Mukkuvar vannimai: Tamil caste and matrilineal ideology in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka
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1. INTRODUCTION

Hence it is true that the ideology in which we see the conscious centre of caste can be lacking here or there within the Indian world, and observation of these cases is of the greatest interest, to show us to what extent and in what conditions institutions of this kind can survive the weakening or disappearance of their ideological aspect.

(Louis Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus, 1970: 46)

The question of caste ideology, that is, how caste systems are conceived and understood by the people who live their lives within them, is the focus of this essay. It is a tribute to Louis Dumont, and to his determined advocacy of a Hindu ideology of purity and pollution as the superordinate or 'encompassing' criterion of Indian caste society, that his work serves today as the standard reference point against which his colleagues in South Asian anthropology feel obliged to measure their own intellectual positions. However, at least one theoretical school now advocates a more radical interpretative framework based upon distinctive South Asian 'coded bodily substance' concepts said to be more ideological and culturally authentic than any proposed by Dumont (Marriott and Inden 1974; 1977; Marriott 1976a). While the work of Dumont, on the one hand, and the formulations of Marriott and Inden, on the other, represent the most clearly contrasting interpretations of caste as seen 'from the inside', mention will be made of a number of other writers who employ elements of both approaches. What is generally lacking, however, is sufficient attention to what Dumont himself, in the rare passage quoted above, admits to be an urgent research priority: the documentation and analysis of local caste systems in which the salient ideologies of rank are, from a South Asian comparative standpoint, atypical, disjunctive, or attenuated.

This essay describes a search for indigenous theories of caste and matrilineal rank in the Tamil-speaking settlements of the Batticaloa region on the east coast of Sri Lanka. Contrary to expectation, the findings of this research throw doubt upon both the major theories. The ideology of caste and matrilineal rank here shows far less evidence of the Dumontian 'purity' symbolism, or of the post-Dumontian 'coded bodily substance' concepts, than one would expect, given the alleged ubiquity of these indigenous ideas throughout the Hindu world. Instead, one finds that a strong ideology of chiefly conquest, a system of matrilineal clan rights, and a traditional array of 'marks of honour'—all associated with ideas of the Mukkuvar vannimai, the regional chieftainship of the Mukkuvar caste—permeate local thinking about social status and marriage alliance. Ideas of ritual purity, on the other hand, emerge mainly within domestic life-crisis contexts and are not articulated as a rationale for the collective status of caste groups. Theories of bodily substance are highly developed, but in the view of local people they clearly belong to the cultural domain of medicine and health, not to an 'ethnosociological' metaphysic of caste identity.

These findings are of some ethnographic interest in themselves, but they also serve to undermine the strong critique of 'purity' and 'bio-moral substance' theories of caste with which this essay concludes. Rather than pursue single-mindedly a unique vision of the 'essence' of caste in all its manifestations, we should instead view South Asian symbols and theories of society in the light of the specific historical factors which gave rise to regional caste systems in the first place and which subsequently conditioned the tone and content of indigenous thinking about local caste hierarchies. In the Batticaloa area, as no doubt in other South Asian sub-regions, the 'symbolic language' of the caste system was shaped by the historical circumstances surrounding the establishment of the dominant caste, its ideological resources, and its specialist groups. Here, in fact, a heritage of warrior conquest by a formerly low-ranking Malabar fishing caste, combined with a distinctive non-Brahman Viracaiva (Lingayat) priestly tradition, has produced a regional caste system with a markedly 'political' (or Hocartian) ideology of caste rank and caste honour. If we would give more recognition to historical discontinuities in the propagation, cultural transmission, and social reception of allegedly pan-Indic social and cosmological ideas, as well as to the precise ethnographic contexts in which these ideas are invoked, the usefulness of such concepts in comprehending specific caste systems would be considerably enhanced.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT THEORY

2.1. Dumont and the 'substance and code' approach

A recent trend in the study of South Asian caste, kinship, and marriage
systems has been a greater attempt to utilize traditional Indic theories of society and indigenous beliefs about the unitary bio-moral quality of action and bodily substance in the analysis of fieldwork data. Dumont’s insistence upon the ideological supremacy of status (purity) over power in Hindu caste systems (Dumont 1970: Chs. 2–3) must be taken as the most important stimulus to this renewed interest in what has been termed the ‘ethnosociology of Hindu caste systems’ (Marriott & Inden 1977).

Dumont’s position is by now well known: it can be summarized as the assertion that Hindu caste society is a reality sui generis built upon the ancient ideological foundation of a radical split between contingent secular power (embodied in the ideal of the Kshatriya varna) and absolute ritual purity or status (embodied in the ideal of the Brahman varna). Dumont insists upon a structuralist or holistic view of caste as an ideologically-governed system in which the ritual superiority of the Brahman subordinates or ‘encompasses’ secular power at the most general or abstract level of Hindu society, although particular social contingencies may temporarily reverse this relationship in certain regional and historical settings (‘interstitial levels’, 1970: 197). This hierarchical relationship between the priest and the king is the essential criterion of caste in the Dumontian sense of the term. On these grounds he has argued that society in Sri Lanka is built upon ‘quasi-caste rather than caste proper’, since Brahmans have never been numerous in Sri Lanka and the Buddhist concept of kingship rejects the Brahman—Kshatriya duality (Dumont 1970: 215–16; S.J. Tambiah 1976).

A number of ‘post-Dumontian’ formulations and reformulations have now emerged, seeking to trace intrinsically Indian patterns of thought more deeply and rigorously than Dumont himself had done. An additional inspiration for this trend has been the work of David Schneider, whose book on American kinship (1968) succinctly suggests that a ‘cultural account’ of American kinship, that is, an account of the defining features of kinship relationships from an indigenous actor’s point of view, would stress the dual concepts of shared natural bodily substance, e.g. ‘blood’ (‘relationship in nature’), and normative code for conduct (‘relationship in law’). Kinship in this perspective is a fundamentally cultural construct which may include symbols of ‘hard’ biogenetic reality as well as moral injunctions or ‘codes for conduct’ specifying kinship relationships. Marriott and Inden (1974; 1977), following Barnett (1970), detect a striking contrast between this dualism which Schneider notes in American kinship ideology and what they interpret to be a universal monism in Hindu taxonomic thought, a philosophic tradition which does not distinguish two separate realms of ‘natural’ versus ‘moral’ phenomena.

Instead, all substances, all actions, and all intangible influences are assumed to embody and convey essential qualities; they are all ‘code-substances’ or ‘substance-codes’, continuously interacting upon one another within a single transformative plasm or matrix of atom-like quality-particles which, in various combinations, are felt to constitute the ranked natural genera of inanimate, animate, and divine beings, including varnas, castes, clans, and other ranked human genera (Marriott 1976a; Inden 1976: 11–48).

Particular attention is thus directed toward indigenous views of the creation, composition, and behaviour of the human body, seen in this perspective as a locus of ‘bio-moral substances’ (e.g. blood) which embody both physiological properties pertaining to bodily states as well as moral properties pertaining to social rights and duties. A Hindu caste, from this point of view, is a group sharing a distinctive type of bio-moral substance which caste members preserve, even occasionally improve, through strict observance of caste rules governing key social transactions, such as marriage, food exchange, and occupational performance. Perhaps the most important aspect of this ‘ethnosociological’ interpretation for fieldwork in South Asia is the manner in which it bridges the gap between claims of intrinsic or attributional caste superiority on the one hand (Stevenson 1954), and the equally visible role which competitive inter-caste transactions play in generating and changing local caste rankings on the other (Marriott 1959; 1968a). By virtue of this highly developed Hindu metaphysical system, all types of inter-caste transactions and relationships, including withdrawal from interaction itself, can be seen to affect the coded-substance (and the rank) of the castes involved. This interpretation argues that ‘purity’ and ‘power’; the categories so assiduously separated by Dumont, are in reality aspects of the same thing: ‘a unitary Indian concept of superior value — power understood as vital energy, substance-code of subtle, homogeneous quality, and high, consistent transactional status or rank’ (Marriott 1976a: 137).

Some of these concepts have recently been applied to ethnographic material from Bengal and Tamilnadu. Inden and Nicholas (1977) have sought to elucidate Bengali concepts of ‘blood’ and ‘love’ as linked elements which constitute the core symbols in the Bengali kinship system, and thus they consider their analysis to be a ‘cultural account’ of Bengali kinship in David Schneider’s sense of the term. Inden (1976) has also produced a historical study of marriage transactions between the highest Bengali Brahman and Kayastha clans and clan grades ca. 1500–1850 A.D.
which relies heavily upon caste genealogical records (*kulajit*) as well as upon textual commentaries and published formulations of 'marriage theory' from the period. These documents are treated as authentic indigenous codifications of the ethnosociological perspective outlined by Marriott and Inden (1974; 1977).

Fruzzetti and Östör have also produced their own 'cultural account' of Bengali kinship, inspired by Schneider and Dumont, which they consider to be 'totally different in theory and method' from the approach of Marriott and Inden (Fruzzetti & Östör 1976: 100). One aspect of this difference is their rather greater concern with the categories of thought revealed in the actual statements Bengali villagers make about blood-linked kinsmen and about blood-transforming marriages, as opposed to Marriott and Inden's more textual or esoteric theory of monistic coded substance. A second aspect is their desire to retain the Dumontian concept of purity versus power, which they feel avoids the cultural slipstream of the Marriott and Inden approach (Barnett, Fruzzetti & Östör 1976: 631–6). However, additional Bengali evidence of the existence of a widespread transformational 'philosophy of rank' based upon combinations of three elemental 'qualities' (*gun*) has been provided by Davis, and this has been taken in support of Marriott and Inden's position (Davis 1976: 6, Marriott 1976b; 190n.).

Several other recent studies using natural substance as an explanatory tool have utilized data from Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. Barnett's work on the high-ranking Kossaikattti Velar (KV) caste in the Chingleput District of Tamilnadu (Barnett 1970; 1973a; 1973b; 1975; 1976), like that of Fruzzetti and Östör in Bengal, places great emphasis upon a local ideology of caste and kin-group 'purity' which is believed to reside in the blood. In the KV example, ranked endogamous kindreds (*vakaiyara*) within the caste preserve distinctions of blood purity, but this purity is susceptible to refinement or degradation as a result of conformity or non-conformity with the transactional rules of the caste or kindred with respect to such things as marriage choice, diet, and exchange of food. A further set of KV ideas deals with exogamous patrilineral *kottiiram* memberships and a bilateral theory of conception in which the father contributes the 'body' (*utampu*) and the mother the 'spirit' (*uyir*) of the foetus. Accounts of Tamil caste and kinship in the northern Jaffna peninsula of Sri Lanka (Banks 1957; 1960; David 1972; 1973b; Pfaffenberger 1977) differ in many respects from the Tamilnadu KV material, but the idea of blood purity and a version of the *utampu*/*uyir* distinction are said to be present there as well (David 1973a: 523; 1974: 53; 1977: 182). Batticaloa is located southeast of Jaffna, separated from it by 175 miles of sparsely populated Dry-Zone jungle. With regard to these and many other ideas, I hope to show how Batticaloa is quite distinct from Jaffna.

2.2. Yalman's Kandyen studies

Although anthropological interest in the exploration of indigenous theories of purity and bodily substance in South Asia has expanded greatly over the past ten years with the publication of major theoretical formulations by Dumont, Schneider, Marriott and Inden, and others, one of the most important contributions came earlier in the work of Nur Yalman on caste, kinship, and marriage in the Kandyen highlands of Sri Lanka (Yalman 1960; 1962; 1963; 1967; 1969). It was Yalman's work, above all else, which provided the suggestion and stimulus for my own research in eastern Sri Lanka, and so it is necessary to discuss some of his major findings in greater detail.

Yalman noted that Buddhist Sinhalese villagers in the Kandyen area discuss differences between castes, ideally endogamous bilateral kindreds (*pavula*), and aristocratic patrilines (*warnsa*) all with reference to a common theory of 'good' (*honda*) and 'bad' (*naraka*) blood, and he interpreted the Kandyen tendency to maintain (at least in fiction, if not always in fact) the principle of endogamous boundaries as a functional correlate of the bilateral nature of caste and kindred ('micro-caste') affiliation. Such groups seek to protect their purity by restricting, or claiming to restrict, the source of reproductive fluids (distillations of the blood) to members of the group itself. Hypergamous marriage patterns, such as those of the Nayars and Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala, are seen by Yalman as 'variants' on the basic bilateral endogamous caste model under the influence of strong unilineal descent principles. Unilineal descent ideas in the form of patrilineal 'aristocratic pedigrees' (*warnsa*) in certain elite Kandyen families are maintained despite the fact that they contradict the generally accepted Kandyen theories of bilateral purity of caste blood, and the principle of hypergamy is recognized between such *warnsa* (Yalman 1967: 138–49, 172–80). In general, argues Yalman, unilineal descent principles provide alternative ways to delineate social groups and, as such, they tend to reduce the need for caste endogamy. If one assumes that group status in South Asia is centred on the idea of ritual purity, and that purity is always protected and preserved through the women of the group (Yalman 1963; 1967: 177–80), hypergamy is the logical alternative to endogamy when unilineal descent rivals bilateral caste as a basic feature of
the social order (Yalman 1967: Chs. 12, 15, 16). Yalman’s aim is to show that there is a ‘general structure’ of caste and kinship in South India and Sri Lanka which has at its core a Dravidian kinship classification with bilateral cross-cousin marriage, bilateral descent and inheritance, and certain South Asian cultural axioms about group hierarchy as a manifestation of ritual purity. Purity is conveyed in the blood and is preserved through special restrictions on the sexuality of women. This general structure is capable of many different empirical transformations in different areas under the influence of different descent principles. One of the empirical variants which Yalman tried to generate from this general structure is what he called ‘the matrilineal hypergamous variant’, which he identified among the Tamils and Muslims of the Batticaloa region and which is the ethnographic focus of this essay (Yalman 1967: Ch. 15).

3. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH OF BATTICALOA

3.1. Castes and communities

Batticaloa, or Māṭṭakalappu as it is known to the inhabitants, constitutes a distinctive region of Sri Lanka by all the major criteria: historical, linguistic, cultural, and social structural. For geographical and historical reasons, it must also be seen as a zone of relative isolation (Cohn 1967; 1971: 26–8). The first anthropological interpretation of this part of the island is contained in Yalman’s monograph, Under the Bo Tree (1967; Chs. 14–15), and many of the ethnographic peculiarities noted by Yalman served equally well as starting points for my own research (McGilvray 1973; 1974; 1976). The data presented here were gathered primarily in two locations during two fieldwork trips to the east coast. These two locations, the town and vicinity of Akkaraipattu (Amparai District) and the village and vicinity of Kokkaṭṭṭiṭṭolai (Batticaloa District), typify respectively the two characteristic types of settlement patterns found along the east coast as a whole: densely packed semi-urban coastal settlements of Hindu and Muslim wet-rice cultivators and fishermen, on the one hand, and, dispersed, mainly Hindu, villages situated inland and separated from the coastal settlements by extensive semi-saline lagoons, on the other (Ryan 1950: 10–12). Both the Hindus, who are officially termed Ceylon Tamils, and the Muslims, who are termed Ceylon Moors, speak Tamil (with minor dialectical variation) and live in adjacent ethnically compartmentalized villages (kiriṇaṁ) and government Headmen’s Divisions (kuricci) along the coast. Neither the small groups of Tamil Christians scattered throughout the region nor the Sinhalese Buddhists who occupy the lands further inland play any direct role in the situation I wish to describe. The local Eurasian ‘Burghers’ are discussed elsewhere (McGilvray, 1982b).

The Hindu Tamils in the town of Akkaraipattu provided an opinion-ranking of the main locally recognized Hindu castes which is summarized in Table 1. There are some other local groups which, for various reasons, Tamil informants insisted were incommensurate and impossible to rank alongside the Hindu castes. The Moors, constituting more than 60% of the population of the town, were the most important such exception: they consider themselves, and are considered by the Tamils, to be a separate ‘race-ethnic group’ (inam), not merely adherents of a separate religion. It is difficult to know precisely where the Moors fitted into the social hierarchy, say, a hundred years ago, but there is no doubt that the high caste Tamils treated them as inferiors. They were once given a recognized place in regional Hindu temple festivals and were accorded the right to have the lowest castes serve them, but communal hostility and separatism between Tamils and Moors is now quite strong. In fact, the Moorish population in this region is largely the product of marriages with, and conversions from, the Hindu castes. They consequently share the kinship patterns, matrilineal clan organization, matrilocational marriage system, and many other customary practices of the Hindu Tamils, with the exception of the fact that they are not themselves divided into what could truly be called a Muslim caste system. There is a tiny, markedly inferior, and strictly endogamous group of Muslim Barber-Circumcisers (ōṭā), a small semi-endogamous set of persons with the title of maulāna claiming patrilineal descent from the Prophet’s family, and a small group of Sufi mystics (Pāvā, Bawa; Pakīr, Fakir) whose recruitment is based upon a mixture of patrilineal descent and discipleship. The vast majority of Moors have no connection with these groups and are internally differentiated only by their matrilineal clan and mosque affiliations as well as by the standard socio-economic criteria of wealth, education, and occupational status.

Aside from employing some Tamil agricultural labour, the Moorish community is primarily linked to the Tamils through its domestic reliance upon Tamil Washermen and its commercial relationships with Tamil Barbers, Smiths, and, until recently, Paraiyar Drummers.

Four other groups were excluded by the informants who provided the caste ranking in Table 1, and again, their reasoning was based upon the claim that these groups were anomalous and incommensurate because of their race, religion, or recent origin. However, from the standpoint of this
Table 1. Tamil opinion-ranking of eight castes traditionally associated with the Hindu caste system in Akkaraipattu

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<td>Vēḷālar Cultivator</td>
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<td>Mukkuvar Cultivator</td>
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<td>Vāṇṇār Wāsherman</td>
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<td>Nāvītar Barber</td>
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<td>Pāraiyar Drummer</td>
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Caste affilition of respondents (N = 46)

Note: The procedures follow those developed by Freed (1963), Marriott (1968a), Hiebert (1969; 1973) and others, but no statistical test of significance was applied. The matrix has been tilted upright for ease of viewing. To illustrate how the table is read, note that in the cell farthest to the right, 43 respondents ranked the Vēḷālar caste above the Pāraiyar caste, but three respondents expressed the opposite opinion, i.e., that Pāraiyars rank above Vēḷālars. In the event of an equal ranking of two castes, each caste was awarded a score of V. Castes and blocs of castes differentiated and ranked by a consensus of at least 2:1 are delineated by a heavy black line.

Essay, the most central questions concern neither the Moors nor the secondary Hindu and Christian groups but the traditional Hindu castes in Table 1. These are the castes which are seen to have an acknowledged position in the local social order historically instituted by ancient kings.

