# Heirs apparent: Fiction and function in Chola mythical genealogies

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As Edmund Leach has noted, it is characteristic of every mythological system that all important stories recur in several different versions.[1] The redundancy of these accounts serves a reinforcement function familiar in communication theory. That is, repetition overcomes problems of information transmission caused by various kinds of interference or 'noise'. When a sacred message is thus transmitted, even the fact that different versions may flatly contradict one another on certain points serves to enhance the story rather than discredit it. A believer typically feels that each rendition elaborates and reinforces the meaning of all the other versions. Where the non-believer sees contradiction, the believer perceives enrichment of the sacred story.

This phenomenon helps explain otherwise puzzling variations in the mythological portions of Indian dynastic genealogies.[2] For it is apparent that the pattern of narrative repetition-with-variations is typical not merely of popular tales of the folk hero, but of the more contrived accounts of the courtly or 'puranic' hero as well. Authenticating a ruling family's ancestral credentials customarily prompted eulogists to compose a story of miraculous origins and impressive descent, so one might suppose that credibility, not just rhetorical virtuosity, of these accounts was relevant to establishing dynastic legitimacy. Yet, in spite of evident attempts at standardising royal eulogies in certain periods, their authors exercised considerable latitude in appropriating materials from a variety of sources, notably the Puranas, in synthesising such narratives. Even for a single dynasty, genealogical accounts of varying generational depth and organisation coexisted without overt challenges to each other's authenticity.

The numerous lithic and copper-plate inscriptions commissioned by the imperial Cholas of the Vijayalaya line provide us with especially useful data

[1] Edmund R. Leach, 'Genesis as Myth,' in John Middleton, ed., *Myth and Cosmos; Readings in Mythology and Symbolism*. Garden City: Natural History Press, 1967, pp. 1–13.

[2] This study has been funded in part by a Grant-in-Aid from the American Philosophical Society. Diacritics have been omitted and utilisation of Indic terms requiring them correspondingly minimised.

*The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21, 4 (1984)
SAGE, Delhi/Beverly Hills/London.

on south Indian kingship, and a small but significant portion of those records contains richly detailed, rhetorically embellished accounts of the putative ancestry and accomplishments of particular Chola kings. Not surprisingly, historians who have previously utilised these eulogies have paid scant attention to the mythological sections and instead have concentrated on the later and more plausible portions dealing with the 'authentic' generations from Vijayālaya onward, the passages that emphasise conquests and other events useful in establishing reliable political narrative and chronology. For our present purposes, however, it is precisely the initial, more mythological and hence more creative sections that are of primary interest.[3]

Elsewhere I have discussed in detail the content and theoretical implications of one of the lengthiest and most important of these Chola genealogies, contained in the eleventh century Tiruvalangadu copper-plate inscription of Rajendra I.[4] The following remarks are devoted to a more general and comparative discussion of the four most relevant Chola epigraphical records, with a view to determining both the common themes in Chola fictive genealogy and the degree of variation. Such a search for themes and variations should assist us in understanding the records' intrinsic logic and their legitimising function.

## Genealogy as Ideology

A royal genealogy is an assertion of the king's status pride couched in the idiom of kinship. It is an idealised view of the king as a larger-than-life figure, descended from gods and heroes. But more than that, it is an ideological construct, a statement about the nature of the world and the place of kingship in it.

Several decades ago, A.M. Hocart suggested that 'the Indian king is not one, but many gods.' Through sacrifice and genealogical myth, kings ritually absorb many gods into themselves, and thereby become a 'compound of deities'.[5] In this 'incorporative' type of authority, rulers are believed to absorb the divinities of their subordinate chieftains. The effect of this political doctrine is to unite a polytheistic world-view with an analogous form of kingship.

More recently Nicholas Dirks, expanding on certain aspects of Hocart's

[3] That Chola kingship utilised genuine, as well as fictive, kingship for political purposes is demonstrably true, but not germane to our present concerns. See my article, 'Ties that Bound: Royal Kinship Alliance in the Chola Period,' in *Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Asian Studies, 1982*, Vol. IV: South and Southwest Asia. Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1982, pp. 717–36.

[4] 'Sons of the Sun: The Solar Genealogy of a Chola King,' *Asian Profile*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 1982), pp. 81–95.

