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Author(s): Dennis B. McGilvray

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Paraiyar Drummers of Sri Lanka: consensus and constraint in an untouchable caste

DENNIS B. MCGILVRAY—*University of Colorado, Boulder*

Michael Moffatt's (1979a; see also 1975, 1979b) recent study, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, generally supports Louis Dumont's holistic emphasis on Hindu caste purity ideology and propounds the argument that untouchable castes in traditional rural south Indian villages share with their high-caste neighbors a "cultural consensus" regarding the basic assumptions and values of the caste structure specifically and of the Hindu religious system generally. Moffatt presents a range of detailed social-structural, mythic, and ritual evidence to refute the contention of writers such as Berreman (1971) and Mencher (1974) that untouchable culture and society diverge radically from the ideals and institutions of the higher Hindu castes, which, it is said, have too often served as an unrealistic model for South Asian anthropological analysis. Aside from its strong polemical stance, the book presents a unique and detailed ethnographic account of society in an untouchable "colony" in the village of Endavur in southern Chingleput District, Tamilnadu. Perhaps most notably, Moffatt reports the existence of a complex hierarchy of subcastes and caste-grades within the colony, including an elevated subcaste of untouchable priests that seems to fill a "Brahman role" and some very low-ranking groups that appear to serve as "untouchables to the untouchables." In the symbolic domain, Moffatt contends that untouchables in Endavur reflect in their religious rituals a firm commitment to the underlying Hindu values of purity and pollution. Thus, his argument runs, even when untouchables dispute the low rank they are accorded as a caste, they still share an implicit cultural consensus with the higher castes concerning the fundamental assumptions of hierarchy and purity which sustain the system as a whole.

Using Moffatt's material on Tamilnadu Harijans as my point of reference, I seek in this paper to assess the evidence for a comparable cultural consensus among the untouchables

While a number of writers have argued that untouchable castes in South Asia are alienated from, and exploited by, the larger high-caste society and culture of which they are the lowest part, Moffatt has recently argued that untouchables in Tamilnadu, south India, nevertheless share a deep "cultural consensus" with the higher castes concerning the basic values and assumptions of the caste system. Using contrasting data on untouchable Tamil Paraiyar Drummers in two locations in eastern Sri Lanka, this paper supports the consensus theory but also points to major constraints imposed on low-caste culture and social organization by prevailing political, economic, and demographic conditions. [Tamil untouchable castes, Sri Lanka, cultural consensus theory, purity versus kingly honor, matrilineal kinship, Hinduism]

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of the Batticaloa region in eastern Sri Lanka.¹ While not encountering the spectacular “structural replication” of hierarchical intracaste divisions he found in Endavur, I do find support for Moffatt’s position in other areas of untouchable thought and behavior. Through a comparison of two separate untouchable settlements, I explore some of the pragmatic limitations on untouchable sociocultural complexity in a more “traditional” locality, as well as some of the innovative sociocultural changes occurring in an untouchable community under conditions of relative prosperity and autonomy in a modernizing regional town. The focus in both of these ethnographic studies is on untouchable symbolic orders and on social change in the domain of religious institutions. While I seek to document some major ethnographic variations on Moffatt’s theme of cultural consensus, I also try to show that untouchables in eastern Sri Lanka, and probably elsewhere in South Asia, can be severely constrained in their ability to express this consensus by prevailing political, economic, and demographic factors.

matrilineal caste structure in the Batticaloa region

The coastal region of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka is an area of Tamil-speaking Hindu and Muslim communities subsisting chiefly on irrigated paddy cultivation, together with some coastal fishing. The settlement pattern is often extremely dense along the coast, with adjacent but segregated Tamil (Shivite Hindu) and Moorish (Sunni Muslim) wards comprising large semiurban coastal villages and peasant towns from which cultivators commute considerable distances to their inland fields. A less dense rural pattern of clustered hamlets, predominantly Hindu, is found on the isolated western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon, and it is here that some of the most archaic features of social organization and communal ritual are still maintained. Throughout the region, but especially in the districts south of the town of Batticaloa, both Tamil and Moorish social organization is typified by bilateral cross-cousin marriage, dowry, and matrilocal residence, as well as a matrilineal clan (*kuṭi*) system that provides a common institutional basis for the management of Hindu temples and Muslim mosques (McGilvray 1974). While specific rights vary locally, the principle of joint management of religious institutions through matriclan representatives is well established among the middle- and high-ranking Tamil castes, whose matrilineal temple trustees are called *vaṇṇakkars*, and among the Moors, whose matrilineal mosque trustees are called *maraikkārs*.

The regional caste hierarchy among the Tamils in this part of the island is peculiar in the virtual absence of indigenous Brahmans. Traditionally, a high-ranking priestly caste of Vīracaiya Kurukkaḷṣ, distantly affiliated to the Vīracaiya (Lingāyat) sect of Karnataka, has provided temple officiants and domestic priests for the highest castes, although today the number of active priests is rapidly dwindling (McGilvray in press). The dominant land-owning castes are Mukkuvars and Vēḷāḷars, but it was the Mukkuvars who, in the precolonial period, exercised predominant political power under a system of seven matrilineal chieftaincies nominally tributary to the Kandyan king. The historical origins of the Mukkuvar caste, and of the “Mukkuvar chiefship” (Mukkuvar *vannimai*) that formerly controlled much of the region, seem largely traceable to the invading mercenary armies of “Keralas and Tamils” led by Magha (*Mākōn*) in the early 13th century A.D. (Indrapala 1965: 236ff.; Liyanagamage 1968:106). The Mukkuvar soldiers were presumably recruited among the ancestors of the present-day Malabar Coast fishing caste of that name, but in the Batticaloa region they were rewarded with land and the right to local kingship, two strongly cherished symbols of Mukkuvar caste identity today. The other major Hindu castes in the regional system are Kōvilar Temple Servants, Karaiyār Fishermen, Cīrpātam Cultivators,

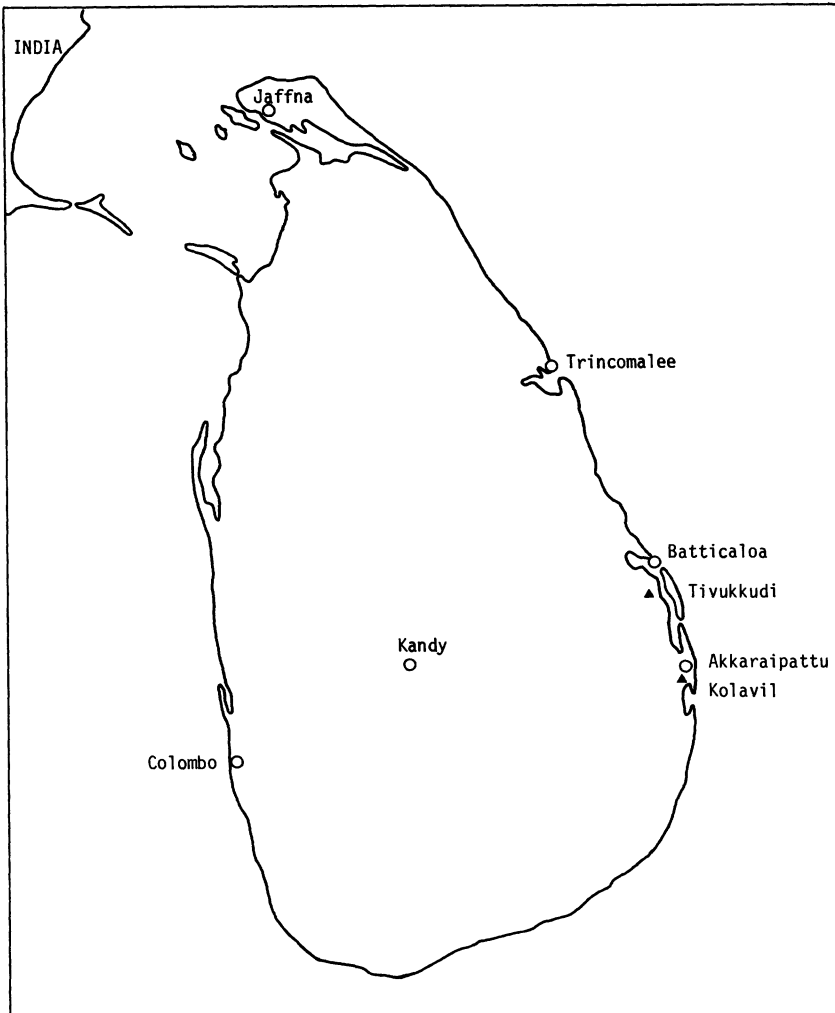


Figure 1. Sri Lanka, showing fieldwork sites.