The basic features of caste rank in Akkaraipattu reveal a high-caste stratum of 'good' (nalla)/big (periya)/high (iyar) people' incorporating three partially and equivocally ranked castes. This stratum is very often referred to simply as 'Tamils', in contrast to the clearly ranked inferior castes who are referred to by their caste names. The middle castes are generally producers of specialized goods and commodities, such as metalwork (here, Blacksmiths and Goldsmiths are one caste) or products of the coconut and palmyra palm (Climbers were formerly producers of fermented toddy and jaggery sugar). At the bottom are the three domestic service castes, the Wāsherman, Barber, and Drummer, who are termed collectively the katuimm, or hereditary household servants. There is no distinct set of agricultural sett (ātimāi) castes, such as the Pāḷḷa of Jaffna and Tanjore (Banks 1960; Béteille 1965), and, although the behavioural reality is probably quite similar, there is no verbal stress on the metaphor of the low castes being 'bound' (kattuppattu) as David reports from Jaffna (1973b and passim). However, the ritual services of some or all of the kutuimm castes at both temple festivals and domestic life-crisis ceremonies is a highly coveted mark of honour (varicai) which the highest castes have traditionally guarded with jealousy (McGilrvay, in press).

3.2. Matrilineal organization

Marital residence for all Hindu and Muslim groups in the Batticaloa region follows a sort of shifting matri-uxorilocal pattern. The wedding takes place in the bride's natal house, and the married couple continue to reside for a period (typically between 6 months and 2 years) with the bride's parents and unmarried siblings. After this, the married daughter takes full possession of the natal house in fulfilment of her dowry, while her parents and some or all of her unmarried siblings move to another house, which is usually new and smaller and is preferably situated in the same or an adjacent compound (vālamu). Virtually all wealth and immovable property is transferred, or at least pledged, as dowry, which thereby acts as a sort of pre-mortem matrilineal inheritance (Goody 1973) tending to provide greater shares for the elder daughters. Brothers must work to help dower their sisters before they are allowed to marry and leave the household. The kinship pattern is identical for both Tamils and Moors, with some lexical
substitutions. Both sets of terminology conform to the symmetrical Dravidian ‘general structure’ described by Yalman (1967: 216–21 and passim). Equal preference for matrilateral and patrilateral cross-cousin marriage is the stated norm, but statistically, MBD marriage seems to be more common than FZD marriage.10

From the point of view of social organization, no doubt the most distinctive feature of the entire east coast region, extending from Kottiyar-Bay (Trincomalee) in the north to Arugam Bay (Pottuvil) in the south, is the system of dispersed named matrilineages which are known individually as kuṭi. With the exception of Christian groups in some places, notably the Portuguese Burghers and other Catholic inhabitants of the town of Batticaloa itself, some pattern of matrilineal affiliations is recognized within every Hindu caste and in every Moorish community in the region. The first feature of the kuṭi which local people cite is usually the rule of matriliny: tāy vali or peñ vali, literally ‘mother way’ or ‘woman way’. The kuṭi is also readily seen as exogamous by informants, and statistical evidence shows this to be remarkably true, except among some kuṭimai castes, particularly the Nāvitar Barbers.11 The rule of kuṭi exogamy is coextensive with the logic of the Dravidian kinship structure which entails that no real or classificatory cross-cousin will ever belong to Ego’s matriline. Members of a kuṭi are not likely to have any awareness of, or interest in, segmentary genealogical links between themselves and shared apical ancestors, and only occasionally is there evidence of explicit and rather shallow sublineages (known variously as wairuwar, vakuttuwar, kuṭṭam, kattara). Some matrilineages are limited to specific localities while others, larger and usually more prestigious, are distributed here and there over a 60-mile length of the coast.

Among the Tamils, each caste is subdivided among a set of distinctively named constituent matrilineages, so that, apart from a few recurring kuṭi names and the anthropologically-elicted residue of unheard-of clans, it is usually possible to identify a person’s caste indirectly by first ascertaining the name of his kuṭi. There is a widespread ideal model of seven kuṭis within every Tamil caste and of eighteen kuṭis amongst the Moors, but in fact their local number varies a great deal. In each locality, a certain number of Moorish kuṭis carry the same names as high caste Tamil kuṭis, but the majority are distinctively Moorish. The kuṭi names themselves are quite diverse and some of them are nearly inscrutable: among the high castes they range from the conspicuously kingly and martial kuṭi names found among the Mukkanvars (e.g. Kāliṅka, an Orissa dynasty; Patalīyānta, leader of armies) to the more heterogeneous but more priestly kuṭi names of the Vēḷāḷars (e.g. Kanṭan, Lord, one who saw; Attiyā or Attiyay, reader of scripture) and the clear sectarian markings of the Viraśāva Kurukkal kuṭi also sometimes referred to as kōṭtrim’s (e.g. Cāníkamar, cognate with the Lingāyat Jangama priest of Mysore; Tēcāntira kurukkal, foreign kurukkal). In the middle of the caste hierarchy (Smith, Fishermen, Climbers) kuṭi names occasionally borrow elements from those of higher castes, but they commonly show a wide mixture of vague honorifics (e.g. Ćuriyaṭappan, solar chief; Vīramānikkan, heroic gem) and much more folksy names (e.g. Kārutakkam, dark virgin; Cummāttukkatthu, wearing a head-pad for carrying loads). Among the service castes, kuṭi names are generally regional place-names which are said to designate the geographical origins of local sub-groups (e.g. Tālaṅkutu Vannān, Paṭṭimēṭu Paraiyān). Moorish kuṭi names may range from the kingly (e.g. Racāmpillai, royal descent), to the geographical (e.g. Vatākkana, northern), to the occupational (e.g. Ėṭivi, carpenter, not related to actual occupation), to the kintyped (e.g. māmanappillai, ‘MB’s or FZH’s child’, i.e., cross-cousin) to the personal (e.g. Ammanāccci, granny).

A detailed account of kuṭi names cannot be undertaken here (see McGilvray 1974), but despite their richness and diversity, it is evident that relatively few have any clear reference to ancestral females. There are no matrilineal personal names,12 no revered clan origin-places, no jointly held houses or lands,13 no tutelary clan deities, and no ancestral cults. In these and other respects the contrats with Nayar society in central Kerala are quite marked, while there are greater resemblances to northern Kerala Nayars, Tiyyars, and Mappillas (Gough 1961; Aiyappan 1944).

Today, kuṭi affiliation continues to have relevance in marriage choice and in the management of Hindu temples and Muslim mosques. Each kuṭi selects one or more representative elders, an office termed Vunakkar by the Tamils and Maraikkār by the Moors, to sit on the management committee of the caste temple or neighbourhood mosque. Frequently one or more kuṭis may assert traditional pre-eminence in temple or mosque affairs, a status typically dramatized and validated by some conspicuous prerogative of ritual or ceremonial which is denied to other kuṭis, such as the right to receive the first offerings from the deity or the right to erect a feasting enclosure (καντίρι παντάλ) in front, rather than to the side, of the mosque. Yalman correctly saw evidence of this tendency in his brief visit to the east coast (Yalman 1967: 326), but my own research has revealed that considerable attention has also been traditionally paid to elaborately graded marks of honour (vāricai) in the conduct of Tamil domestic rituals. The higher castes and their kuṭis were allotted specific numbers of sym-
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bolic household decorations, such as decorated pots arrayed on the roof
and cloths hung beside the doorway, as well as prescribed services from the
kuṭiṃai service castes.

3.3. Ambiguities of caste and matriclan

Some striking contrasts with our standard picture of South Indian, particularly Tamil, caste systems are evident in this region. What Yalman first
noted (1967: 329) in the statements of his informants from the Tamil
village of Tambiluvil six miles south of Akkaraiappattu, and what I quickly
encountered in the initial stages of my own fieldwork, was the relative
looseness and flexibility of statements about the conceptual boundary
between a caste (cāṭi) and a matriclan (kuṭi). Both terms are, of course,
highly polysemic and contextual: cāṭi (jāṭi) in the most general sense
means 'genera, kind, type', and kuṭi can be traced back to the root-
meanings of 'hut, house, household, family dependents' (Winslow 1862:
314). As Yalman reports, people may refer one moment to 'Mukkuvar
kuṭi' or 'Vēḷāḷ kuṭi' and refer a moment later to specific matriclans
within these categories. Yalman's tentative finding was that, among the
higher groups, the expected clear endogamous boundaries between ranked
bilaterally-constituted castes were absent on the east coast. Instead, the
emphasis seemed to be on a ranked set of kuṭis, some sharing caste names,
some having distinct names of their own, which blurred the lines between
presumptive caste categories such as 'Vēḷāḷ', 'Kurukkal', and 'Mukkuvar'.
Yalman also reported that local informants described the marriage arrange-
ments between the exogamous kuṭis as being explicitly hypergamous, with
women of certain lower clans having enduring hypergamous marriage links
with men of certain higher clans.

Given these assumptions, and noting his experience in the Kandyana
highlands where villagers spoke clearly of endogamous and hypergamous
marriage strategies which would ensure the protection and possible
enhancement of 'good blood', Yalman suggested that social organization
on the east coast could be interpreted as a further instance of how a uni-
lineal descent principle coupled with hypergamy could render the principle
of bilateral caste endogamy 'unnecessary'. The matrilineal kuṭi could be
seen to carry all, or at least the largest share of, ritual status for its mem-
bers, whose hierarchical resource was further protected by hypergamy, the
'second line of defense' (Yalman 1967: 179) even in bilateral caste situ-
ations. The model was applicable to the Malabar Coast as well. It even
seemed to account for the fuzziness of local statements about social

... since the status-bearing unit can be a single lineage with
hypergamous connections and it may be difficult in the continuous
descending steps of status to say exactly where one "caste" category ends
and the next begins' (1967: 366).

Yalman's interpretation was quite ingenious, and it naturally served as a
starting framework for my own research in the region. At the same time,
too, some of the writers discussed earlier were beginning to argue their
case for 'coded natural substance' symbolism as the indigenous underlying
rationale for all South Asian caste systems. There seemed good reason to
think that Yalman's 'hypergamous-unilineal-purity' thesis would form the
basis of a more detailed ethnographic analysis which would also detect a
theory of coded natural substance, probably 'blood', as the carrier of
intrinsic ritual status or purity. Ultimately, however, neither of these
frameworks provided a satisfactory account of the data which emerged
from fieldwork.

The first theory to be discarded was Yalman's, with its crucial postulate
of hypergamy. It is inscrutable why his informants spoke of hypergamy, as
no such pattern of hypergamous marriage, ideal or actual, was found to
exist between castes or kuṭis. This finding is corroborated by Hiatt (1973:
235) and was cross-checked statistically against marriage samples
(McGilvary 1974: 272) to eliminate the possibility of bias in informants'
statements. Instead of hypergamy, one finds reciprocal marriage exchange
(or 'alliance') between pairs of high-ranking matriclans in particular
localities. The relationship between matriclans strongly linked by marriage
is sometimes described as maccān maccinaan (cross-cousins, i.e., brothers-in-
law), kontān koṭuttān (receiving and giving), or cóṭi cóṭi (paired up), just
as the ensuing terminological restrictions on marriage between certain
clans are expressed as anṇan tampi (elder and younger brother) or akkā
takkācci (elder and younger sister) relationships. 14

Yet, despite the empirical inadequacy of Yalman's account of
hypergamy, there was still reason to suppose that the observed symmetrical
marriage exchange between prestigious local matriclans might reflect some
underlying ideology of the conservation of purity or natural substance, as
suggested by the work of Yalman, Dumont, and the 'substance-code'
theorists, which would provide a key to some of the unusual aspects of
culture and social structure in the Batticaloa region. The evidence from
fieldwork in Akkaraiappattu, reinforced by briefer visits to other parts of the
region, pointed in particular to five seemingly anomalous, but interrelated,
features. First, it was necessary to account for the fact that Tamils of the
high caste stratum in Akkaraiappattu unabashedly contracted marriages,
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indeed even major kuṭi marriage exchange alliances, across putative caste boundaries, thus violating the expected rule of caste endogamy. The prevalence of this practice was found to vary significantly in different areas of the Batticaloa region, but when it occurred, it did not seem to diminish the sense of caste identity of the spouses or their offspring in the eyes of the local people. Second, informants consistently asserted that caste affiliation, like matrilineal membership, descended strictly in the female line (āy vaiṭi, pen vaiṭi), rather than bilaterally as one commonly finds in other South Asian caste systems. Third, there were vague and contradictory statements from local informants as to the genealogical ‘path’ or spread of ritual pollution following a death, in striking contrast to the role of the unilineal kin group as a community of mourners in many parts of South Asia. Fourth, it appeared that Hindu purity and pollution ideas were generally less pervasive and unitary, more varied and context-linked, than a reading of the South Asian ethnographic literature might lead one to expect. This fact helped to frame the fifth and final problem: namely, that despite considerable historical and ethnographic evidence of closely regulated symbols and privileges of caste and kuṭi hierarchy in domestic life, in marriage alliance, and in temple ritual, there seemed relatively few clearly defined caste and kuṭi ‘interests’ which could account for this concern.

4. Beliefs About Purity and Bodily Substance

4.1. Blood, sex and reproduction

In the hope of finding some indigenous conceptual basis for these atypical patterns, I turned, particularly in my second fieldwork trip, to the investigation of beliefs about bodily substances, ideologies of caste and matrilineal descent, and theories of purity and pollution. Some of the information which follows was gleaned from casual remarks, but much of it comes from discussions with members of a non-random sample of 35 informants selected for their previously proven reliability and their likely familiarity with, and interest in, local ethnophysiological and medical theories.15

Judging from Yalman’s data on the Kandyyan Sinhalese, and from the recent ‘cultural accounts’ of caste and kinship in Bengal, Tamilnadu, and Jaffna mentioned previously, it seemed reasonable to expect that a theory and a symbolism of blood, more than that of any other natural substance, would dominate local discussions of descent and group status. However, when I attempted to raise this topic in conversations I found people were both apathetic and embarrassed. The Tamil words for blood (trattam, utaram) in the Batticaloa region would appear to invite stronger initial cognitive associations with menstrual pollution and the butcher’s shop than with descent and purity. It later became evident that blood played an important role in thinking about bodily health and vitality but that ‘purity of blood’ was not a basic symbol of social hierarchy in this region. Indeed, comments about blood and ethnophysiology were uniform in some ways, but strikingly varied in other respects (see also McGilvray 1982a).

Elements of the Ayurvedic medical tradition (e.g. Caraka 1949) continue to exert a strong effect upon common belief and curing practices here but, as in other areas of the island, some of these ideas have been subjected to local reinterpretation (Obeyesekere 1976). Blood is recognized to be the primary transformation of food within the body, the source of all bodily substance and strength. The basic understanding of this process can be outlined as follows: food, which in Sri Lanka is epitomized by boiled rice, is taken into the alimentary tract and converted to anmaracam or chyle, which in turn is converted partially into blood and partially into waste (malarn). It is the strength and quantity of the blood which accounts for the strength (pelan, sakti) and growth (vararci) of the body. The English word ‘force’ (pōs) has crept into the local Tamil vocabulary, and one often finds it used to characterize the state of the blood. In this context, the term pōs connotes the energy, the amount, and the pressure of the blood present in the body. The process of physiological maturation from infancy to adulthood is a concomitant of the increasing ‘force’ of the blood in the body, and the process of ageing and senescence is believed to be the direct consequence of the declining energy/quantity/pressure of the blood.16

Both the nature of one’s diet and of one’s physical environment have recognized effects upon the internal state of the body, and both are related, with varying degrees of sophistication by different informants, to the influence of the three Ayurvedic humours (muppiṭṭi): namely, nāṭam or vāyu (wind, the source of motion), pittam ( bile, the source of heat), and kēṭṭanam (phlegm, the connective or aqueous humour). One’s daily regimen, the environment of one’s work, and the components of one’s diet all convey different proportions of the three humours, which are imperfectly associated in most ordinary thinking with heating (ciṭṭu), cooling (kūlir), and dermatologically eruptive (kiranṭi) qualities. As one might expect, the ideal of bodily health is based upon an elusive equilibrium of such qualities: not too much heat, not too much coolness, not too much eruptive quality.
Theories of conception in this region contend that a woman is fertilized when male semen (caukkilam, intiriyam, vintu, kānappal, etc.) mixes in the womb with female semen (caurontiam, nātām, but frequently unnamed). In accord with a widespread South Asian belief, male semen is described as a refined form, or distillation (vatippu), of the blood, following some traditional ratio, e.g. blood : semen = 40 : 1 or 60 : 1. There seems to be no specific organ of seminal production, except, perhaps, the brain itself, which is also the place where male semen is stored and conserved. Thick, white, unexpended semen, like the blood from which it is made, has 'force' (pōsē) which makes for healthy children, and the loss of semen drains the body of blood, i.e., strength and substance. If semen can be retained, particularly during adolescence and young manhood, its vital qualities can be redirected internally toward greater physical, and ultimately spiritual, development. Informants were less certain about the nature of female semen; it was generally connected with blood and sometimes assumed to be quite similar to male semen. Some informants considered it to come from the chest or the womb; some felt it was less important in conception than male semen; and a few were unfamiliar with the concept altogether.

Conception occurs with the combination of the sexual fluids during that part of her monthly cycle when the woman’s uterine ‘flower’ is open to admit them. In the man, the heat of sexual desire ‘melts’ the semi-solid reservoir of semen at the top of the head, and it then flows, in some accounts via an intermediate storage sac in the navel, to the penis. The testicles, although recognized as related to sexuality in some way (e.g. in the gelding of bullocks by crushing the testes), were never connected by informants with the sexual act.17 There was no corresponding account of the internal flow of female semen or of its physical properties. During orgasm, both the man and the woman ejaculate their sexual fluids into the womb, where they mix to produce the beginnings of an embryo in the form of a bubble (kumūtā), a lump (kaṭṭi), or a sprout (mulat). A few informants, mostly curing specialists, added that the three Ayurvedic humours, and particularly the pirāṇa vāyuvu (wind of life), were also present at conception. If a specific source of uṣṭi (life, spirit) was known, it was always said to be the pirāṇa vāyuvu, an element which pervades the womb from the surrounding universe, not from either parent. Only four informants out of the sample of 35 denied any knowledge of a female substance involved in conception, and only one informant mentioned the idea of the male ‘seed’ implanted in the female ‘field’ as recorded in Bengal and as described in the Laws of Manu (Manu IX, 31–56; Fruzzetti & Østør 1976; Dube 1978).