[5] A.M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors; An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society*. Collection of works published by the Faculty of Arts, Egyptian University, No. 12. Cairo: Printing Office, 1936, pp. 28–29.

model of incorporative kingship, has demonstrated the importance of changing political conceptions in south India prior to the Chola period and has argued that a 'puranic' view of political authority was adopted midway through the age of the Pallava kings, especially after the accession of Nandivarman Pallavamalla, ca. A.D. 731.[6] As a result of that change, the sacrificial world-view characteristic of early Pallava kingship was displaced by an increasingly universalistic conception based on the themes of extension and pervasiveness. At the same time the Pallavas' claim to sovereignty came to be predicated on divine genealogies and royal gifting, rather than on the performance of royal sacrifices. The incorporative character of this revised conception of kingship was one in which sovereignty was perceived as shared with powerful persons in a variety of localities, perhaps as a necessary consequence of Pallava efforts to expand their authority southward from Kancipuram and integrate Tamil chiefs of the Kaveri basin into their enlarged domain.[7] This scholarly interpretation contains much that is relevant to our present inquiry, but here we shall merely note that the imperial Chola monarchs who utilised puranic conceptions of sovereignty were not innovators in that regard, for such themes had been manifest in the Tamil country since at least the eighth century.[8]

The prevalence of genealogical fabrication in the Pallava-Chola age was not a peculiarly south Indian phenomenon, of course. In part, it reflected developments in northern and central India following the Gupta age, especially after the eighth and ninth centuries, when under conditions of political fragmentation there was a rush for the fashioning of genealogies to demonstrate the Solar or Lunar descent of local dynasties. Romila Thapar has suggested that ascent to political power may have been faster in that period, and therefore recent memories of low caste origins had to be more rapidly altered.[9] 'The rise and multiplication of small, regional kingdoms during this period provided both work and status for the genealogists,' she observes. It was the Brahmans who were pressed into service—or pressed themselves into service—to provide the required genealogies.

The sources primarily utilised for this task were evidently those Mahapuranas

[6] Nicholas B. Dirks, 'Political Authority and Structural Change in Early South Indian History,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April–June 1976), pp. 125–57.

[7] On this last point, see also the interpretation of Burton Stein in 'All the Kings' *Mana*: Perspectives on Kingship in Medieval South India,' in J.F. Richards, ed., *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*. South Asian Studies Publication Series No. 3. Madison: 1978, pp. 115–67.

[8] In the *Laws of Manu*, we find the assertion that the king is formed of the particles of eight deities, namely Indra, Wind, Yama, Sun, Fire, Varuna, Moon, and Kubera, and that the king emulates the energetic actions of each of these gods. *Manu*, VII, 4–7 and IX, pp. 303–11.

[9] Romila Thapar, 'Social Mobility in Ancient India with Special Reference to Elite Groups,' in R.S. Sharma and Vivekanand Jha, eds., *Indian Society: Historical Probings in Memory of D.D. Kosambi*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1974, pp. 95–123, espec. p. 108.

that preserved the most detailed genealogical information on notable lineages, especially the *Visnu, Vayu, Bhagavata*, and *Matsya*. These are not radically different texts. They draw upon the same pool of well-known stories and symbols, and share much of their diverse information. It is precisely because of the encyclopedic nature of these collections that it was possible for subsequent writers to utilise their story elements selectively in new and inventive combinations for the purpose of advancing partisan doctrines and sanctifying social or political changes. In this way the craft of textual arrangement was made to serve political and social aspirations as well as sectarian tenets.[10]

There is reason to think that the compilation of these puranic repositories was related to a concerted and ultimately successful attempt on the part of Brahmans to wrest control of this tradition from the bards and chroniclers, known as *sutas* and *magadhas*, who had previously dominated it.[11] R.N. Nandi has advanced an intriguing set of relevant propositions that connect the gradual diversification of Brahmanical occupations to include unconventional activities beyond the original calling of Vedic ritualists—such as astrology, medicine, temple worship, and even agriculture, among other new forms of livelihood—with the process of radical decay of towns in north India that began in the third and fourth centuries A.D.[12] Nandi argues that the emphasis on the horrors of the Kali Age manifested in the early Puranas—*Visnu, Vayu, Matsya*—that were compiled in the third through fifth centuries really reflects Brahmanical reaction to the loss of urban householder clients and to other stressful socio-economic changes attending the decline of urban life and development of an increasingly village-based subsistence economy.