Taṭṭār Smiths, Cāṇṭār Climbers, Vaṇṇār Washermen, Nāvitar Barbers, and Paraiyar Drummers. The Viracaiva Kurukkals, Mukkuvars, and Velalars presently vie for rank within locally circumscribed status-arenas such as temple festivals, where they are seen as constituting a collective stratum of “high,” or “good,” or “big” people. They are the only castes referred to generically as “Tamils” (lower castes always being specified by name), and it is evident that these high-ranking castes set the prevailing standards in lifestyle, matrilineal social organization, and religious practice throughout the Batticaloa region (McGilvray 1973, 1974, 1982c).

The Moors are the largest and most important non-Hindu group in the area, but their relative prosperity and social autonomy in relation to the Tamils distances them from the Hindu caste hierarchy. There are also Catholic Eurasians, known as Portuguese Burghers or Paraṅkiyars, who constitute a castelike community of craftsmen and mechanics ranked roughly on a par with the Tattar Smiths and the Cantar Climbers (McGilvray 1982b). At the very bottom of the caste system, below the Paraiyar Drummers, are ranked the residentially distinct settlements of Kaṭaiyar Limeburners and Kuṛavar Gypsies. The Kataiyars, however,

are Christian Methodists by religion and have recently immigrated from other areas. Thus, while their absolute caste rank is judged to be below that of the Paraiyar Drummers, they are not regarded as having hereditary rights and customary ritual functions within the local Hindu social order. In fact, the Kataiyars' conspicuous lack of such rights and ritual functions contributes significantly to their low-caste rank relative to those castes, such as the Paraiyar Drummers, who are said to have at least a "share" (*paṅku*) in the traditional caste system. The final group, the Kuravar Gypsies, are at the very bottom of the status hierarchy. Their livelihood is hunting and itinerant snakecharming, although more recently some of them have been settled in a government-sponsored peasant colonization scheme away from the centers of population. They speak a dialect of Telugu among themselves, and some have recently been converted to Catholicism. For these reasons, the Gypsies, like the Limeburners, are seen as outside the organic core of the local caste system.

Tivukkudi: a traditional Paraiyar hamlet

In the relatively poor and isolated districts on the western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon, one finds today the strongest vestiges of the "Mukkuvar chiefship" and probably the most rigid maintenance of ancient intercaste privileges and duties to be found anywhere in the region. One portion of my fieldwork was conducted in the vicinity of the famous Tāntōnrīsvāra Shiva Temple in Kokkaticcolai, situated in the subdistrict of Manmunai Pattu North, the site of an annual ritual that explicitly serves to dramatize and to validate the serial rank ordering of all the major castes and matrilineal clans in the region. This ritual, which is enacted at the close of the annual Shiva Temple festival, is called variously "calling out the rice gruel pots" (*kañci muṭṭi kūrūtal*) or "calling out the shares" (*paṅku kūrūtal*). When I observed the ritual in 1975, a total of 120 honorific titles were recited in strict order, and a representative of each of the named castes and matrilineal clans was expected to step forward to receive an identical small clay pot of *kañci* (rice gruel) as a token of his group's rights or "shares" in the conduct of the temple festival. The organization of these temple rituals, in turn, is seen as a symbolic microcosm of the caste hierarchy and division of labor in the local agrarian social structure (McGilvray 1982c). The very last pot of gruel in this ritual sequence is always awarded to the bearer of the title *mūppan*,² the leader of the local Paraiyar Drummers.

Paraiyars in the Kokkaticcolai area provide ritual services for the dominant Mukkuvar caste and no others, although it is typical in other localities for the Velalars also to enjoy these services. No services are exchanged among the Drummers, Barbers, and Washermen, the three castes identified as *kuṭimai* (domestic servants). There are 19 predominantly Mukkuvar villages that this one group of Paraiyars serves on a regular basis, and the territorial limits of other Paraiyar "service districts" are similarly well defined. All of the Paraiyars who live and work in the Kokkaticcolai vicinity reside in the joint Mukkuvar/Paraiyar hamlet of Tivukkudi (Tivukkuṭiyiruppu), located within the larger cluster of Mukkuvar caste hamlets known as Ambilanturai.³ The Paraiyar section of Tivukkudi consists of only 11 families, and no other untouchable castes are found there. Physically, the Paraiyar end of the hamlet resembles the opposite end reserved for the Mukkuvars: a single unpaved lane shaded by dense coconut trees leads from one end to the other, with palm-thatched mud huts facing the road on both sides. The whole subdistrict is poor, but the absence of any substantial brick and tile-roofed houses in the Paraiyar side of the hamlet distinguishes it from the Mukkuvar settlements nearby. A physical separation between the Paraiyar and the Mukkuvar halves of the hamlet exists, but it is scarcely noticeable to the visitor. In fact, there is no precise boundary line, such as the one circumscribing Moffatt's Harijan colony, and the entire hamlet shares a common name.

The history of this Paraiyar hamlet apparently goes back about 150 years, to a time when four major Mukkuvar landlords (*pōṭiyārs*) donated a total of 7.3 ha of paddy land on perpetual service-tenure to a group of Paraiyar families recruited from already established Paraiyar villages elsewhere in the Batticaloa region. This land is still in the possession of the Tivukkudi Paraiyars, who lease it to other cultivators and share the cash rents they receive. Although the Paraiyars engage in agricultural wage labor for local Mukkuvar landlords whenever they can, their traditional drumming duties appear to take precedence over other forms of employment.⁴ Command of the services of the three domestic service (*kutimai*) castes—Navitar Barber, Vannar Washermen, and Paraiyar Drummer—is a coveted privilege of the higher castes, embodying the ancient rights delegated to them under the former chiefship of the Mukkuvars. In turn, the dominant Mukkuvars are expected to provide economic support and patronage for their hereditary servants, the Paraiyars and others. I do not have precise information on untouchable earnings, but it appears at the present day that the Paraiyars maintain themselves on the shares of rent collected from their service-tenure lands (two shares for the *muppan*), on the wages they earn as intermittent agricultural laborers, on the cash fees they now receive for drumming services at homes and temples, and on a variety of archaic payments in kind, including annual donations of paddy from high-caste landowning households and small but frequent gifts of coins, cooked food, and cloth at high-caste ceremonies. The annual Paraiyar performance of *cevvāṭṭu*, a drumming and dance routine conducted at the gateway to high-caste domestic compounds in commemoration of the Cittirai New Year (April/May), is a customary occasion for patronly donations to help support the local Paraiyar families.