Some informants also cited an interesting assortment of additional factors which were conducive to successful impregnation, ranging from unity of mind, to simultaneous orgasm, to forceful seminal ejaculation. However, the important point is that conception is seen as fundamentally bilateral, involving substances from both parents. Few characteristics of the child are felt to be entirely determined by the conception itself, except for the sex of the child. Informants mentioned four different theories of how the sex of the child is determined at conception: whether intercourse takes place on even (male) versus odd (female) days following the end of menstrual pollution, whether the parents are breathing through the right (male) versus left (female) nostril at the moment of conception, whether the first sexual fluid to enter the womb is male or female, and whether relatively greater amounts of male or female semen is deposited in the womb. All subsequent gestation and development of the embryo draws solely upon the resources and bodily substance (blood) of the mother. Subsequent intercourse during the first part of the pregnancy is allowed, but it has no effect of nourishing or contributing to the embryo.18 The momentary quality of the paternal contribution, as contrasted with the mother’s intimate burden of carrying and nourishing the child through pregnancy, is recognized in the well-known proverb: Aiyāvukku aintu nimisham, ammāvükku pattu nātām, ‘Five minutes for the father, ten months for the mother.’

Within the womb, the child receives a continuous, direct blood transfusion from the mother via the opening (jāvēram) all foetuses are believed to have at the top of the head.19 By the time the pregnancy is approaching term, the child is felt to be receiving liquid food (amārcacam) via the umbilical cord, which is thought to develop late. Many informants identified the blood which assists and nourishes the foetus as the mother’s menstrual blood, seen as clean and beneficial blood accumulating in her womb during the pregnancy, rather than flowing out as a notoriously polluting substance during normal menstruation. After childbirth, the mother nurses the infant with breast milk, another transformation of her own blood, and later she prepares and feeds the child solid food with her own hands.20

As the child grows toward adulthood, nutrition from food supports the constant production of blood, from which all other bodily substances are produced. It is only when the body is nearing its adult size and form that
the production of blood begins to surpass the body’s need for natural building material, and it is at this point that sexual maturation occurs. The onset of a girl’s first menstruation is both a result and a proof of the fact that her body now has excess or waste blood (kalivirattam) to dispose of. A boy’s seminal emissions are likewise a sign of nearing maturity and vitality of the blood, but he is strongly enjoined to conserve this blood (semen) and transmute it into greater bodily, intellectual, and spiritual power. This women cannot do, and for good (indigenous) reasons. While few informants were able to offer a complete explanation of the menstrual cycle, there was considerable agreement that, without it, women would have a dangerously high level of blood in their bodies, much higher than that of men. The monthly flow of menstrual blood from women is said to be a mechanism, instituted by Lord Īśvara, which insures that women’s natural surplus of blood (and hence physical strength and vitality, including sexual desire) is regularly drained away, allowing males to retain control and mastery over women. ‘If it were not for her monthly period,’ said one local Hindu Ayurvedic practitioner, ‘five men could not hold one woman down.’

In later life, the decline in the quantity, vitality, and ‘force’ of the blood begins to have deleterious effects upon health and sexual vigour. The menopause occurs when the female blood supply is no longer in excess, and the early death of some men is attributed to their reckless expenditure of semen in middle and old age. Age is also felt to be accompanied by changes in bodily heat, a factor which limits the acceptable age of marriage partners. Local thinking on this matter is not altogether uniform, but a five- to ten-year superiority in age is considered essential for the husband. A man between the ages of 20 and 30 is considered to be at the peak of his natural powers, and this enables him to exercise proper control over his bride, who will be between the ages of 15 and 20. Greater age in marriage also works to the advantage of the man, it is felt, because he benefits from the sexual relations he has with a strong-blooded young woman. Sexual relations with a woman who is older than her partner will prove extremely deleterious, even fatal, to the man. One explanation offered for this is that individuals, as they lose blood in ageing, simultaneously gain in bodily heat, ‘just as a pressure-lamp becomes hotter and hotter as the fuel is used up’. A severe imbalance in bodily heat between sex partners is harmful to both, but a younger man is felt to be particularly vulnerable, it seems.

In an attempt to crystallize some of the ideas which had been put forth, I asked, “Whose blood, the father’s or the mother’s, flows in the veins of the child?” Opinion was sharply and fairly evenly divided three ways, and in retrospect it seems that the question in this form had scarcely occurred to many informants. Some, who had earlier stressed the potency of male semen in conception, said that semen was a concentrated form of the father’s blood, hence the child shared the father’s blood (see Banks 1957: 115, and David 1973a: 523, for the same view in Jaffna). But others vehemently opposed this view, saying that the tiny amount of father’s semen was insignificant in comparison with the mother’s massive transfusion of blood during pregnancy and lactation. The child’s blood was definitely that of the mother, according to this second view. The third viewpoint was that both parents had contributed elements of bodily substance, making the blood of the child a bilateral composite of the mother’s and the father’s blood. Even in the latter case, no theory of paired maternal utampu (body) and maternal uyir (life, spirit) was articulated, although one person said that the father’s semen governed the uruvam (form, shape) of the child.

My question about the child’s blood was seen by some as rather obsessive and academic, for it left out of consideration the whole dimension of maternal emotional attachments (ampu, love; pācam, ties; puru, attachment). The maternal connection is actually paramount in all discussion of childhood attachments, it recurs in discussion of dowry and matriclal residence, and it again emerges in discussion of the spread of death pollution. Although I never recorded the statement that the matriclal residence rule made the in-marrying fathers and sons-in-law ‘strangers’ to the household (cf. Yalman 1967: 286–7), the obverse point of view, that the women in their natal/dowry houses in their natal villages form the stable conceptual core of the household, was frequently voiced by informants. The expression tāy pācam (maternal bonds) is probably something of a cliché everywhere in the Tamil-speaking world, but in the Batticaloa region, where the matriclal household provides a kind of socio-spatial continuity, where dowry is the main channel of property transmission, and where the matrilineal clan plays a role in social identity, it seems to reflect a more substantive feature of the social structure. Reasoning about conception and sharing of parental blood can, and does, diverge along matrilateral, patrilateral, and bilateral lines, depending upon which elements of the ethno-reproductive theory are stressed. Yet, although local theories of bodily substance are not uniform, and the behavioural reality can vary a great deal, the child’s connections and emotional bonds are typically said to be much stronger with the mother than with the father.

In fact, the notion that members of a single kinship category, matriclan,
or caste might actually think of themselves as ‘sharers’ or ‘uniters’ of unique blood or natural substance, as David (1973a) has argued for Jaffna, was untenable in the face of what informants said. No one spoke of any qualities of the blood aside from the medical or diagnostic ones. Blood can be reduced, thinned, weakened, or have an imbalance of Ayurvedic humours, in which case the individual’s health and vitality must suffer; or blood can be copious, thick, strong, and in Ayurvedic equilibrium, in which case one’s health must prosper. No one voiced a belief in the ‘purity’ of blood; in fact, as with the nonexistent institution of hypergamy, there is no readily recognized way to speak about such a concept in the local language. I asked whether the blood of particular matriclans and castes could be said to have distinctive ‘qualities’ (kunam) but the reply was consistently negative: instead, informants said ‘Blood is all the same’ (rattam onru ian). The stereotypic behavioural traits attributed to certain castes (e.g. Goldsmiths as dishonest, or Drummers as sorcerers) are often seen as the result of seizing opportunities associated with their caste-occupational milieu (e.g. tampering with weights, or access to human corpses). The public reputation of certain families for temperament or moral character is sometimes expressed in terms of good or bad ‘quality’ (kunam), e.g. in discussing possible marriage partners for one’s son or daughter, but the exact focus of this ‘quality’ is never easy to disentangle. It arises from both environment and heredity in the broadest sense of the term, but it is not discussed or explained in the language of ‘blood’. In other words, neither blood, nor any other indigenous category of natural bodily substance seems to operate as the conceptual focus of caste or matriclan membership in the Batticaloa region.

4.2. States of purity and pollution

It is an assumption shared by Yalman (1963; 1967: 137–8) and Dumont (1970: Ch. 2; Dumont and Pocock 1959) that temporary states of individual pollution arising out of contact with birth, menstruation, death, and other such contaminating junctures with ‘organic life’ (Dumont 1970: 47) are assimilated to, and equated with, states of caste pollution, thus defining the essential purity/pollution continuum which underlies caste society. It is certainly true that high caste informants in the Batticaloa region will say that the kutimai castes (Barber, Washerman, Drummer) are immersed in the inescapable contamination associated with cutting hair, bleaching menstrual cloths, and conducting burials. But while there is a standard term (tutakku) which refers to states of individual or group ‘ritual impurity’, including the polluted condition of the lowest castes, there is no corresponding vocabulary for ‘ordinary’ and ‘enhanced’ states of purity, such as described for Havik Brahmins, Coorgs, and KonśākxAA Vējājars in India.

The Tamil dictionary lists a number of terms for ‘purity’, but only one or two words are in common use here. The most general word is cattam, which may connote secular cleanliness, lack of admixture, or ritual fastidiousness, depending upon context. A second word is tuppuravu, which often connotes secular cleanliness and is more often heard in its negative form, tuppuravillai (uncleanliness). Actually, the vocabulary of purity in Batticaloa seems underdeveloped and under-utilized, while the ethnosemantic domain of uncleanliness and impurity is far more open-ended than most South Asian ethnographic sources might lead one to expect. Here, the most general word is acuttam, the opposite of cattam, which must be similarly defined by context. Specific types of physical dirtiness include aikkku and uthai (filth, stain, contamination), kuppai (rubbish), and narakal (revolting substance, e.g. excrement, entrails). Occasionally one hears the word tittu or the expression vittakku tiram (‘away from the house’), referring specifically to states of menstrual pollution. The most universal word for ‘ritual pollution’, however, is tutakku, which refers to the varying degrees of metaphysical contamination resulting from sexual relations, menstruation, childbirth, and, especially, death. The removal of tutakku must invariably culminate in the bathing of the entire body, talai mulakiratu (‘head bathing’). As noted in Jaffna (Ryan 1980: Ch. 4), the vocabulary of ritual pollution also tends to overlap with that of moral and spiritual defects, so that in Batticaloa, tutakku is sometimes called kuram (fault, blemish) or tōsham (malevolent influence).

Although the processes of conception and the nature of blood had not proven to be the key to local thinking about the identity and ranking of castes and kutis, it still seemed possible during fieldwork that an underlying theory of purity or bodily substance might inform local attitudes and behaviour in situations of severe ritual pollution, particularly death pollution. It is known from a number of South Asian ethnographic and shastric sources that patrilineally related kinsmen typically constitute a community of pollution when a member dies (e.g. Beck 1972: 4; Banks 1957: 117; the sapinda rule of Manu V. 59), and a corresponding matrilineal observance of death pollution is known to occur in the Nayar matriclan, the taravād (Gough 1959; 1961: 323–4). In the Batticaloa
region, death pollution (tutakku) is observed for 31 days by all Hindu
castes except the Viraçaiva Kurukkals, who claim a shorter period (12 to
15 days) or none at all.

It seemed reasonable to expect a substantial regional consensus as to
the spread of pollution at death, since bereavement is so universal a life
experience and one so governed by cultural rules. Instead, as with the
interpretation of the blood death, there was a striking divergence of
opinion, and many informants were as surprised as the anthropologist to
discover that outlooks varied so greatly. A detailed analysis of the sur-
prising variety of views on death pollution would require an essay in itself,
but a general classification of responses is summarized in Table 2. Almost
half of the informants made explicit reference to the principle of matriline,
\( \text{úv valli} \) or \( \text{pen valli} \), or the pollution diagrams which they drew showed
obvious matrilineal reasoning. Many of the bilateral opinions stressed the
idea that the most severe pollution affected the nuclear kin group (spouse,
siblings, parents, and children), and especially the residents of the ‘death
house’, cāvītu, but approximately half of the bilateral opinions also gave
secondary or partial acknowledgement of the matrilineal idea (e.g. effects
upon daughters’ but not sons’ children, or sisters’ but not brothers’ chil-
dren). The patrilineal principle, however, had a strong minority of
defenders, a few of whom said that pollution follows the father’s blood
(semen), but most of whom could offer no theoretical justification com-
mensurate with the force of their convictions. Several of the latter were
forced into perplexed silence in public discussions instigated by the
anthropologist, although their views remained unshaken. There was also a
group of ‘other’ opinions which were idiosyncratic, including several state-
ments that the principle of pollution must vary depending on the sex of
the deceased.28

There was no standard genealogical depth to the pollution, and no one
viewed the matriclan, the sublineage, or any other specific grouping as the
‘unit’ of pollution. The justifications offered for the matrilineal spread of
death pollution sometimes mentioned matrilateral ethnoreproductive ideas
(e.g., uterine blood), but most often they appealed to an image of the
matrilocal household and its linked mothers and children as a sort of
enduring socio-spatial ‘establishment’ cemented by ties of matrilateli
and physical propinquity. Unlike the minority patrilineal view, the matri-
lineal theory of pollution made constant reference to the importance of
emotional bonds (anpu, pācam, etc.) in defining who was susceptible to
death pollution. Sometimes the matrilineal stress in these remarks was
unduly formulaic, so that it occasionally became awkward to account for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Matrilineal</th>
<th>Bilateral</th>
<th>Patrilineal</th>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
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children’s pollution on the death of the father. The father is unques-
ionably a source of pollution for the household when he dies. All are
agreed that the chief mourner should be the eldest son, but the matrilineal theory
of pollution stipulates that only the daughters’ children observe tutakk. 
Ideas of sexual/commensal intimacy and emotional attachment are cited as
reasons for the pollution of the spouse, who nonetheless remains fully
susceptible to pollution from all deaths in his or her natal family. Not
unsurprisingly in such a matrilocal society, there is no belief that the wife’s
bodily substance is metaphysically assimilated to that of her husband at
marriage, nor is there any element of the marriage rite which could bear
such an interpretation, such as David (1973a) describes for Jaffna (see also
Pollution transmitted via affinal connections with a member of the matri-
local group is always intensified when there is a close reinforcing kinship
link, as when a daughter’s husband is also her true MBS or FZS. It is fre-
cently said that, failing such kinship reinforcement, such in-laws need to
observe only eight days of real pollution. Pollution is tacitly recognized in
such varying degrees, although there is a countervailing concern to main-
tain a public image of greater propriety through seemingly stricter
observance.

4.3. General implications

It will be useful to consider the implications of what has been presented so
far. Fieldwork has revealed two major drawbacks to reliance upon the
‘purity’ and ‘coded-substance’ approaches in the Batticaloa region. The
first problem is empirical: none of the key symbolic themes such as ‘blood
purity’, ‘hypergamy’, or ‘sharers of natural substance and code’ suggested
by various writers is found to be salient in local thinking about the nature
of castes and kutṣ. Although a negative idea of ‘caste impurity’ can be
directly observed in local attitudes toward the lowest castes, whose duty it
is to remove polluting states and substances from the higher castes, the
positive attribute of ‘caste purity’ is only indirectly evident in the actions
and statements of the higher castes. We shall see later that such an idea of 'caste purity', in the sense of ritual excellence or the right to perform certain special services for the deity, is only one component of the wider ideological field in which castes and kūṭis compete for rank. Complex indigenous theories about blood and reproduction are important in an ethnomedical framework, but they do not completely rationalize or clarify the nature of matrilineal descent. Instead, like local theories of the spread of ritual pollution, they are open to widely divergent interpretations. In general, local thinking about blood, descent, and pollution constitutes a more complex, more disjunct, more contextual, and more open-ended ethnosemantic field than the parsimonious theories of purity and natural substance would tend to imply.

The second type of drawback is heuristic: to assume the existence of a pervasive and coherent ideology of purity or substance underlying the behavioural reality simply leads to erroneous interpretations. Yalman's account of east coast matriclans as purity-conserving hypergamous units bears witness to the pitfalls of such assumptions. Many of the same assumptions impeded my own understanding of social organization in the Batticaloa region, and it is fair to say that a great deal of my time and effort has been consumed in examining these relatively unproductive hypotheses.

5. MUKKUVAR VANNIMAI

I now propose to formulate a more accurate and fruitful picture of caste and matriclan structure in the Batticaloa region, one which stresses the nature of political dominance within a regional frame of reference and which incorporates a historical component to explain some of the unusual features of culture and social organization which are found there. In this account, ideas of purity and natural substance will be treated, not as uniform, universal conceptions immanent in South Asian culture, but as historically contingent, socially transmitted ideas, the strength and configuration of which depends considerably upon competing interests and ideologies within a regional setting.

5.1. Mukkuvars

Let us consider first what is known of the major high caste groups. The politically dominant Tamil group throughout the Batticaloa region as a whole have been the Mukkuvars, also known by the more literary title, Mukkuvar. A similarly named caste is found in coastal areas of Puttalam, Mannar, Mullaitivu, and Jaffna (Casie Chitty 1834: 274–80; Raghavan 1971: 152–61), as well as along the coasts of central and north Kerala, where they are recognized as hereditary fishermen (Anantha Krishna Iyer 1909: 266–76; Thurston 1909 vol. V: 106–17). They seem never to have considered themselves fishermen in Batticaloa, where they have settled in greater numbers than anywhere else in the island and have assumed the role of chiefs and powerful landlords (pōṭiyār). The Sinhalese historical chronicles mention numerous invasions of mercenary armies often including warriors from Kerala, particularly in the 12th and 13th centuries A.D. The earliest historical mention of the Mukkuvars is in the Dārividai-asna, which lists them as soldiers for King Parakramabahu II between 1236 and 1270 A.D. (Indrapala 1965: 180). A collection of regional traditions from Batticaloa, the Mattakkalappu Mānniyam (Nadarajah 1962), celebrates the arrival of the Mukkuvars under the banner of the rapacious Māgha (Mākōn), who claimed Kalinga ancestry. Māgha is known to have seized Polonnaruwa and the northern centres of Sinhalese power with an army of 'Tamilis and Keralas' in 1215 A.D. and to have held power for about 40 years (Indrapala 1965: 236ff.). After the 13th century, a number of rivalrous and recalcitrant regional chieftains claiming the title of Vanniyār arose on the margins of Sinhalese power in the North Central and Eastern Provinces, of which Batticaloa, under the Mukkuvars, was one. In the light of the available historical evidence, which is supported by folk traditions of the region, it seems likely that the Mukkuvars were granted lands and regional chieftships in Batticaloa as their reward for soldierly service in the armies of Māgha (Indrapala 1965: Ch. 5).

The oral and textual traditions of Batticaloa make constant reference to an ideal geographical model of seven constituent sub-chieftaincies (vannipam) within the region and to an ideal social model of seven constituent kūṭis within each caste. The origin of this pervasive model of 'seven' is clearly attributed to the ruling caste in one of its common epithets: ēkkukutu Mukkuvar, the 'seven-kūti Mukkuvars'. Today the system of Mukkuvar sub-chieftaincies within the Batticaloa region has almost disappeared under the impact of 300 years of European colonial rule, yet the temple histories which are still recited and the symbols of the Mukkuvar vannimai (regional chieftship of the Mukkuvars) leave no doubt as to the traditions of conquest and warrior dominance which distinguish this group.