The thesis thus postulates, in decaying towns and cities, a crisis of Brahman subsistence that necessitated some ingenious responses. There was an unavoidable ruralisation of many urban Brahmans, and Brahmanical texts began to stress the virtue of making land grants to Brahmans, a practice that became an increasingly important element in the rural economy from the fifth century onward. New social theories were advanced, including efforts to legitimise the Brahmans' violation of proscribed occupational conduct, by recommending agriculture—chiefly managerial supervision of agricultural and artisinal production in the villages—as a proper vocation for Brahmans, even though earlier opinion had allowed this livelihood only in exceptional situations of distress.

[10] Amrit Srinivasan's analysis of the *Bhagavata Purana*, itself a notably partisan text, suggests that not just the selection of textual materials, but more particularly the order in which they were presented, was crucial in conveying a partisan message. See 'Order and Event in Puranic Myth: Analysis of Four Narratives from the Bhagavata Purana,' *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1980), pp. 195–212.

[11] Romila Thapar, 'Genealogy as a Source of Social History,' *Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (January 1976), pp. 259–81, espec. pp. 262–63.

[12] R.N. Nandi, 'Client, Ritual and Conflict in Early Brahmanical Order,' *Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 6, Nos. 1–2 (July 1979–Jan. 1980), pp. 64–118.

The scramble for subsistence also prompted Brahmans to devise a whole range of new rituals, including *dana* and *tirthayatra* rites that stressed the importance of making gifts to Brahmans and pilgrimage to holy places—the very ones that were in economic decay, Nandi argues. Since it was alleged that in the degenerate Kali Age there is a natural decrease in the amount of religious merit (*punya*) and an increase in the amount of sinfulness (*pataka*), these rites could be characterised as urgent necessities to counteract that degenerative tendency.[13] In addition, since some new forms of livelihood placed the Brahmans in direct competition with other groups that had previously dominated those activites, Brahmans now contended that their own services were more prestigious and they attempted to degrade the ritual status of competing groups even though the competitors' traditional tasks were by no means polluting.

The considerable utility of this illuminating scholarly interpretation is, however, vitiated by a negative view of Brahmanical actions as essentially exploitative of their clients. In reality, the relationship between the Brahmans and the locally dominant peasantry throughout the agrarian tracts in the Tamil country was primarily that of a mutually beneficial alliance, in the absence of which Brahman settlements could not have endured and flourished, as they clearly did, in so many rural localities. As D.D. Kosambi noted three decades ago, Brahmans commanded a variety of useful skills. These included a practical calendar, a fair meteorology, and a knowledge of agricultural techniques that could be imparted to tribal peoples whose subsistence methods 'never went beyond the digging stick or hoe' and thus facilitate their assimilation into agrarian society.[14] Brahmans not only provided a utilitarian form of ideological integration for those agrarian tracts, they also stressed concepts of ascribed ritual purity that endowed respectable cultivators, and of course themselves, with high status relative to lesser castes, including the bulk of tribal peoples being assimilated into agrarian society in menial roles. Hence dominant peasant groups could use Brahmanical ideology to consolidate and justify their local dominance, in much the same way that, on a larger scale, ruling houses could employ them to serve dynastic ends.[15]

[13] This notion too is reflected in the *Manu-Smriti*, where it is said that duties differ in the Four Ages in accordance with the degeneration of mankind: In the Krita Age the chief virtue is the performance of austerities; in the Treta Age, acquiring divine knowledge; in the Dvapara, performing sacrifices; in the Kali Age, liberality alone. *Manu* I, p. 86.

[14] D.D.Kosambi, 'The Basis of Ancient Indian History,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (October 1955), pp. 35–45. Quotation from p. 36.

[15] As Burton Stein has observed, genealogical fabrication was not the only technique by which Brahmans could confirm the achieved status of upwardly-mobile warriors. Brahmans officiated in marriages between the newer warrior families and older, established ones. And they could exercise a very explicit means of enhancing status by means of the 'Golden Womb' (*hiranyagarbha*) ceremony, which effected a ritual rebirth. See 'Early Indian Historiography: A Conspiracy Hypothesis,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 1969), pp. 41–59, espec. pp. 52–53.