In addition to the establishment of Paraiyar service-tenure paddy lands in Tivukkudi, the original Mukkuvar dignitaries who founded the settlement bestowed upon the first *muppan*, or leader of the local Paraiyars, a remarkably fine double-headed brass drum, popularly called the *rācā mēḷam* (“king drum”), which serves as the *muppan*’s insignia of office and as a sort of heraldic symbol of the Paraiyar caste as a whole (see Figure 2). Some type of *raca melam* symbol is cherished in every Paraiyar settlement in Batticaloa, but nowadays it is often represented as a miniature drum or as simply an ordinary drum wrapped in cloth. The drum in Tivukkudi, however, is quite imposing, bearing an inscription in Tamil which indicates that it was given in the year 1839 as the “general drum” (*potuvāna mēḷam*) of the Manmunai subdistrict. In the system of local caste and matrilineal honorifics, the *raca melam* is only one of many different types of *varicai* (public marks of honor) accorded to specific groups. Together with an officially recognized cattle-brand (*virutu*) depicting a pair of drumsticks, it is one of the few marks of honor the Paraiyars have.

The *raca melam* is carried to all public ceremonies where the Paraiyars provide drumming service, as well as to Mukkuvar funeral houses. High-caste patrons are expected to provide new white cloth for the drummers’ turbans, plus several yards of the same material in which to wrap the *raca melam* and a new reed mat on which to place it during the performance. Significantly, however, mats are never provided for the musicians themselves. Thus, the tradition of the *raca melam* mediates a contradiction between the two principles of symbolic degradation and societal holism: the high-caste Mukkuvars rigidly stigmatize the Paraiyars on the level of personal interaction, while abstractly honoring in the form of the emblematic “king drum” the vision of an organic social order in which a royal division of labor and an ancient allocation of sacred duties gives meaning to even the lowliest of caste occupations. The Paraiyars themselves naturally take pride in the honor accorded to their caste symbol, particularly as it reinforces their generalized caste function as musicians rather than their specifically degraded role as funeral servants.⁵

The acknowledged hereditary occupations (*toḷil*) of the Paraiyars everywhere in the Batticaloa region are drumming and funeral work, and funeral drumming is certainly the most

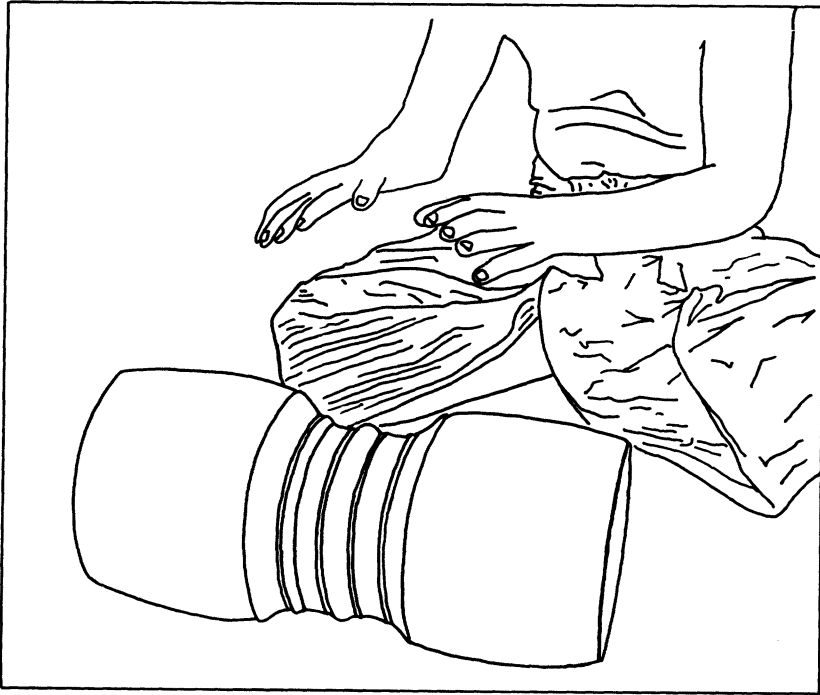


Figure 2. The *rācā mēḷam* ("king drum") of the Paraiyar *mūppan* of Tivukkudi, Sri Lanka. This heraldic brass drum, presently unstrung, bears an inscription indicating it was presented in A.D. 1839 as the "general drum for the entire district of Maṇmunai in Maṭṭakkaḷappu" (Batticaloa).

symbolically potent embodiment of these two functions. Although the Paraiyars are said to guard or to be "in charge of" mortuary sites, the disposal of the dead in the Batticaloa region is accomplished overwhelmingly by burial, not cremation, and friends and relatives of the deceased actually dig the grave.⁶ Thus, Paraiyars serve in the role of cremation ground attendants only rarely; their usual function is simply to drum at funeral houses and to lead the corpse in procession to the cemetery. Drummers are also employed to make public announcements of various sorts, including joint cultivation schedules and governmental notices. Two of the customary Paraiyar jobs mentioned in Moffatt's ethnography, scavenging dead cattle and serving as village watchmen, are underplayed and/or nonexistent in the Batticaloa region. The office of village watchman simply does not exist here. However, cattle scavenging is more difficult for me to judge. No one mentioned it specifically, but it might be an unofficial sideline for some families. Paraiyars with whom I spoke said that beef eating was widespread in the caste, but the source of the beef was not made clear to me.⁷

Although notable change has occurred within living memory, the Paraiyars of Tivukkudi continue to be constrained by rigid deference rules and sumptuary restrictions in the presence of the higher castes. Paraiyar women may now wear blouses, but Paraiyar men do not yet wear shirts or long waistcloths when interacting with Mukkuvars. Local battles over Paraiyar use of bicycles and umbrellas are probably yet to come, as few Paraiyars in Tivukkudi yet have the means to purchase such high-status items. Paraiyar children are only beginning to attend school in this area, and the Tivukkudi Paraiyars as a group are said by high-caste residents to display a characteristically unrefined pattern of speech and manners that marks them indelibly as members of the lowest caste.

Virtually every adult male Paraiyar in Tivukkudi is an accomplished drummer or shawm-player. The authentic one-sided, calfskin-headed *parai* drum (Moffatt 1979a:112; Mahar 1972:xxxiii) is not found in the Batticaloa region, and Ron Walcott (1975:personal communication), an ethnomusicologist who has worked in many parts of Sri Lanka, has never seen one in the entire island. Instead of using the drum which is their caste namesake, the Paraiyars exclusively play the *tavil* (a double-headed cylindrical drum played with one stick and one hand), the *tampattam* (an attached pair of single-headed bowl-shaped drums played with two bent reed sticks), and the *kuḷal* ("flute," here a short double-reed shawm). The demand for drumming services at Mukkuvar temple festivals, exorcisms, domestic rituals, and funerals is sufficient to employ several Tivukkudi Paraiyar bands simultaneously during certain seasons of the year. There are over 18 distinctive drumming rhythms (*tāḷams*) in the Paraiyar repertoire, only 2 of which are inauspicious and are associated with funeral observances. The remaining rhythms are auspicious and varied; they are used in pujas, exorcisms, processions, and public entertainments. Whether at auspicious events or at elaborate funerals, the Tivukkudi drummers are frequently expected to perform customary dance routines in conjunction with their music. The *tampattam* and *kuḷal* players remain stationary while the *tavil* drummers jointly execute various sequences of spins, leaps, and quicksteps similar in some ways to routines observed in the Kandy Perahera (Seneviratne 1978).