We have seen earlier that the names of the Mukkuvar matriclans often celebrate kingly and martial honours, and the matrilineal succession to traditional political offices, such as the Urpoṭiyār of Akkarapattu, is a
recognized prerogative of certain Mukkuvar kūtis. The relative status of these kūtis varies within the region, and there is every likelihood that the Mukkuvar political system based on these clans was highly segmentary and fractious. Mukkuvars seldom make formal claim to membership of the Kshatriya varna, however, and it is significant that they share with all the castes of the region (except the Viracava Kurukkal) the 31-day period of death pollution associated with Sudras (Manu V. 83). Solid historical evidence of how the Batticaloa region was colonized and settled is still quite meagre, but legendary accounts credit the Mukkuvars with expelling the Timalar fishing caste and establishing strict dominance, which was symbolized in many aspects of domestic and public ritual and was maintained by possession and control of the largest share of the land. The distinctive term for a large landowner in Batticaloa is pōtiyār, and the late records of the Dutch East India Company show that the cooperation of the Mukkuvar ‘Chief Podies’ was very difficult to obtain (Burnand 1794).

5.2. Vēļālaars

The major rivals of the Mukkuvars for social preeminence are the Vēļālaars, the renowned high-status cultivating caste of Jaffna and Tamilnadu. There are certain clusters of Vēļālar villages which today claim never to have been subjected to traditional Mukkuvar chiefs, but this seems highly unlikely. It is true, however, that these Vēļālar centres have now largely succeeded in eliminating the tangible evidence of their political inferiority during the period of Mukkuvar rule. It is now known from both historical and ethnographic evidence that the Vēļālaars of Tamilnadu have a strong tradition of association and alliance with the Brahman priesthood of South India (Stein 1968; 1969; Barnett 1970). This South Indian evidence of Vēļālar religious connections is consistent with the traditions of Vēļālar settlement in the Batticaloa region, which assert that Vēļālaars were brought from India and installed as Saivite temple functionaries in perpetuity by local kings. They were not given ownership or control of the temples, but they were given responsibility for overseeing the conduct of temple ritual, and they cultivated a share of the temple lands as payment for their services. The songs and legends in the Maṭṭakalappu Mānmiyam reiterate the theme that conquering kings brought seven groups of Kōvačiyar (‘Herding Vaishyas’, one of the three kinds of Vaishyas which Vēļālaars claim as their puranic ancestors; see Thurston 1909 vol. VII: 361–6; Winslow 1862: 967) to perform such essential domestic tasks for the deity as polishing the vessels, tending the lamps, storing the temple’s grain, and carrying the palanquin of the god. The names of these seven groups are among the most common matriclan names of the Batticaloa Vēļālaars today (Nadarajah 1962: 70–1; Canagaratnam 1921: 35; Kandiah 1964: 435–6). The matrilineal clan organization of the Vēļālaars is similar in every respect to that of the Mukkuvars, and the Vēļālaars seem also to have followed the Mukkuvar law of inheritance and succession in every respect.  

The Vēļālaars are also believed to have been the first group to have brought with them an entourage of service castes. These are sometimes referred to as the ‘17 ciraiakah (slaves, dependents)’, but this is a stereotyped formula which greatly exceeds the number of service castes present today, i.e., the three kuṭimal castes of Barber, Washerman, and Drummer. The Mukkuvars, however, appropriated control of the service castes to themselves, though allowing the Vēļālaars to share their services. We have already seen that neither Vēļālaars nor Mukkuvars express an ideology of blood purity, but the Vēļālaars do make a point of dissociating themselves from the violent warrior heritage of the Mukkuvars. As in South India, the Vēļālaars cherish an image of being custodians and inheritors of the soil, peaceful and honourable. In fact the present aura of the Vēļālar title is very strong, even in this region which has sometimes been called Mukkuvarētēc (country of the Mukkuvars: Denham 1912: 226). This shows through in the caste opinion-ranking (Table 1) as well as innumerable instances of ‘borrowing’ and ‘attaching’ the Vēļālar title to castes and kūtis (Thurston 1909 vol. VII: 376–7; Yalman 1967: 329; McGilvray 1974: 29–33). Both Yalman and I experienced much initial befuddlement attributable not only to the fact that every landowner would like to consider himself a ‘Vēļālar’, on the spurious grounds that the name derives from veḷanmai (cultivation, especially of paddy), but also to the fact that the word ‘Vēļālar’ is a recognized component of certain kūtis names not specifically associated with the Vēļālar caste, e.g. Vēla Vēļālar kūti (‘Hunter’ Vēļālar, i.e., Vedda Vēļālar). It is clear that ‘Vēļālar’ prestige is gaining ground in most parts of Batticaloa today.

It will soon be apparent that, although the idea of distinct Vēļālar and Mukkuvar castes is often invoked by informants (and it is useful here for the purposes of exposition to maintain this convention), there is in reality a wider universe of respectable matriclans (‘good/big/high people’), some of which have explicit, textually-validated links to caste categories such as Vēļālar and Mukkuvar, and some of which are more free-floating and amenable to being assimilated to different ‘castes’, depending upon the circumstances in different localities. However, these ambiguities never blur
the line between the high caste stratum and the lower professional and service castes, so that, for example, the equivocal Cīhikāla kuti (‘Sinhalese kuti’) of the Mukkuvars and Vēḻāḷars is never confused with separate kutis of the same name occurring in the Smith, Wsberman, and Drummer castes.

It must also be added that the textually-specified duties of the Vēḻāḷars to perform the often menial tasks of temple service have, in the course of time, been relegated to a professional temple servant group known as Kövilār (people of the temple, kövi). The historical facts are very difficult to disentangle, but at the present time the Vēḻāḷars interpret their traditional mandate as amounting to supervision of the Kövilār, whom they prefer to treat as a separate and inferior caste. The Kövilār, however, maintain that they are themselves Vēḻāḷars of separate but equal origin. Significant numbers of Kövilār are found today only in the vicinity of the major regional temples, e.g. at Kokkātccōlai and at Tirukkōvi. They prefer to be historically identified as Kāralikāl Vēḻāḷars, as opposed to the others, who are given the contrasting designation of Marunikōr Vēḻāḷars.

5.3. Viracaiva Kurukkaḷ

The third component of the high caste stratum are the Viracaiva Kurukkaḷ, who are non-Brahman priests affiliated with the Viracaiva or Lingāyati sect of South India, particularly Karnataka (Mysore). Yalman was the first to suggest such a connection (1967: 331), and although the historical steps are not yet clear, he was quite right in pointing to the symbols of Viracaiva identity. The group is only partially endogamous today, made up of three intermarrying matriclans: Caṅkāmā Kurukkaḷ, Tēcántara Kurukkaḷ, and Canniyāci Kutti. There is conclusive evidence of a strong marriage exchange relationship between the first two kutis, which are the largest and most prestigious, although this endogamous tendency is much clearer in the genealogical record than in current practice. Today there are a great many marriages with members of the Vēḻāḷar and Mukkuvar castes. The two main Kurukkal matriclans are associated with two of the five traditional Lingāyat preceptors, and both groups are said to have a vague historical connection with the Viracaiva religious ‘throne’ or centre at Mallikārcuṇapuram in South India.34 The full name of the first kuti is Viramakēśvar Kurulinākanākāmā, which title displays the major symbols of Viracaiva doctrine,35 and it is this kuti which traditionally conducted an annual procession through the Akkarapattu region (pakuti) to purify and protect the villages from malevolent forces in the damp and ghostly month of Mārkāḷi (December–January). For this reason,

the senior Kurukkal in this matriline was sometimes called the Pakuti Kurukkal. The second major kuti, the Tēcántara (‘foreign, wandering’) Kurukkal, seem to have been exclusively temple priests, and there is some evidence of rivalry in this ritual division of labour.

The Viracaiva Kurukkal of Batticaloa stoutly maintain their superiority to Brahmans and the Brahmanical ‘varna doctrines’ (varupa vētam), reflecting an antipathy well known from South Indian ethnography (Parvathamma 1971). Their theory is that a truly desire-less (parrīḷāta) person, having received proper initiation (itiḻci, liṅkataram), having performed the prescribed daily and preprandial worship of the personal lingam stone which is worn in a silver casket suspended on a chain from the neck, and having realized true spiritual union with Civa, is impervious to all forms of contamination, from whatever source. The title of Caṅkamar (Jangama) is recognized as referring to this ideal: the word derives from caṅkamam, which means both ‘union’, e.g. union with Civa, and ‘moving’, e.g. the priest as a living abode of Civa (Winslow 1862: 387; Enthoven 1922: 373; Ramanujan 1973).

Today in the Batticaloa region, the lingam is worn only by practising temple priests and a few independent Caṅkamar Kurukkal, and many of the strict Viracaiva doctrines are abridged, qualified, or attenuated. Practically the entire group, or Kurukkal vamicam,36 as it is called, originates from a few small villages, and today its younger members are not taking up the priestly profession. Nonetheless, the long historical association of the Viracaiva Kurukkal with villages and temples on the east coast has bequeathed an ideological legacy of great significance when compared with the usual Brahman tradition. Some of the important features to keep in mind are the Viracaiva belief in the universal prophylactic quality of initiation and wearing the personal lingam, the emphasis upon the Viracaiva priest’s duty to protect and purify the village with his presence and his pāṭoṭakam (water from washing his feet), and the injunction that the Viracaiva priest should eat ordinary cooked food offered at such life-crises as birth, female puberty, and death.

Within the past 40 years, some members of the Kurukkal vamicam in the Akkarapattu area have begun to resist the principle of commensality on potentially polluting occasions such as the 31st day anuṭu domestic food offerings to the departed soul, and the response of the high caste population has been indignant and vocal. Most everyone agrees, regardless of their attitude, that until recently all Kurukkal shared the food at life-crisis rituals. Even in India, of course, the Lingāyat Jangama priest observes commensality only with other Lingāyat castes, whereas in Batticaloa there
are no such other groups with whom the Kurukkals might form a sectarian bloc. The Vīracaiva Kurukkals of the Batticaloa region found themselves in the puzzling situation of being patronized by the ruling castes in preference to Brahmans, yet being denied the underlying support of a true Vīracaiva sectarian social order. In this situation, the Kurukkals were able to maintain some of their own distinctive customs, such as burial in a seated posture with the lingam placed in the mouth of the corpse, but they were inevitably led to accommodate their Vīracaiva ideology to the realities of the local Mukkuvar and Vēḷāḷar-dominated caste system. Ironically, some perceptive members of the Kurukkal group, having come to a greater awareness of the theological and social implications of Vīracaivaism through exposure to modern South Indian religious literature, have become quite pessimistic about the laxity of their practices and the prospects for the maintenance of a Vīracaiva priesthood in the future. The alternative is the continued growth of a heterogeneous priesthood composed in large part of local caste members who officiate at their own caste-supported temples, but there are also indications that a Jaffna-based Brahmanical style, and in some cases Jaffna Brahman priests, may gradually supersede the Vīracaiva Kurukkals of Batticaloa.

5.4. The Mukkuvar—Vēḷāḷar relationship

Part of the difficulty in comprehending the structure and the dynamic of caste and matrilineal organization on the east coast arises out of one's initial temptation to mistake a particular constellation of local inter-caste and inter-clan relationships for a uniform regional pattern. The two high caste groups, Mukkuvar and Vēḷāḷar, are the dominant elements in the social structure of the Batticaloa region, but there may be either tension or accommodation, either a greater or lesser degree of perceived distinctiveness between them, depending upon their relative strength in different sub-regions, the evolution of joint political and ritual institutions in certain areas, and the degree to which local communities have come to recognize a wider range of respectable kūṭis in the high caste stratum, that is, beyond the typical list of seven kūṭis attributable to each caste. The Vīracaiva Kurukkals, on the other hand, have provided a distinctive, and not so markedly hierarchical, priestly idiom which has been congenial to both groups.

A dynamic model of relationships within the high caste stratum, based on an analysis of sub-regional variation and reinforced by a reading of the local legendary-historical traditions contained in the Mattakkalappu...
also cultivated the temple lands on behalf of the deity and retained a share of the crop for their own support. The priests in the textual sources are referred to as Antanar (Brahman), Pćurvar (performer of pūja), and Tampattar (apparently a reference to the Viraçaiva Kunukkals, whose ancient village is named Tampattai). No specifically Brahman settlement is ever mentioned in the textual and oral traditions, nor is there any such Brahman settlement today. In fact, there is a strong tradition that the Brahmins (Antanar) were ousted from one particularly famous temple for their alleged selfishness and aloofness (Nadarajah 1962: 77, 99).

The Mukkuvar ruling group also required artisan castes, various other professional castes, and above all domestic service castes (kutimai), to staff the sort of hierarchical agrarian society they wanted. The origin of the middle range professional castes, such as Smiths and Climbers, is not emphasized in the regional traditions, and most informants today imagine these groups to have come and settled voluntarily. However, it is the Vēḷāḷars who are usually credited with bringing and installing the kutimai castes, and it is clear that at some point the Mukkuvar rulers came to appropriate control of these low castes and to regulate their domestic and temple services as part of a widespread system of caste and kuṭi ‘honours’ (varicai).

The admittedly idealized circumstances I have described can be seen to have provided the basis for an ideological split between the Mukkuvars and the Vēḷāḷars, the former strongly asserting their right to political and economic domination, and the latter circumspectly developing their claim to greater purity and spirituality as the non-violent servants of the temple deity (Nadarajah 1962: 77–80, 99–101). Although one can see in this familiar elements of the tension between temporal and spiritual power evinced in medieval European society as well as in Dumont’s formulation of the Kshatriya–Brahman duality, the historical outcome in the Batticaloa region seems to have largely vindicated the martial caste, the Mukkuvars, and devalued the ideal of an aloc, non-reciprocating, and exclusive priesthood. The latter trend was in the interests of both the Vēḷāḷars and the Mukkuvars, neither of whom cared to subordinate their status to Brahmins. The Mukkuvars, as chiefly guardians and overseers of the major temples, naturally sought to confine priestly charisma to its purely service aspect, the performance of pūja in the restricted sanctum of the temple. The same Mukkuvar overseers even today insist that the priest must first confer the blessed offerings of the deity upon them before distributing it to others. The Vēḷāḷars, as the god’s household staff within the temple, similarly resisted any priestly encroachments upon their sacred duties and their day-to-day management of the temple economy.

With no independently endowed Brahman lands or villages in the entire region, and two landed castes vying keenly to demonstrate high rank through an accepted idiom of temple ritual which was largely predicated on the concept of command, there was really no prospect for widespread Brahman influence.39 Conversely, it is likely that few Brahmans would have been attracted by the idea of serving warrior patrons who had originated from a coastal fishing caste in South India, who had fought with notable ferocity in Māghta’s mercenary army, and whose social status was low in other parts of the island. The historical mixture of groups comprising the seven chiefdoms of the Vanni region of north-central and eastern Sri Lanka at the time of European contact is still not fully understood, but even assuming that Mukkuvar settlements in Batticaloa may have contained elements of other warrior groups, such as south Indian Vanniyārs (Indrapala 1965: Ch. 5), the general implication is that these ruling groups would not themselves have been likely carriers or patrons of a strongly Brahmanical world-view. It is easy to see how Viraçaiva doctrines, which are also espoused in somewhat attenuated form by such lesser priestly groups as Panṭārams in Tamilnadu and Kerala (Thurston 1909 vol. VI: 45–52; Anantha Krishna Iyer 1912: 396–8), as well as by numerous lower caste South Indian groups, including various castes of weavers (Dēvaṅga, Sēniyan, Padma Sālé, and Kaikolān) and fishermen (Bestha, Sembadavan — all references in Thurston 1909), would also prove compatible with the interests of the dominant groups in Batticaloa. And if Māghta himself held Viraçaiva beliefs, this would naturally have provided further impetus to this development (Liyanagamage 1968: Ch. 4).

5.5. The matrilineal rule

A final, but crucial, element in the set of background factors which I wish to bring forward is the ‘matrilineal principle’ (īṭṭa vall) and the specific role it plays in local thought and in local institutions. It is necessary to be especially careful here, since it is quite possible inadvertently to superimpose on the situation a set of assumptions or an image of matriliney derived from the anthropological literature which is quite different from the image the people themselves have of it. It is also necessary to recognize that many matrilineal institutions have vanished during the past 150 years under the impact of radically altered political and legal systems imposed at the national level. What remain today are mere traces of the
traditional Mukkuvar political and economic system, somewhat fuller vestiges of the caste and matricular basis of domestic and temple ceremonial, and a language, a rhetoric, of matrilineal identity and honour which draws upon the distinctive but somewhat jumbled corpus of oral/textual traditions represented in the Mattakkalappu Manniyam.

It has already been shown that there is no consistent underlying reference to matrilineal purity or encoded natural substance detectable in what informants say about castes and kuts, but that there is a pervasive belief in an idea of matriliney arising out of a combination of more subtle factors: maternal nourishment and affection, matrilocal residence, and maternal transfer of property through dowry. To this must now be added the theme of matrilineal inheritance and succession which, despite its increasing irrelevance to modern life, is still seen as a firmly rooted, historically sanctioned, jural rule. There is a certain legalistic quality to the phenomenon which I immediately confronted in informants' responses to preliminary questioning about why people in Batticaloa recognized matrilineal descent and about what the 'meaning' of this custom might be. It is also this aspect which seemed so unsatisfying from the point of view of the operant purity and/or coded-substance assumptions which I was initially trying to apply. Informants eagerly volunteered that 'matrilineal kinship reckoning' (iyh vall murai) was the basic rule, but when pressed for further justification of this practice they simply asserted it was the 'custom' (valakkam) or 'law' (caattam) of the Batticaloa region. Several more scholarly informants even referred me to a nineteenth-century codification of the Mukkuvar law written by a Colombo lawyer (Brito 1876). It was really only after the various 'symbolic' or crypto-cultural theories discussed at the beginning of this paper had been tested and been proven largely irrelevant that the explicit, formal, and 'legal' aspects of matriliney could be seen as important in their own right. I hasten to acknowledge that indigenous concepts of received usage such as 'law' or 'custom' are also fundamentally symbolic, but it appears that anthropologists can sometimes be too clever, passing up such conventional symbols in the search for hidden meaning.

The basic tenets of the traditional system of inheritance and succession for the entire Batticaloa region, in the few extant formulations which have come to light, are explicitly attributed to the Mukkuvars. Brito writes of the 'Mukkuvar Law' (1876). Burnand describes the matrilineal customs enforced by the Mukkuvar 'Head Podies' (1794), and a Tamil document (Anon.: n.d.) in the Sir Alexander Johnston Papers gathered in the early 19th century summarizes the Mukkuvarin caattivallamai (Mukkuvar caste customs). This set of Mukkuvar legal principles figured in some regional case law during the early British period, from which Brito extracted his codification, but the Mukkuvar law was ignored in the 1876 Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance and thereafter ceased to have legal force (H.W. Tambiah 1954: 157; Nadaraja 1972).