The king exhibited an ambiguous relationship with this agrarian society that was both aloof and involved. The king's transcendence was emphasised both ritually and mythically. Yet simultaneously, as a protective figure, a leader in war, an extractor of revenue, and a dispenser of justice and rewards, he was necessarily involved—although to a degree of directness that remains debatable—in the lives of his subjects. This problematic conceptualisation of a ruler who had to be both divinely transcendent and pragmatically engaged is reflected in the royal imagery transmitted through the genealogies.

## King Chola's Hunt

There once was a king of solar lineage named Chola, who ruled the entire earth. He enjoyed sporting in forests inhabited by seers (*rishis*). One day when he was hunting in the forest, a demon appeared before him in the shape of a deer. The king and his men pursued it into another forest, where he killed it. The chase had brought the king to the river Kaveri, so he followed its course and bathed in its sweet waters, which carried the very nectar churned by the gods out of the ocean. He then looked about for Brahmans and found none, so he brought some from the North (Aryavarta) and settled them comfortably along the river. Cutting down the forests on both banks of the river, he planted gardens with areca palms and creepers of betel leaves.

This brief tale, condensed further in the retelling here, is but a small portion of a lengthy eulogy, composed in 419 lines of Sanskrit verse, constituting the preface to an important eleventh century Chola record known as the Kanyakumari inscription of king Virarajendra. Although king Chola is merely the nineteenth name in a list of three dozen putative ancestors—mostly appropriated from puranic mythology—appearing in the eulogy prior to that of Vijayalaya, who established the authority of the imperial Chola dynasty at Tanjavur in the late ninth century, Chola's name is of obvious interest because of the special significance attached to the eponymous ancestor and because of the major themes preserved in the story associated with him.

Tales of kings founding settled communities—often the capitals of new states—following extraordinary hunting experiences are common in south Indian dynastic lore. Even the sixteenth century Portuguese traveller Ferñao Nuniz recounts such a myth about the founding of the city of Vijayanagara. In his anecdote, a certain king Dehorao went hunting in a desert location reserved for the king's amusement. There a hare rose up before the king but instead of fleeing, it attacked and bit the hunting dogs so that they feared to approach it. The king, thinking the amazing animal to be some prodigy, turned toward home. Reaching a river, he met a hermit, a local holy man to whom he recounted this experience. The hermit insisted on being taken to the spot and, on arriving, told the king that he must build a city there, for it

would be the strongest city in the world.[16] Tales of this kind evidently constituted part of the stock in trade of bards and genealogists, and many other versions of the 'royal hunt' story could be cited, even in connection with the founding of Muslim states.

Several thematic elements in the Kanyakumari account of king Chola command our attention. First, we are presented with a dichotomy between the wild forests and the tame, riverine tracts where forests have been cleared with the aid of the king. The forest is a mysterious realm full of wonders and dangers. Its special character is emphasised by the reference to *rishis*, since asceticism is a condition opposed to that of the householder and associated with the wilderness, hence with that which is beyond the realm of the ordinary. It is the domain of esoteric knowledge and power. Here the king goes to engage in manly sport, and in this challenging setting his heroism and skill are tested to defeat demonic forces.

The implication is that the king is worthy of leading society in part because he has demonstrated his capacity to face nature. The hero must enter the wilderness that is society's antithesis and there confront the demonic adversary who is his own symbolic antithesis. Paradoxically, he can validate and perhaps even regenerate his powers as society's leader only through a drama of temporary exile, by completing heroic tasks in a realm where mundane phenomena and ordinary rules of behaviour do not prevail. His triumph over the demon makes possible the clearing of forests along the river and the introduction of settled communities. On one level, then, the story may be read as an allegory for the extension of agrarian society into the wilderness and the vital role played by the king in that process. Yet one senses that the continuing presence of the wilderness is also a vital element in sustaining the king's authority.

Second, there is a pronounced emphasis on royal patronage to Brahmans. Although in reality most agrarian tracts were inhabited largely by peasants, it is the Brahmans that are specifically mentioned as having been colonised by the king. The impression is conveyed that Brahmans should be settled in the riverine tracts, and that it is the king's special duty to establish them there. Since the Brahmans played vital roles as agents of communication and ideological integration, it was clearly in the king's interest to fulfil this alleged duty.