While not specifically contradicting Moffatt's (1979a:113) data that Paraiyar drumming keeps low and malevolent spirits at bay, my informants in eastern Sri Lanka emphasized the regionally developed ideal of drumming as a hereditary high-caste and matriclan honor displayed in domestic ritual. Drumming is exclusively a mark of honor for the highest caste households, and exceptions to this rule can be authorized only by the Mukkuvar headmen. Although such drumming is their distinctive duty and profession (*tolil*), it is specifically *not* one of the Paraiyars' own hereditary caste honors; therefore, the high castes never allow the Paraiyars to drum for their own caste funerals.

The internal organization of the Paraiyar caste in Tivukkudi is quite simple. The only designated authority is the *muppan*, who serves as a local headman for the Paraiyars of Tivukkudi and as the symbolic representative of the Paraiyar caste as a whole in the performance of high-caste domestic and communal ritual. The *muppan* serves for an indefinite term with the consent of his caste-peers, but his appointment is subject to ratification and veto by the Mukkuvar caste leadership, who have sometimes been known to take a direct hand in the selection process. No clear principle of succession to the office of *muppan* can be discerned, but there have been instances of succession from father to son as well as from ego to cross-cousin.

It is the *muppan* who must be notified when high-caste households need drumming services, and it is the *muppan* who oversees the assignment of particular musicians to each event. I have occasionally seen the present *muppan* playing the shawm in large performances, but his basic function is to serve as the living symbol of his caste. He receives the annual pot of rice gruel on behalf of the Paraiyars, and his visible presence at major temple and domestic ceremonies signifies acceptance of the "share" (*panku*) of civic rights and duties traditionally allocated to the Paraiyars under the Mukkuvar chiefship. Conversely, it is by summoning the *muppan* that high-caste instructions and reprimands are conveyed to the Paraiyars as a group. In short, the office of the *muppan* in Tivukkudi is the nexus of all the formal executive, communicative, and symbolic functions affecting the local Paraiyar caste in this area. In this respect, the *muppan* is similar to the headmen of the Barbers (called the *mullaikkāran*) and the Washermen (called the *taṅṅaiikkāran*), the other two domestic castes whose services are so jealously guarded as marks of honor by the higher castes.

The kinship pattern of the Tivukkudi Paraiyars, as revealed in a survey of marriage choice in all 11 households, suggests that the incidence of "correct" Dravidian bilateral cross-cousin marriage (i.e., matches with first cousins or with more distantly related classificatory cousins) is about average for the Batticaloa region (2 of 11 or 18 percent), but the frequency of seemingly "erroneous" marriages with other kin is much higher (4 of 11 or 36 percent; see McGilvray 1974 for cross-cousin marriage statistics). Paraiyars in Tivukkudi with whom I discussed the matter acknowledged this tendency and attributed it to the difficulty of arranging categorically proper matches within such a small marriage pool. About 27 percent of the sampled marriages were contracted with spouses from other Paraiyar settlements, but the relatively greater poverty of the Tivukkudi families puts them at a grave disadvantage in the dowry competition for unrelated sons-in-law. As for matrilineal descent units, the Tivukkudi Paraiyars have none. In fact, a lack of familiarity with "matrilineal reasoning" was apparent in many things they said. A few Paraiyar informants were aware of the existence of distinct matrilineal units in the Paraiyar settlement of Kolavil North (see next section) because some marriages have been contracted there in recent generations. On the whole, however, the attitude toward kinship in Tivukkudi was very down-to-earth and pragmatic: the Paraiyars here claim they are simply trying to cope with life's demands as best they can.

The autonomous religious organization of the Tivukkudi Paraiyars is minimal at the present time, although there is an indication of slightly greater activity in the past. A conspicuous contrast with the south Indian ethnography is immediately apparent in the lack of any well-defined village and hamlet boundary lines to delimit the strict territorial jurisdictions of specific goddesses and guardian deities (cf. Moffatt 1979a; Beck 1972). There is also no clearly segmented hierarchy of personal, family, lineage, hamlet, and village gods as described by Moffatt (1979b:250), although most families do honor a household goddess annually. This holds true for all Hindu settlements in the Batticaloa region, both high caste and low. However, the cult of the goddess (generically, *Ammā*), particularly in the forms of *Māriyamman*, *Pattirakāḷi*, and *Kaṇṇakiyamman* (cognate with the Sinhalese *Pattini*), is a widespread and fundamental component of the religious life at all levels of the society. In the area around Tivukkudi, every substantial *Mukkuvar* village or village-cluster maintains temples for *Mariyamman* or *Kannakiyamman*, while *Pattirakali* receives special (although by no means exclusive) veneration from the *Tattar Smiths*. Each temple celebrates an annual festival during the summer months that effects a ritual "cooling" (*kuliritti*) of the goddess's anger and secures her protective blessing for the hamlets in the vicinity, particularly those that share in the sponsorship of the nightly rituals. Festivals for *Mariyamman* in this part of the district generally include nightly processions through the residential neighborhoods, a spectacular sequence of trance behavior and firewalking, and finally a reenactment of the myth concerning *Mariyamman's* meditative austerities (*tavam*) to obtain the "pearls" of smallpox as a boon from Lord Shiva. A typical *Kannakiyamman* festival also cools the goddess, this time through recitation and reenactment of parts of the *Cilappatikāram* myth, including her marriage to *Kōvalan*, followed by the offering of colossal heaps of *pukkai* (boiled milk-rice) (McGilvray 1977).

The larger *Mukkuvar* village cluster of *Ambilanturai*, of which Tivukkudi is a part, maintains a permanent *Mariyamman* temple that, in the manner of similar temples elsewhere, requires the services of Tivukkudi Paraiyars from time to time, especially during the annual festival. However, the Paraiyars are not permitted to enter the immediate precincts of the temple compound. Instead, they are ensconced in a designated area adjacent to the temple, from which their music is suitably audible to the goddess as well as to the higher caste worshipers and devotees inside. The priests (*puccāris*) and temple officials shout or signal to the Paraiyar band whenever drumming of one sort or another is required for the rituals, and

these same drummers later take up the vanguard in festival processions through the village lanes. Both the drumming rhythms and the wailing sounds of the shawm provided by the Paraiyar band, as well as the devotional hymns with *uṭukkai* (hourglass-shaped hand-drum) accompaniment supplied by high-caste devotees, are essential to achieving the trance and possession states that are central to the cult of the goddess in all her forms. The Paraiyars, although barred from witnessing details of the inner pujas, nevertheless attend many such festivals each year, and they certainly understand the broad structure of the rituals.

The independent worship of Mariyamman is not closed to the lowest castes; it is only their attendance and participation at temples run by the high castes that is strictly regulated. This is shown by the existence of a humble Mariyamman shrine in the Paraiyar neighborhood of Tivukkudi itself. To be more precise, there is a site in Tivukkudi where the Paraiyars formerly erected a temporary *pantal* shrine and celebrated their own Mariyamman festival each year at the conclusion of the larger Mariyamman festival conducted by the local Mukkuvars from nearby villages. There is a tiny permanent Paraiyar shrine to Piḷḷaiyār, the locally preferred name for Ganesh, and informants also said that Vairavan, a popular guardian deity, is commonly propitiated. Paraiyar residents of Tivukkudi told me that there was a former *muppan* headman who had been competent to conduct the rituals for Mariyamman, but that in recent years no one has taken the initiative to maintain the annual observances. After severe floods occurred in 1957, the Mariyamman temple for the Mukkuvar hamlet-cluster of Ambilaturai as a whole was relocated in the high-caste portion of Tivukkudi itself, a factor that may have somehow cast a further shadow over the struggling Paraiyar Mariyamman cult.