The Mukkuvar law recognized the categories of mutucom which was ancestral property transmitted through females, tetiyatettam, which was acquired property of either spouse, and citanam, which is dowry bestowed upon daughters. Similar terminology is found in the Jaffna legal code, the Thesawalamai, but the systems are not identical, most notably in the fact that in Jaffna the mutucom devolves upon sons (H.W. Tambiah 1950: Ch. 10; S.J. Tambiah 1973a: 111–27). A discussion of the detailed aspects of the Mukkuvar law and the Thesawalamai must not preoccupy us here. The essential thing to note is that the available evidence on the Mukkuvar law indicates that most property, especially land, was either classified as ancestral property (mutucom), which passed to one's sister's sons, or as dowry property (citam) which is passed to one's daughter. The historical significance of dowry is still a bit uncertain; the most detailed source, Brito's account, makes little reference to it, yet it is mentioned earlier (Anon. n.d.) and today it constitutes the primary mode of property transmission. A couple's acquired property (tetiyatettam) was disposable at the discretion of the husband, according to the sources, but it does not appear that traditional Mukkuvar society offered much practical scope for 'acquisition' apart from matrilineal inheritance and dowry. Burnand's description in particular stresses how the Mukkuvars jealously guarded their domination over a static agrarian order even, it seems, to the detriment of their own people.

The greater half of the Batticaloa fields still belong to the Mockwa families... & the remainder to their temples, to the Bellalas or to other Casts as Accomodissans [service tenures] & to the Maurmen. All the great & petty Headmen of the Mockawass keep it as an ancient custom not to sell any of their lands to other Casts, nor even to alienate them out of their families, however they may be burthened with debts, and it is a further custom with them... to hypothecate their Lands for these Debts. The other Pagan Inhabitants in the Country as well as some Maurmen follow the same custom, to the great prejudice of Agriculture.

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

(Jacob Burnand 1794: 57, 86, 138)

The extent to which Mukkuvar inheritance rules imply the former existence of a corporate land-holding matrilineal descent unit is also uncertain. Brito asserts that the eldest brother acted as chief manager of the matrilineal property, but today there is very little evidence of 'jointness' in household structure or cultivation patterns. It is possible that the estates of the wealthy ruling Mukkuvar pōṭiyārs were managed on collective matrilineal lines, while most Mukkuvar households were too poor to bother with such practices. There is no evidence, historical or contemporary, indicating the existence of joint matrilineal households, but there are a few examples of jointly held lands in scattered parts of the Batticaloa region today. These instances are extremely rare, and they do not conform to a single pattern. The principle of joint matrilineal management of land seems capable of being implemented in specific ways to serve particular material or civic interests. In a larger sense, of course, the general pattern of matrilineal inheritance would ensure that no land left the matrilineal group, although distribution of land among members of the group might be quite unequal. Regardless of how land may have been distributed among effective management units within the group, the idea of local matrilineal members as corporate 'share-holders' in the management of temples and in the sponsorship of rituals presupposes an effective internal system for collecting the necessary tithes and donations. Although such fund-raising today is sometimes transacted in money, the traditional medium was grain (paddy). It is easy to see how the liability of members to such an agrarian tithe would have contributed to an image of the group (i.e., a local or sub-regional segment of the group) as having at least some material basis in land. Similar 'shares' in temple ritual are found among the middle and lower castes, who were allotted particular tracts of land by the Mukkuvars in return for their services (lands called accomodessans in the early colonial records). Some of the common features of the group and caste 'shares' will soon become apparent.

5.6. Matrilineal rights, shares and honours

The language of Mukkuvar inheritance law says nothing about matrilineal blood or purity, but it says a great deal about the importance of matrilineal rights. The same word (urimai) means both 'right' and 'inheritance', which is to be expected in a society where virtually all traditional rights were secured by reference to some aspect of birth-status, e.g. pēn vattu urimai pēn pillai may be translated as 'woman with matrilineal rights' or 'female heir from a female line' (Brito 1876: 12). The very same word, urimai, is encountered whenever political and ritual privileges are being discussed, along with the word painku, which means 'share', and the word varciāi, meaning 'mark of honour'. The principle of matrilineal succession to office is largely irrelevant in the political sphere today, since the local and regional Mukkuvar chiefships and the councils of high caste village elders have no legal sanction. The traditional matrilineal rights to hold political office are nonetheless firmly linked to specific kuti, who have the 'right' to supply the incumbent. The succession to such office is said to pass from mother's brother to sister's son, but genealogical evidence shows that the adult male kuti membership is regularly called upon to decide the succession and ratify the outcome of the numerous disputes which arise. One of the few Mukkuvar political offices still in existence is that of the area chief (Uppōṭiyār) of Akkaraittongu, who must be drawn from Pañikkana kuti. It must be emphasized that it is not just the Uppōṭiyār's own restricted kin group, but the kuti as a whole, which shares the honour and prestige associated with the right to this office.

In other Mukkuvar settlements where the more distinctly political offices have vanished, and in Vēlālar and lower caste settlements where such offices either never existed or played a subordinate role in the Mukkuvar authority structure, the principle of matrilineal succession and formal kuti representation still operates in the selection of temple and mosque trustees. The actual mixture of kuti representation on temple and mosque boards varies greatly from locality to locality, but in every case it reflects a balance between two opposed tendencies: on the one hand, claims to individual kuti rights (urimai) to local preeminence backed by a local historical charter and force of numbers; on the other hand, aspirations for the local integration of all kuti as part of a single 'system' which would both reflect the larger political realities as well as fulfill the image of society as an organic instrument of collective worship. There are a number of different ways in which these two tendencies have been expressed in temples and mosques in different areas, and there has also been no lack of special pleading to demonstrate that the first tendency is merely a more concrete embodiment of the second.

For the Tamils in Batticaloa, as for Tamils elsewhere (Baker and Washbrook 1975; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Pfafftenberger 1977; Stein
Dennis B. McGilvray

1978), the temple plays an extremely important organizing role in society. In informants' statements and in textual sources from Batticaloa, the existence of the temple is depicted as conceptually prior to the founding of the settlement. By no means all of the temples which exist today are viewed in this light, but it is clearly true of the major regional temples (tēcattukkōvils) which figure prominently in regional history and legends. Some of these temples are seen as having been founded originally by epic figures such as Rāvana, who, for all his faults, was a pillar of Saivism. Other temples are believed to have been built at the command of kings, who wished to inscribe the perpetual veneration of sacred icons (lingams, vēl weapons, cīlampu anklets, etc.) either accidentally ‘discovered’ in the forest or brought to the region by wandering devotees. The warrior kings of the Vijayanagar period (14th–17th centuries A.D.) in South India have been noted for their consuming interest in temple construction and religious patronage which legitimized their systems of ‘tributary overlordship’ (Stein 1969: 188–96), and the historical legends of Batticaloa seem to reflect much the same ideology. It is the king who is depicted as having first appreciated the sacredness of a particular place; it is the king and his group who appropriated all subsequent glory by proclaiming themselves protectors of the shrine; and it is the king who colonizes the surrounding lands with the requisite functional castes. In the language of these idealized accounts, it is the provision of an elaborate system of hereditary services to the temple deity which is depicted as the central achievement, the creation of society merely an incidental byproduct. The whole scheme fits very well with Hocart’s image of the caste system as a sacrificial organization instituted by the king (Hocart 1950). The tradition endures today, particularly at the tēcattukkōvils and proportionately so at lesser temples, that the overall constitution of society should be reflected and validated in temple rituals, especially in the annual temple festival (tīrāvia).

There is still today a language of ‘rights’ (urīmait, ‘shares’ (pāṅku), and ‘honours’ (varicai) which is expressed in the entire range of ritual display from grand temple and mosque festivals to humble domestic life-crisis ceremonies. Among the Tamils, all participating groups, both castes and kūṭis, are said to have a ‘share’ in the affairs of the temple if they fulfil at least one of the minimal conditions: public sponsorship of some segment of the annual festival or provision of ritual services during the festival. It is the essence of such festivals, of course, that some shares are smaller or more servile than others, but at least the rhetoric of shares is uniform. The biggest shares include the sponsorship of specific ‘nights’ of the festival, and the most glorious of these are usually the last few evenings before the morning tīrātam or bathing of the deity which closes the festival. This is perhaps one of the most dynamic arenas of kutis ranking, since sponsorship of the festival requires both manpower and financial resources which may fluctuate over time. The re-allocation of ‘nights’ to different castes and kutis, as well as the arrangement of joint sponsorship by several smaller groups on a single night, is a well-attested feature of the system. The display of a preeminent position in temple ritual, particularly on dramatized at the climax of the ceremony by receiving the god’s garland and first offerings, is a recognized honour called munnitū (foremost position). On most evenings of the annual festival, this honour is given to one or more people called tiruvilakkāru, who are the designated leaders of the group(s) sponsoring the ritual that night. On the final night of the festival, the munnitū is typically accorded to the temple trustees (Vannakkar) representing the dominant local matricians. In colonial and pre-colonial times, however, it might have been claimed by a regional political chief.

The term varicai, on the other hand, is applied to the set of ritual privileges accorded to different castes and kutis during domestic observances such as weddings, female puberty celebrations, and funerals. The traditional consistency and rigour of the varicai system is difficult to judge today, as the lower castes and lower-ranking kutis have begun to seize honours which were never before accorded to them and the higher castes and kūṭis have consequently begun to regard varicai as a kind of debased currency which may be disregarded. The list of varicai honours starts with entitlement to have domestic services from the Washerman, Barber, and Drummer. High caste groups have the services of all three, but middle-ranking castes such as Smiths and Climbers were traditionally accorded only the first two. Other varicai honours included the right to place specific numbers of decorated pots of water (viṅgri nuṭ-tu, ‘house crowns’) on the roof and to hang certain numbers of cloths beside the doorway. Certainly high caste kutis also claim the honour of having the Washermen spread clean cloths on the path in front of the funeral procession (nīlappāvaṭai). Each of the castes, and many of the high caste kūṭis as well, have recognized insignia (virutu) which are used primarily as cattle brands, and these are also considered to be a varicai. The list could be expanded. Most informants laboured mightily but were unable to give a fully standardized account of the ‘18 varicai’, reflecting no doubt some potential for insinuating new varicai honours, as well as the present decay of this entire ritual idiom.
5.7. Matrilineal caste affiliation vs. bilateral status

All of the ‘rights’, ‘shares’, and ‘honours’ which have been described are acquired by virtue of membership in units constituted by the common rule of matriliney (ṭāy vali, pen vali). One of the most important of these is the kūti, with its shallow and unsystematically segmented sublineages, which, although not a ‘classic’ matrilineal descent group, can be seen to share certain features of matrilineal descent as a conventional anthropological category (Schneider 1961). However, it is just as true, if more difficult to accept from a conventional anthropological standpoint, that castes (cārti, jīti) are also matrilineal in the Batticaloa region, and that they are associated with much the same cultural imagery as kūtis.\(^{44}\) Castes differ from kūtis chiefly in having a much stronger functional/occupational component.\(^{45}\) The survey of ethnoreproductive and ethnophysiological beliefs revealed no underlying theory of distinctive caste purity or bi-moral substance, but it did reveal a consistent view that caste membership derives from the mother. This opinion was voiced by members of all castes, and it was supported by appeal to the same principles of intimate maternal care and affection, the same mixed factors of matrilocality, propinquity, and property, and the same jural rule of matrilineal ‘rights’ as one encounters in discussions of kūti membership. In both kūti and caste contexts, though without perhaps undue reflection in either instance, informants quoted a well-known proverb: vērōṭi valarṭti mulaṭṭānum, tāy vali tappaṭu. ‘Although the root may grow out, develop, and sprout up, the maternal connection is never lost’.

Admittedly, the matrilineal rule of caste affiliation is largely hypothetical when considering cross-caste unions involving the lower castes, since the members of the high caste stratum advocate and enforce a rule of strict caste endogamy among these groups. Apart from the effects of the common Dravidian kinship terminology which encourages marriage within a close, localized kinship universe, members of low castes said they saw no intrinsic reason to refuse an opportunity for marriage with higher caste groups. They quickly pointed out, however, that the higher caste groups would never tolerate such unions and that, formerly at least, the traditional Mukkuvar political authority would have meted out swift punishment for such a violation of the social order. The high caste people, in turn, confirmed this. It is not a concern with protecting purity or with preventing the mixture of bio-moral substances, but an adamant refusal either to permit the erosion of their ‘rights’ and ‘honours’ or to acknowledge the equality implied by marriage in this culture, that motivates these high caste restrictions. Other comments reflect the strong high caste image of society as a historically-instituted system of social differentiation, a functional division of labour laid down by kings ‘in the time of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyans’, deviation from which represents a breach of faith or the breaking of a commitment to the past. The function of low castes in such a social order is expressed as a ‘duty’ (kaṭamāi) to perform ‘service’ (āṭyam) to the higher castes and to the deity of the temple. The high castes, ever willing to see evidence of an organic design in such arrangements, also refer to these obligatory low caste temple services as ‘shares’ (pāṅku), in the formal sense that any group participation in temple ritual is a ‘share’, or as ‘rights’ (arimāi), in the sense that these specific ritual responsibilities can never be usurped. In some cases, low caste groups which eagerly quit their demeaning and no longer legally-enforceable temple duties 40 years ago are still wistfully said to be welcome if ever they wish to resume their hallowed ‘shares’. The ideology of the high castes vis-à-vis the lower castes is very strongly coloured by such traditions of historically-sanctioned political subordination, and as a consequence the theory of matrilineal caste affiliation is very seldom put to the test with members of these groups.

It is also true that overall birth status is never utterly and solely determined by the caste and kūti of the mother. Ethnoreproductive theories acknowledge, and genealogical research confirms, that the father plays a role with the mother in endowing the child with bodily substance, personal qualities, and social identity. While it is uniformly asserted that the child’s formal affiliation is always with the caste and kūti of the mother, the personal standing of the child within his caste and kūti will be enhanced or diminished by the high or low caste origins of the father. In one documented example, the illegitimate offspring of a Barber woman by a high caste Mukkuvar landlord have gained prestige from the union and are fond of teasing the nephews and nieces of their Mukkuvar genitor as ‘cross-cousins’. In another case, a respected Vēḷāḷar schoolteacher’s daughter is married (matrilocal) to a Karaiyār Fisherman caste man, and although the children carry their mother’s caste and kūti affiliation, the neighbours still talk. It is always understood that the class, occupational, and educational status of a man, as well as his appearance and character, can compensate for some shortcomings of caste and kūti when marriage is being considered.

The latent bilateral aspect of overall individual status poses much less of a problem, however, when both parties to a marriage are drawn from the high caste stratum of ‘good people’. Status distinctions between the
categories of Vēḷāḷar, Mukkuvar, and Kurukkul, as well as between the constituent kutsis of these groups and the residual ‘free-floating’ kutsis of the high caste stratum, do not approach in magnitude the distinction between the high caste stratum as a whole and all of the lower castes. Marriage between the high caste people and any of the middle or lower castes, or between the middle and lower castes themselves, violates fundamental canons of ritual subordination and functional separation of low caste groups. On the other hand, marriage between kutsis in the high caste stratum, some of which are historically ‘tagged’ to specific castes and others of which are more equivocal in caste identity, can be more general or more restricted depending upon local political, economic and demographic circumstances. The following discussion deals specifically with the relationships between elements in the high caste stratum.

The factor always to be kept in mind is that, here, marriage between groups implies equality between groups, even though the parties to any given match may exhibit different degrees of wealth, occupational prestige, education, and personal attractiveness. The equality asserted in one marriage must sooner or later be reinforced by another marriage in the opposite direction, in accordance with the stated and behaviourally verified ideal of bilateral cross-cousin marriage. Perhaps no more vivid demonstration can be offered of the lack of asymmetrical marriage principles in this society than the acceptability of a double marriage between two brother-sister pairs, termed a māṟṟukkaliyānam (‘exchange marriage’), which simplifies dowry negotiations and cements a strong bond between two families. The most visible evidence of the importance of consummation equality between groups is, however, to be seen in the recognized patterns of reciprocal marriage exchange between the leading high caste kutsis in different localities, which have already been mentioned.

5.8. Patterns of local variation

An understanding of the regional dimension of high caste dominance, together with a recognition of how the basic assumptions of matrilineal rights and group affiliations operate in local thinking, makes it possible now to see a broad range of social structural variation within a single historical and analytic framework. The ambiguous listing of castes and kutsis which Yalman recorded in Tambiluvil, and similarly jumbled accounts which I initially recorded in Akkaraippattu, reflect the distinctive similarities between castes and kutsis in Batticaloa: they are both formally defined by a doctrine of matrilineal rights which is strongly sanctioned in the traditional Mukkuvar law and which also makes sense to Batticaloa people in the context of their general matrilocal domestic pattern. The potential for selective emphasis on either kūṭi or caste identity is implicit in the nature of these categories and is clearly evident in actual fieldwork situations.

Indigenous theories of purity or bio-moral substance are undeveloped, equivocal, and context-restricted; they seem to have played, at most, a secondary role in organizing and justifying the traditional relationships between castes and matriclans in Batticaloa. Instead, an explicit, formal political symbolism of matrilineal honours, rights, offices, and shares, along with a highly static and authoritarian control of the land, was sufficient to sustain the traditional Mukkuvar vannimai in close, if not always harmonious, partnership with the Vēḷāḷars. It is precisely the formal quality of these matrilineal connections that seems to allow for the selective emphasis in group identities noted above. At one extreme, it is possible to emphasize the historic and poetic ideal found throughout the Batticaloa region that every caste is comprised of seven specified kutsis; and in smaller settlements where a set of such single-caste-linked matriclans forms the largest segment of the population, it is possible to maintain a claim to ‘unmixed’ Mukkuvar or Vēḷāḷar caste identity. Strong marriage exchange alliances are found in such situations between the largest and most prestigious kutsis within the designated caste category, and there tends to be an ideology of caste endogamy. At the opposite extreme, in the larger and more complex ‘peasant towns’ for which Batticaloa is noted (Ryan 1950: 10n.), it is common to stress the strictly matrilineal rule of caste and kūṭi affiliation regardless of which caste-linked matriclans form the marriage ‘pool’.

In such localities, the range of high caste kutsis tends to be more heterogeneous, intermarriage between kūṭis ‘tagged’ to different castes is unrestricted, and there tends to be an ideology of Mukkuvar–Vēḷāḷar alliance reinforced by an inter-caste marriage exchange relationship between the most powerful and prestigious kutsis. The same principles apply to the third group in the high caste stratum, the Viracāva Kurukkals, but the numbers and the resources of this group have always been tiny in comparison to those of the Mukkuvars and Vēḷāḷars. Because of this, and because of their circumscribed role as priests and spiritual servants to the Mukkuvars and Vēḷāḷars, the theme of equality through cross-caste marriage exchange with these dominant groups has never been fully developed.