Third, the identification of the North as a source of Brahmans and hence of higher religious norms and values is explicit. It is unlikely that all of the Brahmans referred to in Chola records as recipients of land grants were really immigrants from the North,but the fact that the eulogists wished to convey such an impression of northern origin is noteworthy. There is special significance in the fact that this particular record is found inscribed on temple pillars at Cape Comorin. The southward advance of Indo-Aryan

[16] Robert Sewell, *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar. A Contribution to the History of India*. Reprint edition. Delhi: Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 1962, pp. 281–87.

culture and of agrarian society are viewed in this document—by a poet writing, after all, in elegant Sanskrit—as one and the same process. Indeed, toward the end of this record (vv. 80–81) its royal sponsor, king Virarajendra, is praised specifically for having created many *brahmadeya* settlements and having pleased 40,000 Brahmans, learned in the Vedas, by granting them lands and establishing them there.

It is not surprising that king Chola's name is one of the few mythical names to be included in every Chola genealogy that we are examining. But contrary to what we might expect, in no instance is his name mentioned first, for it is always preceded by other names of gods and heroes whose presence adds further embellishment and prestige to the dynasty's claim of extraordinary origin. In the Kanyakumari record, for example, his name is immediately preceded by that of the epic hero, Rama, whose victory over the evil Ravana is pointedly invoked. Thus the Cholas were endowed with genealogical charters of truly epic and cosmic import.[17]

## Four Creative Accounts

The four Chola genealogies that primarily concern us are from different reigns spanning four generations and about a century, from the 960s to the 1060s. They are contained in the Anbil plates of Sundara-Chola Parantaka II (ca. A.D. 956–973), from about A.D. 960; the Larger Leiden plates of his son Rajaraja I (985–1014), ca. A.D. 1005; the Tiruvalangadu plates of the latter's son Rajendra I (1012–1044), from about A.D. 1018; and the Kanyakumari inscription of Rajendra's youngest son Virarajendra (1063–1069), from A.D. 1069.[18] The four reigns were consecutive except for the last, since Virarajendra came to the throne only after his elder brothers had ruled. The first three records are copper-plate grants; the last is a lithic record inscribed on temple pillars. Each record is bilingual, consisting of a lengthy and elegant poetic eulogy in Sanskrit, followed by the shorter operational section of the grant, its mundane details prosaically described in Tamil.

We may safely presume that each of the four eulogies had separate authorship, since the authors of the three copper-plate inscriptions, all

[17] On genealogies as political charters, see Laura Bohannan, 'A Genealogical Charter,' *Africa*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (October 1952), pp. 301–15 and R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, 'The Kinsmen of the Buddha: Myth as Political Charter in the Ancient and Early Medieval Kingdoms of Sri Lanka,' *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 1976), pp. 53–62.

[18] For published texts, see T.A. Gopinatha Rao, 'Anbil Plates of Sundara-Chola: the 4th Year,' *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 15 (1919–20), pp. 44–72; K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer, 'Larger Leiden Plates (of Rajaraja I),' *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 22 (1933–34), pp. 213–66; 'The Tiruvalangadu Copper-Plates of the Sixth Year of Rajendra-Chola I,' *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. 3, Pt. 3, pp. 382–439; K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer, 'Kanyakumari Inscription of Virarajendra,' *Travancore Archaeological Series*, Vol. 3, Pt. 1 (1922), pp. 87–158. Although not discussed here, the Udayendiram plates of the Ganga king Prithivipati II Hastimalla include the genealogy of his suzerain, the Chola king Parantaka I. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. 2, Pt. 3, pp. 375–90.

Brahmans evidently quite willing to take credit for their compositions, identify themselves by name—and, in two instances, by *gotra* as well—and the anonymous Kanyakumari record follows the last of those charters by a half-century. Thus any similarities that they exhibit do not result from common authorship.

Each record begins by invoking a god or gods prior to tracing the Chola genealogy. But the invocations are not identical; indeed, the choice of gods to be invoked appears to reflect the whim of the poet. Although the Cholas are often characterised as devotees of Siva, in these records Brahma and especially Visnu also feature prominently. The Anbil plates open with elaborate invocations to both Visnu and Siva before proceeding to describe the Cholas 'whose origin was the light which proceeded from the eye of Visnu.' The Leiden plates praise Visnu and invoke the gods for the continuation of the Chola family. The Tiruvalangadu plates invoke the blessing of Parvati. And the Kanyakumari inscription invokes Siva, Visnu, and Brahma before tracing Chola descent from the latter.