In general, the evidence that the Tivukkudi Paraiyars participate in the ritual institutions of the dominant Mukkuvar caste is quite strong, but this participation is markedly stigmatized, partial, and imbued with an aura of hereditary servitude. There is no evidence of an independent untouchable counterculture; in fact, there are clear indications in the domain of caste honorifics and the cult of local goddesses that Paraiyars share the attitudes and presuppositions of the higher castes. At the same time, however, "structural replication" of high-caste social organization and temple ceremonies, to use Moffatt's terminology, has not occurred among the Tivukkudi Paraiyars. The comparison of Tivukkudi with a larger and more autonomous untouchable settlement in the same region reveals some of the dynamic factors that can either limit or promote the tangible expression of "cultural consensus" at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

Kolavil North: an independent Paraiyar settlement

The relative inaccessibility, dispersed village settlement pattern, and rigid intercaste service relationships that characterize the area around Tivukkudi are no longer typical of the Batticaloa region as a whole. The greater portion of the population lives in much denser multiethnic coastal settlements, such as the town of Akkaraipattu (population 25,000, in Amparai District), which served as my own primary fieldwork site. The Moors of Akkaraipattu (approximately two-thirds of the inhabitants) dominate the residential wards on the northern side of the town, while a small number of Christians and Sinhalese Buddhists, together with a major bloc of Hindu Tamils, inhabit the southern wards. The high-ranking Mukkuvars and Velalars reside in a neighborhood adjacent to the town's main Pillaiyar temple, which they control, as well as in several outlying villages. The closest of these suburban villages is Kolavil, but despite progressive "urban sprawl," there still remains a clear geographical separation of approximately 180 m between the southern edge of the town and the northernmost margins of the village. Administratively, the entire village of Kolavil is grouped together within one of the Tamil wards of the town, under the jurisdic-

tion of a single government headman (Grama Sevaka), but socially the village of Kolavil is sharply divided into two distinct caste neighborhoods. Only Mukkuvars live in Kolavil South and only Paraiyars live in Kolavil North. The dividing line between them is a narrow zone of coconut and banana trees and weeds. Kolavil North is widely regarded as one of the oldest Paraiyar settlements in the Batticaloa region, although no concrete historical documentation could be found.

The Mukkuvars exercised strong political control over the caste system in Akkaraipattu in the early colonial period, and there are still important vestiges of the old caste authority structure today. The chiefship of Akkaraipattu subdistrict is customarily lodged in the office of the *urppōtiyār*, a position transmitted in the matrilineal line, subject to consensual ratification by the leadership of the important Mukkuvar matriclans. The *urppōtiyār* symbolically enacts the "Mukkuvar chiefship" by regulating the display of honorific markers by each caste and matriclan and by enforcing the performance of hereditary caste duties within his territorial jurisdiction. In the Akkaraipattu area, the Mukkuvars share their high honors and privileges with the Velalars, who are said to have originally brought the three domestic service castes to the already Mukkuvar-dominated region when they immigrated. Today, caste affiliation is reckoned in the matrilineal line of descent, and specific Mukkuvar and Velalar matriclans enjoy a long-standing tradition of reciprocal cross-caste marriage alliance.⁸

Designated elder male representatives of each Mukkuvar and Velalar matriclan constitute a committee of temple trustees (*vannakkars*), which also functions as a de facto high-caste council, with the *urppōtiyār* serving as an ex officio member. These same matriclan leaders periodically canvass their clan memberships for contributions of money, labor, and materials to underwrite the performance of specific segments of major temple rituals. For example, a large matriclan might be expected to sponsor all the pujas and processions on a specific night of the festival, and such a practice tends to make the sequential order as well as the grandeur of each ritual "share" a matter of great status rivalry among the groups. In practice, however, a certain degree of pragmatic compromise and pooling of resources is often necessary among the demographically smaller and financially poorer groups if they are to participate successfully. Thus, despite the frequent rhetoric of time-honored rights, it is apparent that the sponsorship of local temple festivals is a dynamic arena of shifting status-dramatizations, both for castes and for matriclans.

Here, as in the vicinity of Tivukkudi, the privilege of summoning Paraiyars to domestic rituals and to funerals is deemed a highly significant mark of honor to which only certain higher castes have historic right. Under the traditional rules, which are now steadily eroding, the *urppōtiyār* had to be notified of all life-crisis ceremonies, and only he could authorize an order summoning the Paraiyars from Kolavil North. Among these Paraiyars, the headman formerly exercised the multiplex sort of authority and leadership still presently enjoyed by the *muppan* of Tivukkudi. Here, too, in an iconic sort of way, the *muppan* stood for the entire Paraiyar caste, and even today high-caste residents will refer lightheartedly to any nearby Paraiyar as "*muppan*." Similarly, the designation of a successor to the previous *muppan* was a decision in which the high-caste leadership actively took part.

Kolavil North is much larger and more affluent than the Paraiyar hamlet of Tivukkudi. Over 100 Paraiyar families resided there in 1975, and I understand that the majority of households have government land-use permits in the Gal Oya development scheme that are virtually as good as deeds. I do not have detailed information on the size and distribution of holdings, but I am led to believe that the parcels of land are small (perhaps .5-1.2 ha). Yet these modest landholdings, together with employment as agricultural wage laborers, carpenters, brick masons, astrologers, and curing specialists, enable most Kolavil Paraiyars to avoid performing any of the stigmatizing duties popularly associated with their

caste. In the government Householders' List for 1970, a total of 73 percent of the adult Paraiyar men listed their occupation as "cultivation" (*kamam*), including the local *muppan* himself. Only one man officially listed his profession as a form of drumming (*piracittam*, "announcing" as a government-employed crier). The reputation of the Kolavil Paraiyars as *mantiravātis* (sorcerers, specialists in the occult), as well as effective and respected practitioners of folk medicine (McGilvray 1982a), is widespread even beyond the limits of the Batticaloa region. The appearance of Kolavil North is much more orderly and prosperous than that of Tivukkudi, with a substantial proportion of plastered brick structures and many individual wells. The lanes are arranged in a rectilinear grid fashion identical to the layout of high-caste neighborhoods, there is a government school, and a couple of houses near the main road even have electricity.

The authority of the Mukkuvar *urppotiyar* of Akkaraipattu has dwindled drastically in the 20th century, and it is quite possible that the present incumbent will be the last. The administrative apparatus of local government has appropriated virtually all of his traditional powers, and there is very little for him to do anymore except to cling to his symbolic domination of the Barber, Washerman, and Drummer castes. The two middle-ranking castes in the Akkaraipattu hierarchy, the Smiths and the Climbers, have already managed to assert their independence of the Mukkuvar chiefship, dramatized in the annual Pillaiyar temple festival conducted by the highest castes. Both the Smiths and the Climbers have built their own permanent temples, and they largely ignore the events transpiring at the main high-caste temple. As for the Barbers and the Washermen, they continue to find their caste professions lucrative in a town the size of Akkaraipattu, although many of them are dropping their hereditary, *jajmāni*-type links with high-caste households and are opening more dignified and universalistic barber saloons and laundry shops along the main roads. For reasons I cannot fully explain, the Barbers have practically no independent religious institutions of their own, despite their modest prosperity, but the Washermen have daringly built their own permanent Hindu temple within plain view of the high-caste temple.

The *urppotiyar* asserts that his connections with the service castes have changed little over the years, but in fact what was once a relationship of command and subordination has perforce become a connection requiring diplomacy and negotiation. There are only about seven adult Paraiyar men in Kolavil North who still engage in drumming of any sort, and the younger generation shows little interest in taking up the profession. On the one hand, funeral drumming is a low-status profession in the eyes of the Hindus, and on the other hand, the decision of Muslim religious leaders in the past 20 years to discourage the hiring of Paraiyar musicians at circumcision ceremonies and mosque feasts has removed a major financial incentive to take up drumming.⁹ The office of the *muppan* still exists in Kolavil North, but it is no longer the symbolic and authoritative nexus of Paraiyar caste organization. The *muppan* continues to act as the official leader of the caste musicians, and it is to the *muppan* that the *urppotiyar* continues to convey his official summonses for funeral drumming. However, the *urppotiyar* now must phrase his commands as "requests," and the *muppan* has specified that they must be delivered in writing to ensure their authenticity and to lend further dignity to the entire transaction. The office of *muppan* remains, but it is viewed by the younger generation in Kolavil North as increasingly archaic, demeaning, and irrelevant to the future of the community.