All three high caste groups illustrate the fact that perceptions of the degree of authenticity of caste identity vary in proportion to the degree of
reinforcement available both from local demographic patterns and from
the ideal, somewhat poetic, model of society enshrined in regional texts.
When such reinforcements are weaker, the emphasis in most informants' comments is upon markers of kuti identity, rather than upon caste bound-
aries. In this case, it comes down to a question of how much meaning can
be imputed to a matriline name, with all the local rights and symbolic
associations that name evokes. In more populous and heterogeneous
settlements, like the town of Akkaraiyattu, the kuti name is frequently
taken as the basis for the inference of caste membership: a man is known
to belong to Panikkankan kuti, which is one of the 'seven-kuti Mukkuvar'
clans, therefore he must be a Mukkuvar. When kuti identities cannot find
such clear textual validation, there is always receptability to be gained
from appending the portmanteau 'Vellalar' label to the names of the
residual clans. In more traditional contexts, and in smaller scale settle-
ments, on the other hand, rights to exercise a particular caste or cuti
privilege, or to fill a matrilineal office, often carry the corollary stipulation
that a man's father as well as his wife should belong to a traditionally
allied matriline. That is, the exercise of such matrilineal rights and offices
is fully legitimated by observance of a complementary marriage rule
which, in effect, attaches a latent bilateral condition to a putatively matri-
lineal right. At this end of the sociological spectrum, not merely the kuti
name, but reciprocal alliance obligations of a more multi-stranded sort, are
taken into account in assessing finer degrees of entitlement to recognized
matrilineal statuses.

Against the historical and ethnographic background which has already
been sketched, there are at least four major 'tactical resources' which are
mobilized in varying combinations to produce different configurations of
caste and matrilineal relationships in different localities: (1) an assumption
of high caste, especially Mukkuvar, control over the land and over the dis-
position of lower caste services, although this is growing weaker; (2) a
fundamental implication of equality and alliance which is established and
maintained by reciprocal marriage exchange; (3) a widely recognized
principle of matrilineal descent and matrilineally transmitted rights
defining both castes and matricians; and (4) a set of shared assumptions
about the temple as a conceptual paradigm for society and as the setting
for ceremonial transactions which validate the position of castes and matri-
cians in the social order. The underlying continuum along which high
caste, and high caste kuti, relationships may vary in different localities
can be seen in a comparison of data from three separate settlements, one of
which is in a strongly 'Mukkuvar' area, another of which is a strongly

'Vellalar' village, and the last of which is a larger and more heterogeneous
semi-urban settlement where a joint ideology of Mukkuvar and Vellalar
alliance and intermarriage is basic to local perceptions.

5.9. Mukkuvar dominance: the Kokkattingal temple
In the isolated vicinity of Kokkattingal, located on the patta'n karai,
the western or 'sunset shore' of the Batticaloa lagoon, the patterns of
Mukkuvar solidarity and dominance persist today in perhaps more tra-
ditional form than anywhere else in the region. The ancient Tantôni
Koval (Temple of the Self-appearing Civa) at Kokkattingal is still con-
sidered to be one of the most important of Batticaloa's 'regional temples'
(técatu'kkovil), and despite the inevitable erosion of their traditional
power, the Mukkuvars here still cling strongly to the symbols and preroga-
tives of temple overlordship which validated the Mukkuvar vannimai or
regional chiefship. The temple is governed by three trustees (Vannakkuk
or Vannakkak) representing the three most prestigious kutis in the region
(Ulakkippô kuti, Kàlînikâ kuti, and Pañjyânta kuti), and the three temple
priests claim to be Viracaya Kurukkal. The lesser servants of the temple are
members of the Kôvillar caste whose hereditary duties are differentiated
among six named matriline. Direct 'supervision of the inner-duties'
(utkâtampal atikâram) of the temple staff was, until quite recently,
delegated by the Mukkuvar trustees to a hereditary Vellalar temple officer
called the Técatu' Vannimai (chief of the region), who acted as a sort of
prestigious ritual factotum for the Mukkuvars. This Vellalar temple chief
was by right always a member of one of the two high-status kutis (Atiyâ
kuti and Vattinâ kuti) which predominate in the Vellalar village of
Palukâmam about eight miles south of the temple. This office was seen as
the joint prerogative of these two matricians, which are strongly allied in
a reciprocal marriage exchange relationship. These two kutis also enjoyed
specified prebendary rights over a large tract of temple land named after
one of the clans, Atiyâ munmarí, in return for the ritual services they
rendered to the temple, particularly during the annual festival. A special
committee of elders, known as the Katukkenjar, representing all the major
sub-lineages within Atiyâ and Vattinâ kutis had special responsibility for
selecting each new Chief as well as for overseeing the management of the
prebendary lands and the marshaling of revenue from these lands to fulfil
the hereditary Vellalar duties at the temple. At the time of the annual
festival, the Vellalar temple chief took up temporary residence near the
temple and directed the conduct of the ritual, including the provision of
extra Vēḷāḷars manpower (from Attiyā and Vaittinā kutis) to perform certain high-status tasks such as carrying of the deity’s palanquin in procession and riding with the idol atop the temple car.

At the close of the festival, a ceremony is still performed which is called variously kuṭukkai kūṟatul or kaći mūṭṭi kūṟatul (‘calling out the pots’ or ‘calling out the rice-gruel pots’) or paikku kūral (‘calling out the shares’). It was the Vēḷāḷar temple chief who, until recently, called out in strict order a list of arcane titles identifying all the castes and kutis recognized as having a ‘share’ in the celebration of the temple festival. When the list was recited in 1975 by a respected Mukkuvar schoolmaster, it contained a total of 120 titles, some of which appeared to commemorate mythological figures, but most of which represented specific castes and kutis holding recognized positions in specific localities throughout the Batticaloa region. Three pots for members of the Moorish community were recited, but no one took them up. When a representative of a group stepped forward to receive a pot in front of the image of the god, the onlookers sometimes challenged the recipient to explain his qualification to receive that share. If necessary, this would have to be done by reciting from memory a passage from one of the recognized textual sources of Batticaloa tradition.

The list of titles began with Vētam (Veda, or scripture in general) and ended with Miṟṟpan (chief of the Paṟaiyār Drummers). In the middle of the list the elaboration of titles and sub-titles in the list bore scant relationship to present day realities. Ten different kinds of Cetti shares were called but not taken up, and in the end, only 36 pots were actually distributed. The principle behind the ritual is nevertheless clear: it is intended as a traditional recapitulation of the entire social order, validating group status in terms of rank-order as the shares are called. At the same time, the uniform size, shape, and content of all the pots reflects the principle that all share-holders, however humble their contribution, play a recognized role in support of the deity.49

Much more could be said about inter-kūṭi and inter-caste relationships dramatized during the Kokkaṭṭicōlai temple festival, but the important point here is to recognize the elements of a traditional, but unequal, balance between the clear kingly dominance of the Mukkuvars, expressed in overall control of the temple, and the competing claims of Vēḷāḷar ritual excellence ambiguously sanctioned by their historical ‘servitude’ to the temple. The Vēḷāḷars from the village of Paḷukāmam were given considerable recognition and status in the affairs of the temple, but the Mukkuvars always retained ultimate control. Tradition recalls that even when the Vēḷāḷars were given the right to assume the former priestly duty of passing out the kaći mūṭṭi pots, they were required to cover the first pots, i.e. the Mukkuvars’ pots, with a silk cloth, while their own pots and those of all other groups remained uncovered. The Mukkuvars, then and now, see the Vēḷāḷars as the hereditary servants of ‘their’ temple and, within the context of temple ritual, as their delegated overseers of the lower service castes. As such, the Vēḷāḷars are seen as liable to kingly Mukkuvar discipline whenever they betray their hereditary obligation to serve the deity. Temple history preserves the memory of one such misdemeanour, the complicity of the Vēḷāḷar temple store-keeper in a theft of temple valuables. A public expiation of this sin was incorporated by the Mukkuvars into the annual temple rituals: at the end of each festival, a representative of the Vēḷāḷars was symbolically tied and beaten by women of the Kōvīlār caste at the order of the Mukkuvar trustees.

The Vēḷāḷars have come to chafe increasingly under this symbolic domination by the Mukkuvars in recent years, and the ensuing intensification of hostility has been reflected in electoral politics within the local legislative constituency. An old antagonism seems also to have been exacerbated between the higher-status absentee ‘Maruṅkūr Vēḷāḷar’ functionaries from Paḷukāmam, and the lower-status permanent Kōvīlār temple servants resident in Kokkaṭṭicōlai, who are now seeking recognition of their equal status as ‘Kāraikkāl Vēḷāḷars’. Several years ago the Vēḷāḷars finally severed their service relationship to the Kokkaṭṭicōlai temple entirely. They retained, however, de facto possession of the temple lands, which the Mukkuvars angrily claimed had been given to the Vēḷāḷars strictly for service tenure. This claim has failed in the courts, and now the responsibility for ‘supervision of the inner-duties’ of the temple has fallen quite happily on the Kōvīlārs, who were formerly in chronic friction with the Vēḷāḷars over day-to-day running of the temple. Their recent promotion has also had the unforeseen effect of amplifying the Kōvīlārs’ claim to be considered genuine Vēḷāḷars themselves, and, ironically, the same kinds of symbolic rights and disabilities which fuelled the Mukkuvar–Vēḷāḷar dispute now figure prominently in Mukkuvar–Kōvīlār tension.

The Kokkaṭṭicōlai evidence is extremely useful in establishing a traditional base-line for judging data gathered elsewhere. The characteristic assumptions of matrilineal caste and kuti descent are found here, but the Mukkuvars of Kokkaṭṭicōlai and the Vēḷāḷars of Paḷukāmam also observe mutually exclusive endogamous caste boundaries and considerable residential segregation. There is a rather clear distinction between the two castes, not to mention, nowadays at least, considerable hard feeling. Vivid evidence of the Mukkuvar cultural ideal of political domination can be
seen in the temple ritual, and it is interesting to note that even where Vēḷāḷar claims to caste precedence carry an implication of intrinsic religious superiority, these claims are given concrete expression in much the same metaphor of power, honour, and authority. Thus the Vēḷāḷar temple chief, whose responsibility was ostensibly limited to the strictly religious conduct of the temple festival, nevertheless carried the full kingly title of Pupula Kōttirī Ētētta Vannīmar (‘regional chieftship of the earth-guarding lineage’). It is also ‘supervision’ (ātkāram) of the rituals, rather than performance of historically recognized ‘hereditary service’ (tonkvelam) to the temple deity, which is emphasized in contemporary Vēḷāḷar ideology. Although caste boundaries seem fairly strong in this region, there are still exceptions, notably in the considerable degree of intermarriage between Mukkuvars and Kōvillārs in the vicinity of the temple. Here, not only is the matrilineal rule invoked to distinguish the castes, it is still the basis for allocating specific categories of temple work among the different Kōvillār matriline. No doubt this Mukkuvar–Kōvillār connection has been an additional factor in the temple quarrels which have taken place over the privileges and responsibilities of the Vēḷāḷars from Paḷukkāmam.

5.10. Vēḷāḷar dominance: Tambiluvil and Tirukkoliv

Forty miles south of Kokkaṭṭiccōḷai, it is the Vēḷāḷars who dominate the affairs of an equally famous ‘regional temple’ to Lord Kantacuvāmī, known here as Cittiravelāyaṭutucuva (‘Lord of the Beautiful Lance’) at Tirukkoliv. The nearby village of Tambiluvil, which has been discussed by at least three anthropologists including myself (Yalman 1967: Ch. 15; Hiatt 1973; McGilvray 1974: 130ff.), is typically described by its inhabitants as a ‘Vēḷāḷar village’. Two textually-attested Vēḷāḷar matriclans share undoubted preeminence within the village, which is consolidated by an explicitly preferred pattern of reciprocal marriage exchange. One of the leading pair of matriclans, Kaṭṭan kuti, furnishes the single trustee (Vannakkkar) of the Tirukkoliv temple by ancient matrilineal right, while the other leading clan, Kaṭṭappattan kuti, enjoys a similar right to appoint the single Vannakkar of the Kaṭṭappattan temple in Tambiluvil.

Many more features of the traditional temple organization and festival ritual have undergone change at Tirukkoliv than at Kokkaṭṭiccōḷai, but they are still remembered by local people. In fact, it was Yalman’s informants from Tambiluvil who first mentioned the existence of the kaieti muṭṭi, or as they expressed it, the ‘kuti-calling’, ritual which was still being conducted at Tirukkoliv in 1955 (Yalman 1967: 326–7). There is no sign of the ritual today, nor is there much left of the Mukkuvar regional chiefship which formerly ‘presided’ over the annual festival. There is an acknowledged, but presently rather uninvolved, Mukkuvar Talaiyar or Vanniyār (regional chief) whose title and office descends matrilineally in Panīkkanai kuti, but his home is 20 miles away, and he works as an engineer in Colombo. Mukkuvar traditionalists argue that the Vēḷāḷar Vannakkar of the temple was originally a rough equivalent of the Vēḷāḷar temple chief at Kokkaṭṭiccōḷai: that is, a sort of domestic overseer of temple ritual appointed under a historic Mukkuvar mandate. The temple has been the subject of endless legal suits brought by leading Mukkuvars and others from outside the immediate vicinity, claiming mismanagement and arrogation of authority by the Vēḷāḷar (Kaṭṭan kuti) trustee, but the truth is that wider Mukkuvar regional dominance can no longer be enforced over Tirukkoliv in the modern legal and social setting. The annual festival is still a major regional event, and there is still widespread sponsorship of nightly ‘shares’ of the ritual. However, along with the lapse of the kaieti muṭṭi ritual, there has been an evident change of emphasis from the validation of fixed hereditary ranks in society to a more pragmatic and ‘devotional’ pattern of voluntary sponsorship by local settlement areas. The local demographic concentration of Vēḷāḷar matriclans in Tambiluvil has enabled the local population to maintain their sense of Vēḷāḷar identity and to consolidate greater control over the ‘regional temple’ at Tirukkoliv as tangible Mukkuvar dominance has weakened. Inhabitants of the village are sometimes heard to say that they are ‘unmixed’ (cutta, kalavilliṭa) Vēḷāḷars, but the strongest adherents to this claim are members of the two large, high status kutis who have a tradition of marriage exchange and who manage the two main temples. In fact, nearly half of the population of Tambiluvil belongs to one of these two leading matriclans (Hiatt 1973: 248), and succession to matrilineal office, e.g. temple Vannakkarship, is predicated on the assumption that the candidate’s parentage has been restricted to members of these two allied kūṭis. The existence of two separately governed temple complexes in the village provides scope for some degree of ‘friendly rivalry’, but there is no evidence of hypergamy (Hiatt 1973: 237–8, 248). In the view of leading Vēḷāḷars, the Vīraciva Kurukkaḷs are merely a lesser matriclan within the Vēḷāḷar category, and the Mukkuvars are a distinctly inferior group living in other settlements, such as Akkaraiṭattu.

The conceptually salient pattern of shared preeminence between Kaṭṭan kuti and Kaṭṭappattan kuti in Tambiluvil shows some of the
features of Yalman’s Kandyan ‘micro-caste’ or ideally endogamous bilateral kindred (Yalman 1962: 1967: Ch. 9). From the remarks of some Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

Some of these lesser kuṭis are unique to the village, but 20% of the inhabitants belong to kuṭis found also in the town of Akkaraiappatu, a place which residents of Tambiluvi like to stigmatize as a ‘Mukkuvar settlement’. There is little evidence of a Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

5.11. Mukkuvar–Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

In Akkaraiappatu, a mixed Tamil and Moorish town located about eight miles north of Tambiluvi on the main coastal road, the elements of a sort of sociological compromise can be seen, combining both Mukkuvar and Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

the two leading clans is seen as symbolic of a larger cross-caste alliance between the Mukkuvar and Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

An interesting mythical charter, a variation on a more widespread regional legend, is perpetuated in Akkaraiappatu, particularly by leading members of Panikkannā kuṭi. According to this story, the Mukkuvars, led by chiefs of the Panikkannā kuṭi, conquered and inhabited the Akkaraiappatu region, but for many years they lacked any lower castes to perform domestic and ritual services for them. When a Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

He was refused but managed to abscond with the woman, who was later discovered and killed by the Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

As the tale is told, the Mukkuvar chiefs of Panikkannā kuṭi assumed supreme power in the region, particularly with respect to the disposition of the service castes and the regulation of the system of caste and kuṭi honours (varicar). The Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

In Akkaraiappatu, and not merely among the two leading matriclans, the caste honours of the Mukkuvars and Veḷḷḷḷḷ苓

If a person’s kuṭi is historically and textually tagged to the Mukkuvar caste, he is a Mukkuvar; if to the Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

When the kuṭi name is more vague or anomalous (accounting for approximately 28% of the high caste population in a relatively cosmopolitan settlement like Akkaraiappatu), adding the charismatic ‘Veḷḷḷḷḷḷḷ苓

The local high caste temple to Lord Pillaiyar is admin-
they have endowed their own matriclans with responsibilities and honours in their own caste temples which replicate many of the patterns of the high caste kuṭis. Today some high caste informants are unaware of the intricacies of low caste matriclan organization and disdain to enquire about them, but in fact the matriclans of most of the lower castes are generally as viable today as those of the higher castes. Succession to the office of lower-caste headman, where such office still exists, is in many cases matrilineal. Numerous court cases, both past and present, attest to the strength of lower-caste feeling about preserving matrilineal temple honours, particularly among the Taṭṭār Smith caste. If economic resources permitted, it is likely that additional low caste disputes would surface in the courts. Under the traditional Mukkuvar vannimai, of course, such disputes would have been settled by the local Mukkuvar chief and his councillors.

The pervasive Mukkuvar cultural paradigm of seven sub-chiefdoms within Batticaloa, and seven kuṭis within each caste, is both elaborated in the local texts and sung in the songs of local informants. The circumstantial evidence, at any rate, suggests that the society of the Batticaloa coast was profoundly influenced by the ideas and the institutions of the Mukkuvars, who (it would appear) encouraged, perhaps even enforced, the structural replication of their matrilineal clan system in all of the lower castes.51 Whether any of the Vēḻālers or Viracaiva Kurukkalas, or any of the lower castes, brought matrilineal institutions with them when they arrived in Batticaloa is presently unknown. Despite the likelihood of Mukkuvar origins in Kerala, the names of the remaining castes of the region nearly all correspond to well-known castes of Jaffna and Tamilnadu.52 Some names of matriclans and some regional place-names show resemblances to those of Kerala, but the language spoken in Batticaloa has been identified simply as an archaic and rather literary dialect of Tamil (Zvelebil 1966).

Whatever the origins of the various castes, and whatever their mode and sequence of arrival in Batticaloa, it is clear that the dominant Mukkuvar political system sought to uphold a distinctive pattern of matrilineal rights and institutions throughout the entire population. Even the Moors, a major segment of the population who have presumably been present throughout the period of Mukkuvar rule, follow clearly derivative social institutions based upon matrilineal organization. In fact, it seems quite likely that the size of the Moorish population of Batticaloa (44% in the 1971 Census) is attributable in some measure to the voluntary conversion of both ordinary Mukkuvars and members of other castes under circumstances of harsh domination by Mukkuvar chiefs.

