, perhaps we could see it as a bit of cultural rhetoric, illustrating the improbable way humans are led to destiny by revealing how even gods are by accidents led to theirs. This would be a fine reading of the *kalvuttu* that Mr. Kandan was planning to write, but I do not believe a word of it. It would truly be, in Bourdieu's sense, an injection of the meta into Mr. Kandan's "practice".

So what to do?

Suppose, then, we use a weaker form of Bourdieu's thesis. Let us try this: any attempt to read both Mr. Kandan's question and his subsequent dropping of the issue of Mr. Jampulingam as a sort of Magister-ludi-style *playing* with the possibilities fails, not for the negative reason that Mr. Kandan, ensconced as he is in the *doxa* of practice, is either too desperate or too dull to *play*, but for the positive reason that the form of scholarship he is engaged in -- the Tamil business of being a polemical *pulavar*, and even the wider domain of being an intellectual *per se* (i.e., a *paticca akkal*) - would regard any move in the game that would disengage one from the practical life as being illegitimate. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the public ethics of being an Batticaloa, Tamil, intellectual have here crept into the operation of Mr. Kandan's intellectuality, but not in secret, as Bourdieu's oddly Freudian-styled "*doxa*" would have it, but openly, self-reflexively, and as a stated ideal. If this is so, then what we confronted in Mr. Kandan's silence was not the failure of a practice-dulled mind, but the sinewy flexing of a well-muscled, Tamil intellectuality that was strong enough to stop analysis, despite the obvious temptation Jampulingam's miracle offered of an

escape into pure scholarship. Precisely the sort of thought, in other words, that Bourdieu believes has eluded the Western human sciences. If I were Bourdieu, I guess I would be beating a path to Mr. Kandan's door.

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