By contrast, there are other roles and social institutions in Kolavil North that show strong evidence of innovation and vitality. For one thing, the Kolavil Paraiyars have a full-fledged matrilineal clan system consisting of five named descent units that are also ranked in order of status. Whereas the names of matriclans among the high castes often evoke mythological or kingly imagery, the names of matriclans among the lowest castes, including the Paraiyars, refer strictly to topographical or village sites within the region. In Kolavil North,

the highest ranking Paraiyar matriclan is Paṭṭimeṭu Kuṭi, named after a local paddy cultivation tract of great antiquity, and the popular belief is that the members of this clan are descendants of the first Paraiyars who were brought to this fertile area. The other matriclans, in descending order of rank, are Karavāku Kuṭi, Kaḷutāvaḷai Kuṭi, Ciṅkaḷa Kuṭi, and Navalūr Kuṭi. Karavaku and Kalutavalai are locations of other major Paraiyar settlements from which marriage partners are sometimes obtained. The names of the two lowest ranking clans commemorate an unspecified component of Sinhalese descent, and the offspring of an allegedly hypogamous marriage between a Paraiyar man and the adopted daughter of a Vannar from Navalur, respectively. Paraiyars in Kolavil North with whom I spoke attributed the low status of Navalur Kuti to its recent origin and to its heritage of mixed descent. Residents of Kolavil North regard their matriclans much as high-caste informants regard theirs, which is to say they seem fully cognizant of the principles of matriliney, of clan exogamy, and of clan ranking. A survey of marriage choice among these Paraiyars revealed that, behaviorally, the rule of clan exogamy was widely honored within all but the third-ranked clan (Kalutavalai). With respect to the Dravidian kinship rules, the Paraiyars of Kolavil North seem to marry their real or classificatory cross-cousins more than twice as often as members of the high-ranking Mukkuvar and Velalar castes (67 percent of sampled Paraiyar marriages versus 26 percent of sampled high-caste marriages; see McGilvray 1974).

Although the veneration of Mariyamman as a tutelary household deity is quite common in the Akkaraipattu area, her public temple cult is less widespread than in the vicinity of Tivukkudi. In fact, the only public festival to Mariyamman in Akkaraipattu is conducted by the Paraiyars of Kolavil North; as a consequence of this fact, the goddess is sometimes said to have a special relationship with the Paraiyars. A visit to see the Kolavil North Mariyamman shrine outside of the festival season would reveal practically nothing, for only a temporary wood and cloth shelter (*pantal*) is erected for the goddess each year during the celebration. Her principal image is a small silver face (*tirumukam*) that is packed away for most of the year.¹⁰ What is quite conspicuous, however, is the handsome new brick temple for Lord Pillaiyar that the Paraiyars have recently built adjacent to the site of the Mariyamman *pantal*. Every outward architectural indication would suggest Pillaiyar as the central deity in the Paraiyar pantheon, yet the real focus of religious fervor has always been, and remains, Mariyamman. In fact, through the astute public relations efforts of a local Paraiyar astrologer, the dates of the annual Kolavil North Mariyamman festival are now published in the annual editions of the Tamil almanac (*pañcaṅkam*) distributed islandwide, a listing that might lead the naïve visitor to expect a shrine of substantial size, certainly not one that is dismantled and stored away in a wooden chest for most of the year.

With the gradually increasing prosperity of the Kolavil Paraiyars, and their loosening bonds of hereditary service to the Mukkuvar *urppotiyar* and his high-caste constituents, the Mariyamman festival and other religious undertakings of this untouchable settlement appear to have taken on a new significance and a new organizational structure modeled directly on the higher castes. Where formerly the *muppan* was the only office of significance, now a more complex and differentiated scheme of internal caste leadership roles has been consciously instituted by the Paraiyars, although the aloof Mukkuvars remain largely unaware of it. The purview of the *muppan* is now strictly limited to the coordination of drumming performances at high-caste funerals and at temple festivals in the area. On such occasions the Kolavil *muppan* is accompanied by the *raca melam* (here usually a miniature drum carried on a special palanquin), and he continues to personify the duties of his caste in the eyes of the Mukkuvars and Velalars, who described him to me as "the leader of the Paraiyars." But in reality, among the Paraiyars themselves, the *muppan* no longer holds such a prestigious or authoritative position.

Residents of Kolavil North were quick to point out that a more modern system of caste leadership was now in operation, a system that turned out to be an interesting reformulation of the standard high-caste pattern of representation by matriclans. In an effort to broaden the participation of younger men in caste affairs (and perhaps to give them responsibility for the more onerous tasks), two separate categories of matriclan representatives have been created: one specifically oversees the affairs of the Paraiyar temples and religious festivals and the other fills the more diffuse roles of clan elder and adjudicator of disputes. With the exception of Navalur Kuti, which is too small to participate equally with the others, each Paraiyar matriclan nominates two temple trustees (*vannakkars*) and one clan headman (*talaivar*). Fund raising is the responsibility of the *vannakkars*, since the principal need for public donations arises in sponsoring the Mariyamman festival and in funding capital improvements such as the new Pillaiyar temple structure. In fact, the foundations have just recently been laid for a permanent Mariyamman temple, too.

The matriclan headmen do not meet formally as a group; they are said to tend to the affairs of their matriline on an individual ad hoc basis. The overall leadership of the Paraiyar community in Kolavil North has now been vested in the new office of "chief headman" (*periya talaivar*) of the caste. This system appears to have been instituted quite recently, and there is no precedent upon which to base a judgment of its long-term stability or effectiveness. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the chief headman was also a temple trustee, the head of the temple trustee committee, and the chief priest (*pucari*) for all the local Mariyamman rituals. A different young man acted as custodian of the Pillaiyar temple, but it is likely that the chief headman supervised the rituals there as well. A strongly overlapping leadership structure was certainly in operation, and no separate priestly sub-caste of "untouchable Brahmans," such as the Vaḷḷuvar Paṅṅārams of Moffatt's village, had developed.

Finally, this sketch of Kolavil North would not be complete without an assessment of Paraiyar attitudes toward the higher castes and toward their own position in the caste hierarchy. While the more downtrodden Paraiyars of Tivukkudi are caught up in an ongoing system of deference and ritual subordination that gives them little opportunity to maneuver for higher status, the relatively more autonomous and affluent Paraiyars of Kolavil North actively oppose upper-caste attitudes of arrogance and superiority. One response has been to seek to acquire all of the formerly restricted household conveniences and civic amenities found in higher-caste neighborhoods. They have been surprisingly successful: brick and tile houses, private wells and latrines, a school, several professional offices (curing, astrology), a new temple structure, some electricity. Today, except among the few men who continue to perform funeral drumming, personal dress and adornment are no different from that of the higher castes, although older people well recall the earlier battles over Paraiyars' use of shoes, shirts, umbrellas, and bicycles.