5.12. The Mukkuvar cultural paradigm

There are many aspects of social organization in Batticaloa which have been omitted from this summary account, as well as others requiring further research, but the importance of the cultural paradigm which was traditionally imposed throughout the region under the Mukkuvar vannimai, the chiefship of the Mukkuvars, deserves a final comment. Much of what has been described here relates specifically to the high caste stratum of Mukkuvars, Vēḻālers, and Kurukkalas, but it should never be forgotten that the same complex of matrilineal caste affiliations, matriclan rights, and matrilocal kinship institutions is shared across the entire Hindu caste hierarchy. Where certain caste groups have broken away from their subordinated roles in Mukkuvar- and Vēḻāler-controlled temple ritual, for example,
6. CONCLUSION

6.1. A critique of purity and bio-moral substance theories

It would scarcely be feasible to 'disprove' the highly encompassing purity theory of Dumont or the immanent transactional/bio-moral substance approaches advocated by Marriott and Inden and others, nor has this been my aim in this paper. I have sought instead to suggest in a more practical way, by considering some original ethnographic data, that these approaches are typically too condensed and reductionist, or too vague and universalizing, to be of heuristic value in field research.

One might, for example, wish to discount the absence of Brahmans from the Batticaloa region and see the local Vējā拉萨 as structurally filling the 'Brahman role'. In such a Dumontian recension, the Viracaiva Kurukkals could be seen as a doctrinally weak embodiment of the hierarchical principle, posing no bar to the assertion of ritual purity by the Vējā拉萨 (surrogate Brahmans) in the context of Mukkuvar (surrogate Kshatriya) power in regional temple organization. What this paper has attempted to demonstrate, however, is that invoking a single, abstract, and highly condensed attribute such as 'ritual purity' in this context suggests a misleading identification of Batticaloa Vējā拉萨 thinking with some idealized form of Brahmanical theology presumed to exist in India. In fact, it has been found that Vējā拉萨 here do not tend to articulate their claim to high status in terms of an indigenous theory of blood purity or in a systematic vocabulary of purity/pollution; instead, they share the Mukkuvar ideology of authority and matrilineal rights and honours. So understated is the idea of caste purity in Batticaloa, and so pronounced is the kingy 'liturgy' of honour and authority (Hocart 1950; Dumont 1970: 216), that it is doubtful whether the concept of ritual purity would have occurred as a major focus of analysis if there were not already such a voluminous literature on the subject. With the decline of effective Mukkuvar political hegemony in modern times, the Vējā拉萨 have utilized this historically sanctioned politico-legal idiom to amplify and strengthen their latent claims to both religious and political eminence within localities having a strong Vējā拉萨 identity. This aggregating tendency seems to be a common feature of modern Vējā拉萨 ideology in Jaffna and in Tamil Nadu (Banks 1957: 197–200; 1960: 66–9; David 1974: 51–63; Barnett 1970; 1973a: 183–5), and it is also in accord with recent research which indicates that in South Asia 'purity' and 'power' are, in certain contexts at least, aspects of the same thing (O'Flaherty 1969; Wadley 1975; Marriott 1976a: 113).

It must be obvious, also, that Dumont's whole analytic strategy of restricting the meaning of the term 'caste' to situations in which the shastric ideal of the Brahman/Kshatriya relationship constitutes the fundamental model of inter-caste structure not only rules out facile Western comparisons in the sociological jargon of 'social stratification' (one of his explicit aims), it also hinders more culturally sympathetic comparisons within the larger Indic world itself. While, for example, data from some parts of Sri Lanka or Nepal which conforms to the Brahman/Kshatriya ideal can be taken as further confirmation of Dumont's viewpoint (as such doctrines are assumed to have their origins in Indian law and scripture), any discrepant finding can be dismissed either as the artifact of an insufficiently holistic pan-Indian point of view or as a sign of mere 'quasi-caste rather than caste proper' (Dumont 1970: 216). In either event, some of the more interesting questions about how regional social systems in South Asia actually operate are neglected. What, for example, should we make of the existence of Viracaiva Kurukkals instead of Brahmans in Batticaloa? It might be taken as evidence of an 'incomplete' caste system, intelligible only as a segment of the larger Indian society; but that offers scant insight into the distinctive beliefs and attitudes of the local inhabitants, especially those of the Viracaiva Kurukkals themselves. On the other hand, if we try to settle the question by designating Sri Lankan society as having 'quasi-caste', we immediately confront a whole series of bootless classificatory quibbles. Are Salvite Tamils with 'quasi-caste' really then only 'quasi-Hindus'?

The recent 'ethnosociological' approach to South Asian caste systems, which has been developed by Marriott and Inden to supersede such rigidities in Dumont's framework, seeks to account for an even greater degree of ethnographic diversity by arguing for a widely shared set of South Asian transactional strategies by means of which social genera (including castes and kinship groups) mix, preserve, and improve their intrinsic bio-moral substances and attributes. There are no prior restrictions in this approach which would rule out data from Sri Lanka; in fact, the authors are hopeful that it will clarify Buddhist, Islamic, and various sectarian social systems as well as orthodox Hindu caste systems. This ethnosociological theory is said to be a 'generative model' based upon shastric legal, medical, and philosophical theories as well as upon 'what we know of South Asian actors' pervasively monistic cognitions of reality'.
of funerary ritual, and there only haphazardly, as the balls of rice flour, which are sometimes offered to the souls of the departed. This is recognized to be a relatively new and by no means widespread feature of funeral and death commemoration rituals in the Batticaloa region: it is presently being introduced through the influence of Jaffna Brahman-trained officials, and there is virtually no common appreciation of its etymology or symbolism. In the area of marriage alliance, which is a pronounced feature of matrilocal relationships at the local level, there is likewise no ideology of conserving bodily substance, only the idea of sharing local rights to matrimonial offices and exercising the symbols of political dominance connected with matrilocal titles.

Just as Batticaloa concepts of bodily substance are confined to the ethnosemantic domain of medicine, so the local concepts of 'code for conduct' are expressed in the domain of political authority and historical honour. Everyday extensions of the shastic notion of dharma as in-born, bio-moral family and caste duty are very rarely invoked by the people of Batticaloa. During the course of fieldwork, the word dharma (tarumam) was most often heard in the context of alms-giving (tanumatanam); it was never applied to the behaviour of castes (cf. 'jatidharma', Marriott and Inden 1973: 7). The term dharma in Batticaloa has the primary connotation of individual, particularly charitable, duty. In fact, it was striking to discover in fieldwork that such ideas as dharma (tarumam) and karma (karumam) and reincarnation were seldom mentioned even in discussions of religion. The popular religious aspiration, and apparently expectation, is that the soul should attain the heaven of Civa (Chirarnit, 'the foot of Civa') after death. Souls of the dead linger about this world until the final food offerings are made on the 31st day, when the messenger of Yaman (god of death) conducts the soul to its judgement at the hands of Cittirai Puttrian, whose scales weigh its accumulated sin and merit (pavampunyiram).

Theoretically, punishments include consignment to various hells and/or rebirth at an appropriate level in the natural/social order. In practice, however, great hope is placed on the likelihood of at least a saintly (tevar) incarnation, if not something better. Although one may elicit the orthodox theory of karmic rebirth, it is not typically invoked to explain the nature or ranking of castes. Many of these same tendencies have been noted in the popular beliefs of non-Brahman villagers in Tamilnadu (Maloney 1975; Moffett 1979: 268, 296–7). Basic Vaisnavism doctrines rejecting rebirth (Dubois 1906: 116) may also have influenced popular attitudes in Batticaloa.

The vocabulary of caste and matrilocal behaviour, as we have seen already, is one, not of transcendental dharma, but of historically instituted relationships of service, enforced obligation, respect, honour, chiefly sovereignty and the like. These 'codes for conduct', to borrow for a moment the Marriott and Inden terminology, are not conceived as immanent moral qualities of bodily substance but as rules in a geographically delimited political and legal system, sanctioned by historical precedent, and regulated by Mucchini and Veliar caste authorities in sub-regions of the district. Patterns of inter-caste transactions between high caste people and members of the middle and lower castes are behaviourally similar to those reported from other parts of South India: intermarriage is forbidden, cooked food is never passed upward, and a wide range of distancing behaviours are required of the lower castes. The indigenous explanation of this, however, stresses not the mixing of coded substances but the need to enforce and maintain the deference (mariyattar) and the respect (matippu) of the lower castes. The ultimate justification for caste differentiation is a religious goal, i.e., the maintenance and support of temple rituals instituted by kingy vows, and the more off-hand justifications elicited from informants were also couched in the metaphor of civic duty and functional division of labour. The lower castes, particularly the kuttimai castes, are indeed polluted and polluting by virtue of their intimate contact with the tutakku which accompanies birth, death, menstruation, and their (assumed) exposure to various exuviae and pustrefactions. The explanation of low caste status in terms of karmic retribution is not unknown, but it seems to be mainly a 'back-up' theory not well integrated with the more readily voiced ideology of an ancient kingly division of labour (see also Sharma 1973: 362). These castes might equally well be portrayed as polluted because they are low, as low because they are polluted or sinful.

It may be objected that all of the specifically mentioned interests, such as political authority, enforced servitude, caste respect, ritual preeminence, maternal affection, matrilocal attachments, even the legendary associations of matrilocal names, while divorced from concepts of blood or bodily matter, can nevertheless be subsumed under much more liberal South Asian categories of gross versus subtle 'substances'. This is the clear implication in Marriott's discussion of transactions in 'coded influences that are thought of as subtler, but still substantial and powerful forms, such as perceived words, ideas, appearances, and so forth' (1976a: 111), as well as in his treatment of honour and violence as transactional media (1976a: 132–3). The data on 'worship' substances, 'territorial' substances, and 'occupational' substances in middle period Bengal (Inden 1976: 16ff.) and
South Asian kinship and caste transactions. The most clearly formulated versions of this concept are adduced from Ayurvedic medical texts and shastric law books, where a highly developed Sanskrit vocabulary of flowing atom-like particles (pinda) and in-born generic duties (dharma) serves to enunciate a unified theory of the world. These scholarly textual theories are said to be reflected today in 'the cognitive assumptions actually prevalent in South Asia' (Marriott and Inden 1974: 983), in the 'world of constituted things as conceived by most South Asians', and in what 'recent ethnography tells of the same sorts of cognitions among Hindus in rural areas' (Marriott and Inden 1976: 110,113). In the words of its authors, the ethnosophological theory 'borrows what now seems to be a repeated empirical finding - the cognitive nonduality of action and actor, code and substance - and uses it as a universal axiom for restating, through deduction, what we think we know about caste systems' (Marriott and Inden 1977: 229).

Research in Batticaloa does not support this universal axiom. Local thinking about the nature of the body is well developed, but it is seen as the domain of medicine and health (vattiyam, cukam), not as an extension of moral philosophy and sociology. It is only within this context that informants feel at ease to discuss such impolite topics as blood, breast milk, and semen. The 'qualities' (kunam) which are attributed to the gestating foetus are usually morally neutral qualities such as appearance, stature, strength and intelligence, while propensity toward moral or immoral conduct is typically felt to develop in childhood and later life. The idea of the untainted innocence of the young child is, in fact, a very strong cultural theme, and for this reason young children often play an important role in Hindu rituals. It is evident that caste and kutti differences are not conceptualized in terms of bodily substance. In fact, I have already noted that questions about the possible intrinsic caste or matrician-linked qualities of the body or of the blood met with the common reply that 'Blood is all the same'.

This finding is consistent with the lack of widespread inter-caste food exchange patterns at weddings and other domestic observances. It is also reflected in the absence of any belief in the transsubstantiation of a bride's bodily substance or transfer of her descent group affiliation to that of her husband at the time of marriage (or vice versa). As for an indigenous theory of atomic particles, there is no formulation which local people cite aside from the theory of Ayurvedic humours, which is invoked in a specifically medical context. The word pinda (T. pin'atam), cited in shastric sources as the word for particles of matter, is known only in the context
the concept of ‘love’ as a bodily substance in Bengali kinship (Inden and Nicholas 1977: 21), exemplify some ethnographic applications of this omnibus concept. To the extent that such an exhaustively monistic concept of ‘substance’ is ethnographically documented and described among specific groups of people in a particular place and time, the finding is noteworthy and significant. As an a priori conceptual framework, however, or as a ‘universal axiom’, it seems likely to lead to a distorted re-definition of fieldwork experience. There is also the problem that where a popular culture of radical monism could be empirically shown to assimilate everything to relativized ‘substance-code’, the result would be a viewpoint analytically trivial and solipsistic. As a limiting case, radical monism begs the fundamental question of why individuals and groups choose particular transactional media or pursue particular transactional ends, since it is axiomatic that all substance-codes are mutually transformable. In order to anchor their substance-code theory and give it some firm reference points, the authors make their strongest appeal not to distinct, locally-situated, and ethnographically-attested models of social virtue and social status, but to ‘Hindu macrosociology’ (Marriott 1976a: 112), also known as ‘The Theory of the Varna’ (Dumont 1970: Ch. 3). Judging from the results of fieldwork in Batticaloa, the formal ‘tactical’ possibilities inherent in the two-dimensional matrix of transactional logic (Marriott 1976a: 114–23) may prove to have greater ethnographic usefulness in South Asia than a universal belief in miscible substance-codes.

It should be noted that Marriott and Inden have assessed the range of regional, historical, and sectarian variation in South Asian caste systems succinctly and informatively in several publications, devoting considerable attention to features of South Indian and Sri Lankan caste systems which are also found in Batticaloa (Marriott 1960; Marriott and Inden 1974). In the summary formulations of their ‘ethnosociological’ theory, however, they argue that regional variation and change in caste systems can be made intelligible ‘as replications and deletions, as permutations and combinations, as negative and reciprocal transformations of coded substance according with the preceding cognitive repertories of kinds of nondual units, relationships, and processes’. They further state that ‘deletions and replications are perhaps the commonest devices’ (Marriott and Inden 1977: 236). The ideology of caste and matrilineal organization in Batticaloa might seem a classic case of ‘deletion’, were this whole mode of interpretation not so unsatisfactory; not only does it assume what is yet unproven, i.e., the existence of a popular monistic theory of substance-codes, but it also enables the authors to bolster their case by appeal to what is circumstantially disconfirming evidence (‘deletions’). One fears that ‘deletions’ could be made to do for Marriott and Inden what the ‘encompassing’ relationship does for Dumont: that is, to explain away the awkward empirical anomalies (Lynch 1977: 262).

The more ethnographically-specific works of writers like Yalman, Barnett, David, Östör, and Fruzzetti, who wish to retain something of the holistic Dumontian purity versus power distinction but who have also detected various ideas of coded bodily substance in the indigenous cultural rationales offered to explain caste and kinship patterns, are also, in these particular respects, of little help in sorting out the Batticaloa caste and matrilineal data. It is in fact the non-substance-linked aspects of these research studies, particularly Yalman’s analyses of Sinhalese kinship categories and domestic organization, which have proven most useful to the understanding of society in Batticaloa. Although Yalman was, I believe, quite misled to suppose that ritual purity and hypergamy were basic features of matrilineal structure on the eastern littoral, his consistent attention to the implications of marital residence and domestic patterns in other parts of the island has provided extremely useful insights which apply equally well to the matrilocal households of Batticaloa. His attention to the ‘contradictions’ of bilateral caste affiliation implied in aristocratic Kandyen patrilineal wamara titles and his general emphasis upon the capacity of unilinear descent rules to produce dramatic regional variation in the degree of ‘bilaterality’ expressed in caste and kinship also suggest important parallels with Batticaloa. His concern with empirical flexibility and variation in both social organization and social ideology within the relatively small geographical compass of Sri Lanka and adjacent parts of South India suggests a more pragmatic and constructive orientation to the data of South Asian anthropology than the single-minded pursuit of pan-Indic varna dichotomies, or pan-Indic bodily substances, or pan-Indic monistic cognitions.

6.2. The social and historical context of caste ideologies
I have argued that the ideology of Mukkuvar dominance, emphasizing martial values and matrilineal rights, is not a thin kingly veneer but rather a pervasive cultural influence at all levels. However, it would not merely be sufficient to demonstrate that this ideology of Mukkuvar dominance deviates from the caste ideologies of Brahmanical purity or coded bi-moral substance which are reported in other parts of Sri Lanka and India. In this highly compressed account, I have also tried to suggest some
plausible historical, cultural, and social structural reasons why this particular ideology occurs in this region and among these particular groups. It is this type of intellectual concern which seems lacking in much recent South Asian research into the cultural symbolism of caste.

The transactional substance-code approach of Marriott and Inden, although put forward as a more generally applicable and more culturally valid theory than that of Dumont, actually shares with the latter the same kind of theoretical goal: a single formula to explain all South Asian caste systems. Both of these approaches, if not ahistoric as a matter of principle, are predicated upon an assumption of the underlying uniformity of 'Indian thought' since Vedic times. Both of these approaches recognize the existence of regional and sectarian variation, but their true goal seems nevertheless to capture the essence of South Asian social thought as if by heroic application of Benedict's theory of 'cultural wholes' to the entire Subcontinent. Both of these approaches argue for the existence of a culturally-immanent and, at some level, uniform set of assumptions governing caste behaviour, but ambiguities about just where these postulated ideas reside and how they are empirically manifested in South Asian culture make it difficult to know exactly what should count as evidence. My approach in this essay has been to remain as empirical and as close to overt culture and behaviour as possible; if 'purity' or 'substance-codes' are meant instead to represent unconscious models, allegorical themes, or otherwise indirect formulations of reality, it is not apparent from what these authors have written.

The extent to which highly developed caste ideologies of purity or of bio-moral substance predominate in South Asia is an empirical question which we will no doubt know a great deal more about as ethnographic research proceeds, but it seems just as important to consider the origin and disposition of these cultural beliefs within historical and social structural settings. The need for this may seem more obvious with anomalous or recalcitrant data such as I have presented from Batticaloa, but it is really a basic concern of any anthropological study. A strictly 'cultural account' of symbol systems and indigenous classifications may have its uses (Schneider 1968), but it also prompts a whole range of behavioural and social structural questions. It is also relevant to consider, for example, (a) who generated, codified and transmitted the ideas and why; (b) who had exposure to the ideas and who did not; (c) what degree of selective emphasis, scepticism, apathy, or ignorance may have been entailed in this process; and (d) why these ideas may have been congenial to certain groups and not to others. The existence of an ancient literate tradition in

South Asia, and the historical role of Brahmans and other castes as professional scholars and scribes, suggests not only the wide distribution of indigenous South Asian theories of caste; it also points to the likelihood of some formal arbitrariness, discontinuity, and lack of fit between the elements of the received pan-Indian textual tradition and local sociocultural systems (Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1968). While literate religious traditions commonly feature the jealous preservation of orthodoxy and the adoption of an esoteric vocabulary among the professional literati, it is by no means certain that theoretical concepts and lexical fragments found in the everyday thinking and parlance of ordinary villagers will always reflect the textual definitions (wide the word 'dharma' in Batticaloa).