Paraiyar attitudes toward caste endogamy rules were only probed in hypothetical questioning, but the general response indicated that they would be happy to "marry up" into the higher castes if the higher castes would only have them. This conforms to Dumont's (1970:123) interpretation of Hindu caste endogamy as resulting from frustrated up-marriage, but contrasts with the abhorrence of cross-caste marriage reported among Moffatt's (1979a:108) south Indian Harijans. Residents of Kolavil North seek to puncture upper-caste prejudice whenever it is convenient and tactically effective to do so, as when an anthropologist is present to witness the confrontation. On several occasions my higher-caste assistants were deliberately invited to drink "pure" beverages such as coconut water from "polluted" Paraiyar household tumblers, entrapment I unwittingly aided by drinking first myself. Once a heated sermon was preached to a meek high-caste companion of mine by a successful Paraiyar astrologer/businessman who challenged him to adduce any textual

authority whatsoever for untouchability. All in all, the appearance, manners, and behavior of the Paraiyars of Kolavil North are now so similar to those of the higher castes that my college-educated Mukkuvar research assistant, who had grown up near Tivukkudi, was at first completely fooled as to their low-caste identity. After a few pleasant hours talking with a Paraiyar carpenter who was making some furniture for me, my assistant was incredulous to learn that we had just visited the heart of an untouchable settlement.

some observations and implications

These data on Paraiyars in eastern Sri Lanka offer some significant ethnographic contrasts with Moffatt's material on Harijans in Tamilnadu, and for this very reason they are useful in testing some of his basic theoretical contentions about "cultural consensus" at the bottom of the caste system. Here are some implications that emerge.

structural replication Research in Tivukkudi and in Kolavil North has revealed none of the internal "structural replication" of hereditary high-caste privileges and social boundaries documented by Moffatt among the untouchables of southern Chingleput. No occupational subcastes or "grades" associated with differential purity, specific titles, or ranked duties within the Paraiyar community were observed. At the same time, however, a different sort of "replication" of high-caste institutions is clearly present in Kolavil North, where one notes the self-conscious operation of an orthodox system of matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence, dowry, and Dravidian cross-cousin marriage, together with a recently reconstituted system of internal caste leadership roles modeled on the high-caste pattern. In place of the single multiplex and symbolically dependent headship role of the Paraiyar *muppan*, the people of Kolavil North have instituted a system of caste and temple leadership based largely on the principle of matriclan representation, which is fundamental to the high-caste pattern of the Mukkuvars and the Velalars. Just as the Mukkuvar *urppotiyar* serves as the overall leader of the high castes, and the separate matriclan elders (*vannakkars*) constitute the high-caste temple committee, so the new *periya talaivar* is the general leader of the Paraiyars, and the newly formalized committee of *vannakkars* in Kolavil North is expected to oversee the affairs of Paraiyar religious institutions. Both the *urppotiyar* and the *periya talaivar* have ex officio, or at least de facto, representation on the temple committees (in fact, the current Paraiyar leader is also the temple *pucari*), so there is a comparable degree of coordination in each of these authority structures. I might add that the adoption of such titles as *periya talaivar* and *vannakkar* by Paraiyars in the traditional hamlet of Tivukkudi would immediately evoke derision and outrage from the dominant Mukkuvar headmen, who would be loath to tolerate the use of such presumptuous titles by members of the lowest caste.

downward displacement The composition of the overall caste hierarchy, and the existence of various religious and ethnic groupings that are anomalous from the Hindu point of view, have important implications for the position of the Paraiyars in the regional society of Batticaloa. There are several castes that are assigned lower absolute rank than the Paraiyars, but these castes do not participate in communal ritual nor provide hereditary domestic services to the Paraiyars or to any of the higher castes. These lowest groups, the Kataiyar Limeburners and the Kuravar Gypsies, are said to have no "share" (*panku*) in the ancient system of caste duties and caste privileges. They are considered to be outside the traditional core of the local caste system. Therefore, they cannot serve as candidates for

the displacement of stigmatized caste functions from the Paraiyars onto still lower castes, such as Moffatt (1979a:99–153) describes for the Harijan Washermen, Chakkiliyans, and Kuruvikarans of southern Chingleput.¹¹

In fact, the relative “simplicity” of the caste structure in Batticaloa has until recently conferred certain benefits on the Paraiyars, who are the only autochthonous musician caste in the region. Despite their stigmatized role as funeral drummers, the Paraiyars also seem to have served regularly as auspicious drummers for high-caste weddings, female puberty ceremonies, and temple festivals, as well as for Moorish circumcisions and mosque feasts. In recent years, however, a small group of Naṭṭuvar Musician families from Jaffna have settled in Batticaloa town. These Nattuvars provide strictly auspicious, and more sophisticated, drumming and *nātasvaram* music, which is considered more appropriate for weddings and the dignified portions of some temple festivals. As a result, the auspicious roles of the Paraiyar band have been usurped, and the stigma of funeral drumming has been further underscored. To invert Moffatt’s position, it is the *higher* castes who are here “replicating” an aspect of the Hindu caste order which has historically been absent from the Batticaloa region.

middle-class respectability The conduct of religious observances and the maintenance of temples in Kolavil North both serve as important symbolic statements of Paraiyar caste status and identity in the changing caste system of Akkaraipattu town. It is significant that the first major permanent temple to be constructed in the village was for Pillaiyar and not for Mariyamman, despite the fact that the cult of Mariyamman remains the most important focus of religious observance among the Paraiyars. Pillaiyar is a more dignified and transcendent deity, a god whose worship is fully compatible with middle-class respectability throughout Tamil Sri Lanka. His pujas are neither ecstatic nor bloody, and as the “god of beginnings” he is worshiped by every stratum of Hindu society. In Akkaraipattu, the “village temple” controlled by the Mukkuvars and Velalars is dedicated to Pillaiyar, a factor that further reinforces the image of this deity as a local symbol of respectability. The public credibility of the new temple trustee system in Kolavil North is thus enhanced by its connection with a temple of precisely the same sort as that similarly governed by the high-caste *vannakkars*. The building itself, of course, stands as tangible evidence of the prosperity and self-sufficiency of the Kolavil Paraiyars, as well as “proof” of their identity as mainstream Shivite Tamils.¹²

The annual Mariyamman festival in Kolavil North is also being managed in a self-conscious way to promote the fame and respectability of the village, while it continues to meet the traditional religious needs of the villagers. The festival is now advertised nationally in the Tamil almanac (*pancankam*), and efforts are being made to develop the cultic distinctiveness of this shrine in a local area where Mariyamman temples are not that common. Without going into details of the ritual at this point, I mention what struck me as I witnessed the Kolavil North Mariyamman festival in 1975. Much to my surprise, the conduct of the rituals was markedly less wild and ecstatic than the annual festivals for Pattirakali and Kannakiyamman conducted by the higher-ranking Tattar Smiths and top-ranking Mukkuvars and Velalars in settlements directly adjacent to Kolavil North. I observed no fire-walking, no flagellation, no tongue-piercing, nor any blood sacrifice at all—although I do not mean to suggest that the festival was in any sense dull! There was a good deal of trance behavior and spirit possession, and the nightly processions through the lanes of the village by *karakam*-dancers with pots atop their heads were quite colorful and distinctive. However, in the context of impression-management, I would venture to say that the Paraiyar festival was comparatively restrained and dignified. All the offerings to Mariyamman were “pure” ones, and the atmosphere of the ritual suggested *bhakti*-style supplication

more than *shakti*-style propitiation. It seemed to me that even the Mariyamman cult in Kolavil North had been mobilized on behalf of Paraiyar upward social mobility.

purity versus kingly honor Moffatt's data and interpretive framework emphasize the Dumontian continuities in Hindu purity/pollution ideology between high castes and untouchables, as reflected in similar attitudes toward the village pantheon and in the structural replication of the priestly "Brahman role," as well as of lower, pollution-removing roles among the untouchables themselves. His analysis advances the view that the south Indian caste system is culturally founded upon an ideology of ritual purity but enacted under constraints imposed by another component of the ideal model, "dominance." Whether dominance is a recognized cultural role or merely a pragmatic state of affairs seems debatable but worthy of further research. However, it is the universal importance of the belief in purity and pollution as the bedrock rationale for the caste hierarchy that my own Sri Lankan data seem to throw into doubt.

The Paraiyars of Tivukkudi and of Kolavil North may be responding in a consensual manner to the ideals and assumptions of the surrounding Hindu society, but in comparison with Moffatt's material, these Sri Lankan ideals and assumptions seem less Brahmanical and more kingly in nature—less Dumontian and more Hocartian, if you will (Dumont 1970; Hocart 1950). Thus, while Moffatt's Harijans are needed by the higher castes to mediate with hovering demons, to chase away polluted spirits from vulnerable ritual occasions, to scavenge polluting carcasses, and to help guard the village from human as well as supernatural attack, the Paraiyars in eastern Sri Lanka serve more visibly as feudal retainers and symbols of public honor and prestige for their hereditary high-caste overlords. The Paraiyars themselves participate in this system of historic emblems and caste honors, as evidenced by the *raca melam* itself, the very name of which invokes the royal idiom. The former use of Paraiyars to provide music at auspicious events, not just funerals, also suggests a traditional high-caste emphasis on using the Paraiyars to give public validation to high-caste status, rather than solely to combat ghosts and polluting substances. Why else, for example, would it be necessary for the high castes to prohibit the Paraiyars from drumming at their own caste funerals? Likewise, the strong interest currently being taken by the Paraiyars of Kolavil North in the operation of their Dravidian marriage rules and the elaboration of their matrilineal clan leadership system seems to reflect a desire to project a caste image of participation in the historic high-caste pattern of matrilineal political office. Altogether, ideas of caste status in this part of the island, while sometimes linked to ancillary notions of ritual pollution, more often convey a vivid sense of kingly honor and political subordination. This suggests that the basic purity/pollution model of the caste system with which South Asian untouchables are said to be in "consensus" should be revised to admit a more significant degree of local and regional variation than either of the two current pan-Indic theories of caste (Dumont 1970; Marriott 1976) seem to allow, an argument I have made in greater detail elsewhere (McGilvray 1982c).¹³

consensus and constraint Finally, while the data I have presented here support the general theme of Moffatt's analysis, the idea that the lowest untouchable castes share a "cultural consensus" with the higher castes, the possibility of complex and autonomous social organization and religious institutions among Hindu untouchables is nevertheless highly constrained by their degree of economic independence and prosperity, their degree of involvement in highly traditional forms of intercaste ritual service, and their simple demographic strength as a local group. On each of these dimensions, the Paraiyars of Tivukkudi are markedly more disadvantaged than those of Kolavil North, and this is reflected in their relatively simple and dependent role structure. Moffatt (1979b:258–259)

has rarely broached such issues, but they demand close attention if a full understanding of untouchable life is to be gained. In the Sri Lankan case, the cultural consensus is expressed not in elaborate patterns of subcaste segmentation that replicate high-caste distinctions between pure and polluting caste roles but rather in parallels with a high-caste pattern of kingly honorifics and in a closely similar system of matrilineal descent-group organization that has recently been extended to the administration of Paraiyar religious institutions. As the further analysis of Hindu reference-group behavior has shown ("Sanskritization"; Srinivas 1966), lower castes tend to emulate high-caste values, institutions, and styles of life, whatever these may be. So the Paraiyars of Kolavil North seek to establish their identity as full participants in the distinctive matrilineal sociocultural order of the Batticaloa region. The more disadvantaged Paraiyars of Tivukkudi would doubtless do the same if political, economic, and demographic constraints would only permit.

notes

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A Brief Note on Orthography. When they first appear, Tamil words in this paper are expressed in the system of notation adopted in the *Tamil Lexicon* (University of Madras, 1924–36, 6 vols.). In subsequent instances, diacritical marks are omitted.

¹ Data for this paper were gathered during three fieldwork trips to Sri Lanka in 1969–71, 1975, and 1978. Moffatt uses the term Harijan to identify the main caste of untouchables in Endavur, but they are also known as Paraiyars, the same caste described in this paper.

² The title *muppan* is the familiar form of a word meaning "an elder" in Tamil.

³ The terms *cēri* or "colony" are not applied to untouchable hamlets in this part of Sri Lanka. Instead, the term *kirāmam* ("village") loosely designates a wide range of rural settlements irrespective of caste.

⁴ No formal relationship of hereditarily bound agrestic labor, such as the *paññaiyāl* relationship described by Moffatt (1979a), Gough (1960), and others for Tamilnadu, or the *aṭimai* ("slave") category noted by Banks (1960) and others in Jaffna, exists here; nor do the untouchables constitute a significant share of the agricultural labor force in the Batticaloa region as a whole.

⁵ Moffatt (1979a:201–202, 270–289) also cites some examples of how Harijans juggle the positive and negative aspects of key symbols of their caste status.

⁶ Reliable sources assert that the cremation of eminent persons is a completely modern development in the most traditional and isolated areas of the district, and it is also known that the Viracaiva Kurukkal priesthood in the region continues to practice highly elaborate *camāti* burial rituals (McGilvray in press).

⁷ In larger towns, freshly slaughtered beef is cheap and readily available from Moorish butcher shops, and Paraiyars would have no difficulty in obtaining it.

⁸ In a local mythic account recorded in Akkaraipattu, the well-established Mukkuvars challenged the initial exclusivity of the Velalars, who sought to monopolize the services of their own *kutimai* castes (Barbers, Washermen, and Drummers). The Mukkuvars broke the endogamous barrier of the Velalar caste by abducting a series of noble Velalar women, and finally the Velalars capitulated, agreeing to share both their women and their *kutimai* retainers with the Mukkuvars (McGilvray 1982c).

⁹ Two of the remaining professional drummers in Kolavil North are permanent employees of the government officer in charge of the subdistrict. They are the official public criers for the local courts and administrative offices, and they hasten to dissociate their duties from domestic drumming of any kind.

¹⁰ Moffatt (1979a:253) offers a neat mythological argument to explain why his south Indian Harijans, too, worship only an image of the head of Mariyamman: because the goddess is said to have been created with the head of a Brahman and the body of an untouchable Chakkiliyan, the worship of her head is a cult of "her pure, high, Brahmanic part." However, I must report that in eastern Sri Lanka, not

only Mariyamman but many other goddesses *without* split personalities are worshiped in the form of small metal faces. It seems just as likely that these face images are employed for reasons of economy and portability, since they are actively worshiped only once or twice a year.

¹¹ The Kuravars of the Akkaraipattu region are strikingly similar in caste status, occupation, and life-style to the south Indian Kurivikarans ("crow-catchers") at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy, who receive food from Harijans in Moffatt's (1979a:144; 1979b:253) village. However, there seems to be no interaction between the Kuravars and the Paraiyars in eastern Sri Lanka.

¹² Another upper-caste Hindu trait shared by the Paraiyars is a relative lack of concern with theories of karma and rebirth. My data strongly corroborate Moffatt's (1979a:296; 1979b:258) on this score (McGilvray 1982c).

¹³ Moffatt (1980:personal communication) has noted that in Tamilnadu Harijans never drum at Brahman funerals and seldom do so at Velalar and Mudaliyar funerals. A possible reason might be that these high-ranking groups accentuate the ideology of purity and pollution and de-emphasize the symbolism of kingly power. However, Barnett (1970) describes a subcaste of Velalars in Chingleput who try to have it both ways.

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