Even the most well-founded 'emic' approach to South Asian cultural materials cannot consist solely in the anthropological admiration of indigenous categories and their 'monistic' or 'dualistic' logic; it must also seek to understand the limits of cognition, the experience and social manipulation of symbolic forms (Geertz 1964; 1973), and the effects of both 'ideal and material interests' upon the content of indigenous reasoning (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1958: 280). Although it would add an element of plausibility to their interpretive schemes, both Dumont and the 'substance and code' writers seem indifferent to the need for a sociology of knowledge. Numerous precedents for such an approach to the study of South Asian civilization can be found in Max Weber’s analysis of Hinduism (1958), in Robert Redfield’s concept of the ‘social organization of tradition’ (1956), and in Milton Singer’s work on the propagation of Sanskritic Hinduism in South India (1972). Indeed, these issues are central to Marriott’s own earlier work on the interconnections between the Indian village and its civilizational matrix (1955) and on ‘multiple reference’ in Indian caste systems (1968b). Even the rare epigram I have chosen from Dumont’s Homo Hierarchicus acknowledges the need for greater attention to variation and discontinuity in ideologies of caste. This essay has presented some data on Tamil caste and matrilineal ideology in eastern Sri Lanka in the hope they will stimulate, if necessary resuscitate, these concerns in South Asian anthropology.
Mukkuvar vannimai: Tamil caste and matriclan ideology in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka

Initial fieldwork in the Batticaloa region was carried out for 18 months in 1969–71 while I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago. Financial support for this research was provided by NIMH Pre-doctoral Fellowship No. MH38122 and NIMH Research Grant No. MH11765 awarded by the U.S. Public Health Service. Additional shorter (4 to 6 month) periods of fieldwork were undertaken in the same region in 1975 and in 1978, while on leave from teaching duties at Cambridge University. This recent research was funded by British SSRC Research Grants No. HR3276 and HR5549, and also by grants from the Smuts Memorial Fund and the University of Cambridge Travelling Expenses Fund. I am indebted to all the people of Batticaloa who assisted me in this research, and especially to K. Mahesvaralingam, Nilam Hameed, K. Kanthanathan, and V. Ratnam.

1 It has been pointed out that Dumont's formulations were less 'dualistic' in his earlier writings (Marriott 1976b: 190–2).
2 David (1977: 182) states that 'the classificatory term for the high castes (uyirnda catukul) [sic] derives from the term for spirit (uyir)', and he cites this as evidence for the belief that 'spirit resides in the blood'. This is surely a lexical error deriving from the mis-transcription of colloquial dialect. The derivation of the expression is from uyar, meaning ‘to rise, to become high’ (Winslow 1862: 137), hence the phrase uyarna catikal (lit. ‘high castes’). This expression is common also in Batticaloa, where it is sometimes colloquially pronounced 'acanta catil'. See section 3.1.
3 The term ‘Moor’ dates from the Portuguese period (1505–1658 A.D.), but it has remained the official designation of the native Muslim population of the island for Census and other purposes. In the Batticaloa region they are all Sunni Muslims of the Shafi’i legal school. The Tamil name for this community is Cōnakar, but in the present climate of pan-Islamic consciousness many prefer to be known simply as 'Muslims'.
4 The largest concentration of Christians is in the town of Batticaloa itself, where Roman Catholics, many of them Portuguese Burghers (Parankiyar), are a very strong community. Methodists and Anglicans have established smaller congregations there. There are modest Christian groups in all of the major towns along the east coast, plus some tiny Christian groups inland. Roman Catholics are by far the largest denomination.
5 Starting in the early years of Independence (post-1947), the government of Sri Lanka sponsored a large-scale irrigation and land-settlement project in the Gal Oya Valley, approximately 15 or 20 miles inland from the Tamil and Moorish settlements along the coast. This has made some new lands available to Tamil and Moorish cultivators, but it has also brought an influx of landless Sinhalese
evidence of the Tamil custom of repeating names in alternate generations, but the practice seems much rarer in the present day.

13 See note 42.

14 Yalman recorded references to traditional marriage relationships between matrilineal clans in Tambiluviul, but he did not appreciate the implication of isogamy which these expressions convey. His informants seem to have said nothing about the formal non-marriageable relationships between clans which are logically entailed (Yalman 1967: 289, 326).

15 The views represented are primarily those of high caste Hindu males. A quarter (9/35) of these informants, including the only two Moors, were full or part-time non-Western curing practitioners; a handful (4/35) were Vilagia Kurukkal temple priests, and a similar number (6/35) were low caste informants (1 Taṭṭār, 1 Vanār, 4 Paraiyars). Not every informant could answer all of the specialized questions I asked, but the sample consisted of the most knowledgeable people in these areas of enquiry. The data they supplied have the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of all intensive first-hand fieldwork material, but I think the most important potential sources of bias have been mentioned.

16 It was interesting to observe some of the minor confrontations between traditional medical systems and Western medicine which arose during the research. There are a number of government hospitals in the region, as well as some Western-trained private practitioners, and Western medical concepts have entered the popular culture. There was an awkward moment during one interview on the topic of the beneficial effects of 'forceful' circulation of the blood. Someone present asked why, if this were true, so many older people today were said to die of 'high blood pressure'.

17 This was a source of initial embarrassment to some local curing practitioners and other informants who had acquired a degree of awareness of Western theories of reproduction and who were afraid to contradict my presumed beliefs. Several informants knew that the medicinal plants were considered to be very important in Western medicine, but all were relieved not to be held accountable for their function.

18 Both among Kandyan Sinhalese (Yalman 1967: 137) and among Kontakattai Vellājars in Tamilnadu (Barratt 1976: 146) it is reported that repeated sexual intercourse is recommended during pregnancy to supply additional semen which will nourish or strengthen the fetus.

19 Tangible evidence of the prior existence of this opening is seen in the fontanelle, the soft spot every newborn baby has at the top of the cranium.

20 The similarity between seminal fluids and breast milk in this respect is reflected in the fact that one of the rare terms for male semen is kāmapāṟṟ, 'milch of lust'.

21 Some informants say that, just as a man's blood (semen) goes into the woman's body during sex, so some of the woman's blood (female
practitioners or by the government hospital would necessarily affect patients of different castes differently. The fact that medication (for a given ailment) was uniform supported the contention that blood was uniform.

26 States of pollution, ordinary purity, and enhanced purity are distinguished respectively among Huvik Brahmans as muttuchettu, mailige, and madi (Harper 1964: 152); among Coorgs as poole, mailige, and madi (Srinivas 1952: Ch. 4), and among K’v’s as itu, sataranam, and madi (Barnett 1976: 143).

27 The general word for ritual pollution among the Moors is mulukku, which is apparently derived from the same verb, muluka, 'to bathe completely'.

28 The explanation of alleged sex-specific differences in the spread of death pollution was linked to the theory that the sex of the child is determined by the relative amounts of maternal semen versus paternal semen which is deposited in the womb. This theory, which was adduced by only two informants, fits nicely with the idea that pollution is transmitted through shared bodily substance. It predicts that pollution will predominate on the father’s side of the family if the deceased is male, and on the mother’s side if the deceased is a female. It was a surprisingly consistent interpretation of conception and pollution, but it was also highly idiosyncratic from the standpoint of the survey findings.

29 In areas of very strong Mukkuvar dominance, particularly in Mannamari Pattu, the more literary form is often heard, i.e., Mukkukar or ‘Mukkuvar’, meaning the ‘foremost Kukans’. This literary form is given as the authentic name of the caste in the regional traditions of the Matthakkavaapu Manmysam (Nadarajah 1962), which also refers to the caste as Kukan Kalam. All of these titles represent claims of caste descent from the mythological Guha (T. Kukan), loyal ferryman of Lord Rama, whose noble qualities are particularly eulogized in the Ramayana of Kamban (Rajagopalanchari 1961). This is not a unique puranic charter; it is shared by the Valan fishing caste of Kerala, the Maravar warriors of Ramnad, and the Sambadavan fishing caste of Tamilnadu (Anantha Krishna Iyer 1909 vol. I: 232; Thurston 1909 vol. V: 24; vol. VI: 352).

30 Mukkuvars in Batticaloa emphatically deny any connection between themselves and the ‘Mukkikar’ fishing castes of Jaffna, and there appears to be no communication between these two groups today. However, there are legends in Jaffna that the Batticaloa Mukkuvars represent the descendants of fishermen expelled from Jaffna for defiling a temple with fish (Brito 1879).

31 There is considerable controversy over the interpretation of this alleged Kalinga ancestry (see Indrapala 1965: 246, for a summary of the arguments). It is, however, a living tradition in Batticaloa, where one of the foremost Mukkuvar matricians is Kaliṅkā kuṭi.

32 H.W. Tambiah (1954: 89) has argued that the Vēḷāḷars of Batticaloa were distinguished from the Mukkuvars and the rest of the population
of the region by the fact that they followed the Thesawalamai legal code of Jaffna. His evidence for this is found in a few ambiguous passages in the Sir Alexander Johnston Papers (Public Record Office, London) which seem scarcely able to bear such a positive interpretation. I know of no ethnographic evidence to corroborate his view.

Vegetarianism is acknowledged to be an ideal form of behaviour for anyone who wishes to attain enhanced piety and spirituality, and some individuals do limit themselves to a vegetarian diet (Caiva cappathu, 'Savite food'). As a caste-wide rule of conduct, however, neither the Vēḷāḷars nor any other caste, except the Viraciva Kurukkals, enforce vegetarianism. It is much more common as a special religious austerity during periods of religious observance. Even among Viraciva Kurukkals, vegetarianism may be limited primarily to active temple priests, who are the only persons who wear the personal lingam at the present time.

Tēcāntara Kurukkals are said to regard 'Akōramāyā Tēvar' as their ancestral preceptor, while ĺannkamar Kurukkals claim 'Panṭṭārēcuna Tēvar' or 'Panṭṭyāvṭīrryayā Tēvar' as their ancestral preceptor. These correspond to the Ekaramārādhya and Ponntārādhya respectively, two of the standard Lingāyat sages (Aanatha Krishna Iyer 1931 vol. IV: 114). Malikārēcuna (Malikkara) is the form in which Civa is worshipped at the Viraciva centre known commonly as Sr Lanka in the Kurumkollu District of Andhr Pradesh (Shree Kumaraswami 1956: 99; Narahash Gopalakrishnamm Chetty 1986: 182; Ramanujan 1973: 47).

The phrase 'Guru-Linga-Jagama' is a motto which commemorates the three cornerstones of Viraciva doctrine: the religious preceptor, the iconic lingam stone, and the Jagama or priest (McCormack 1959: 119; Thurston 1909 vol. IV: 272). The term Makēsvara is a Saivite title sometimes applied to the Jagama priest (Enthoven 1922 vol. II: 355).

The term vavicama corresponds to the Sinhalese waama (Yalman 1967: 138), to the Bengali bānīa or bōngso (Davis 197: 14; Frutzetti & Gverd 1976), and to cognate terms in other Indian languages which typically refer to patrilineally defined social units. However, the term is used in this instance to refer to a set of matrilineal descent units. The term also is used to refer to matrilineally defined groups among the North Kerala Nayars (Gough 1961: 388).

Brahman priests from Jaffna are presently employed in a number of larger urban temples in the vicinity of Batticaloa and Kalmunai towns, as well as at the ancient 'regional temple' of Tirukkōvil.

It should be emphasized that the histories, legends, and formulations of ancient customs contained in the Mattlekakappu Mānnyiam are still part of the fragmentary oral culture of Batticaloa. Informants volunteered recitations from parts of this corpus before I was even aware of its existence. The common term for any discrete palmyra leaf inscription is ētu, while texts pertaining to historical tradition and custom are known by the general term kalvetu ('stone inscription'), although this is merely a metaphorical term. The Mattlekakappu Mānnyiam contains a number of these separately known kalvetus but there are others which exist outside this compendium (e.g. Raghavan 1953).

According to Gunasingam (1974), there is epigraphical evidence of only two royally-endowed Brahman caste settlements (brahmadaya) in Sri Lanka during the Cōḷa period, one of which seems to have been located in the Trincomalee District at Kantālai. It appears to have been a sizeable settlement which conformed to the pattern of Brahman settlements in South India during that period (Stein 1968), and it was patronized by Sinhalese kings of Polonnaruwa after the demise of Cōḷa power in the island. There is no evidence of any such Brahman settlement having been founded in the Batticaloa region.

Several people had heard of an ancient document, the Mukkuvar ērattu ('Mukkuvar enactments'), but I was never able to locate it.

There are only three examples of collective management of agricultural land on a matrilineal basis about which I have much information: (A) There was traditional cultivation of lands belonging to the Kakkatticōlā Civa temple by members of two specific Vēḷāḷ caste kutis from the village of Talukkam. This is discussed in section 5.9. (B) There is a more complex system of management of temple lands in the Cirpatam caste village of Tutulinlanda, whereby members of 13 recognized kutis are annually allocated the 80 standard shares of land in accordance with some principle of rotation. This allocation is in the hands of a special committee of land administrators (Kāṇi Aṭappan) who are in turn accountable to the 13 kuti representatives who constitute the temple committee. This is an indirect management system which involves many kutis, not just one, in the cultivation of temple lands. Court records over the past 25 years indicate that the probity of the special committee of Kāṇi Aṭappan has not been above question. (C) Four generations ago, a Viraciva Kurukkal priest in Akkaraippattu, who had no children of his own, bequeathed about 50 acres of paddy land to his sisters and to his sisters' female descendants. His intention, according to informants, was to provide an endowment to be managed jointly and to be shared by succeeding generations of women of his priestly matriline. Today only 12 acres can be cultivated, due to unforeseen inundation from new irrigation projects. These 12 acres are presently leased to local Moors, and the revenue is shared by the living descendants. Joint management in this case involves a specific branch of the founder's matriclan, rather than the matriclan as a whole.

In addition to these three examples, there is fragmentary evidence of the existence of some joint kuti lands (kuti pānku kāmi) in both Moorish as well as Tamil areas, but no one was able to locate them for me. The principle of tattumāru, or rotating shares of land within a larger tract, is an old type of land tenure which has almost disappeared. Informants were not sure whether traditionally the shareholders within a given tract would have been members of a single kuti. In the few
existing instances of *taṭṭumāru* in the Kokkaṭṭicōlai area, the share-
holders are said to be members of many different *kuṭis*. For other
accounts of shareholding and joint cultivation see Leach 1961 and
Obeyesekere 1967.

42 The expression *urimaiō pen* may also mean a man’s ‘rightful marriage
partner’ in many Tamil areas (Beck 1972: 237; David 1973a: n. 15;
for Sinhalese equivalent see Yalman 1967: 113n.), but this usage was
not noted in Batticaloa.

43 My high caste Tamil landlord in Akkaraipattu, a man of the pres-
tigious Maluvavarancu *kuṭi*, summed up his disdain for the modern
arrogation of *varicai* honours by saying, ‘Only the little people bother
with it nowadays’.

44 Stirrat (1975a: 592) reports another unilinear deviation from the
model of bilaterally-ascribed caste in a Catholic Karāva caste fishing
village in the bilingual (Sinhalese/Tamil) zone near Chilaw on the west
coast of the island. There, however, the rule of caste ascription is
strictly patrilineal. A patrilineal emphasis is reported in Beck’s *Kōṇku

45 In the past there seems to have been a distinction between the ritual
duties of the two main Kurukkal matriclans (see section 5.3). There is
still today a pattern of Kōviḷar caste temple duties which allocates
specific tasks to certain matrilines within the caste. Moorish matric-
clan names include several titles referring to occupational categories,
e.g. *Őjāv* (carpenter) or *Levvi* (Lebbe, leader of mosque prayers),
but these names bear no present relation to actual occupation.

46 Tamils in the Batticaloa region do not seem to bother with elaborate
comparisons of the horoscopes of proposed marriage partners, in con-
trast with Sinhalese concern for these matters (Kemper 1979).

47 As an ideal characterization, marriage between Kurukkals and Vēḷāḷars
is said to be more common than marriage between Kurukkals and
Mukkuvars, but there is no empirical evidence for this in Akkara-
pattu. In the Vēḷāḷar-dominated village of Tambiluvil, Kurukkals seem
to have married spouses of the highest ranking Vēḷāḷar clans no more
than 25% of the time (Hiatt 1973: 248), yet Kurukkal informants
often told me that a Vēḷāḷar spouse was a very respectable ‘second
best’. The Vēḷāḷars in Tambiluvil, at any rate, often speak of the
Kurukkals as members of their caste, but they rank them below the
most prestigious pair of Vēḷāḷar *kuṭis*.

48 Yalman (1960; 1967: 142) has discussed the importance of the
possession and manipulation of hereditary names and titles in Sin-
halese society. The manner in which even a conventional naming rule
(e.g. patronymic) can encourage the development of a ‘pseudo-
unilineal’ ideology with no empirical basis has been illustrated by
Leach (1973), using material from the genealogies of eminent English
Quaker families of the 19th century.

49 There are a number of functional similarities between this ritual and
the annual *Asala Pahara* in Kandy, which ‘enacted’ the constitution
of the Kandyian kingdom in visible form through a series of dramatic
processions associated with the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha.
Also like the Kokkaṭṭicōlai temple, the Temple of the Tooth is
organized around the distinction between the ritual duties of an
‘inner group’ (*atul kaṭṭale*) of Goygama caste servants who assist the
officiating Bhikkus and an ‘outer group’ (*pīta kaṭṭale*) of secular
temple administrators. The chief of the ‘inner group’ is the Kāṇya
Karavana Rāla, who is also in charge of the temple store-room and
who seeks to occupy a role similar in many ways to that of the
Vēḷāḷar temple chief at Kokkatticcōlai (Hocart 1931: 8–15;
Seneviratna 1978: 26–37). The historical traditions of Batticaloa
refer occasionally to the role of the Kandy king as a patron of
major temples, and it seems likely that there would have been some
sharing of ritual conventions between the two regions.

50 Recent years have witnessed the development of patterns of sponsor-
ship by new categories of participants, e.g. civil servants employed in
government offices in the Akkaraipattu area. This corresponds to a
trend noted also in Tamilnadu (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976: 203–4).

51 Much more historical information is needed, however, before all the
puzzles are solved. There remains the fact that the Timilar caste,
which tradition recounts was driven out of the Batticaloa region in a
war with the Mukkuvars, and which is found today in the vicinity of
Verugal and Toppur south of Trincomalee, follows a pattern of matri-
lineal clan organization substantially similar to that of the Mukkuvars,
Vēḷāḷars, and other Hindu castes of present day Batticaloa.

52 Aside from the Viracazva Kurukkals, the only group which appears to
be unique to Batticaloa is the Cirpatam caste (Raghavan 1953; 1971:
109–12).
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