But the genealogies themselves are even more striking in their diversity. If we consider only the 'mythological' (and perhaps in part quasi-historical) portions of these genealogies—that is, the section of each genealogy preceding the name of Vijayalaya—we find that the lists of names that can be abstracted from those passages range in genealogical depth from 16 to 39 names, as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Anbil: | 18 |
| Leiden: | 16 |
| Tiruvalangadu: | 39 |
| Kanyakumari: | 35 |

**The Mythical Ancestry of King Vijayalaya: Four Versions**

*Anbil*: Visnu, Brahma, Marichi, Kasyapa, Aryaman, Mahavira, Rudrajit, Chandrajit, Usinara, Sibi, Chola, Senni, Killi, Karikala, Kochchengannan, Nallatikkon, Valabha, Srikantha

*Leiden*: Sun, Manu, Ikshvaku, Mandhatri, Muchukunda, Valabha, Sibi, Chola, Rajakesarin, Parakesarin, Suraguru [Mrityujit], Vyaghraketu, Panchapa, Karikala, Kochchangannan, Kokkilli

*Tiruvalangadu*: Sun, Manu, Ikshvaku, Vikukshi, Puranjaya [Kakutstha], Kakshivat, Aryyama, Analapratapa, Vena, Prithu, Dhundhumara, Yuvanasva, Mandhatri, Muchukunda, Valabha, Prithulaksha, Parthivachudamani, Dirghabahu [Chandrajit], Samkriti, Panchapa, Satyavrata [Rudrajit], Usinara, Sibi, Marutta, Daushyanti [Bharata], Chola

[Cholavarman], Rajakesarivarman [Rajakesarin], Parakesarin, Chitraratha, Chitrasva, Chitradhanvan, Suraguru [Mrityujit], Chitraratha [Vyaghraketu], Narendrapati, Vasu [Uparichara], Visvajit, Perunatkilli, Kalikala [Karikala], Kochchengannan

*Kanyakumari*: Brahma, Marichi, Kasyapa, Vivasvan, Manu, Ikshvaku, Vikukshisrava, Puranjaya [Kakutstha], Prithu, Kuvalasva, Mandhatri, Muchukunda, Harischandra, Sagara, Bhagiratha, Rituparna, Dilipa, Rama, Chola, Rajakesarin, Parakesarin, Mrityujit, Virasena, Chitra [Vyaghraketu], Pushpaketu, Ketumala, Samudrajit, Panchapa, Nrimrida, Manoratha, Perunatkilli, Karikala, Valabha, Jagadekamalla, Vyalabhayankara

Obviously the later genealogies are the longer ones. The four records together mention a total of 108 names. But some names appear repeatedly.[19] A comparison of the four lists reveals that there are only 68 unique names, and of those, 44 (nearly two-thirds) appear only once. Therefore, the remaining 40 instances (the difference between 68 and 108) result from single or multiple duplication of the other 24 unique names. Of those 24, only three—namely Chola, Karikala, and Valabha—appear on all four lists. The other 21 duplicated names comprise two groups, such that eleven names appear on three lists and ten appear on two.[20] In summary:

| | |
|---|---|
| Names appearing on four lists: | 3 |
| Names appearing on three lists: | 10 |
| Names appearing on two lists: | 11 |
| Names appearing once: | 44 |

One implication is immediately apparent. The fact that two-thirds of the names appear on only one list demonstrates the high degree of variability in the genealogies. So too does the fact that only three names—fewer than 5 per cent of the unique names—appear on all four lists. So on what grounds could one maintain that these genealogies have very much in common? To answer that question, we must consider other features.

## Structural Features

One characteristic of 'puranic' conceptions of kingship is the dichotomous classification of royal families into Solar and Lunar dynasties. The Cholas

[19] Since some names appear as their synonyms on other lists, they are treated as identical for the purpose of comparison. Thus, Suraguru is counted as appearing on three lists, even though it appears on one of these only as the *alias* Mrityujit.

[20] This article was written on a Kaypro IV microcomputer. Genealogies were compared by using WORDFREQ lexicographical analysis, part of THE WORD Plus software program.

claimed to be a Solar dynasty, and two of our four genealogies, those from the reign of Rajaraja I (Leiden) and Rajendra I (Tiruvalangadu), do begin with the Sun and then proceed to Manu, the mythical first man and 'first of kings,' then to his son Ikshvaku, generally regarded in puranic tradition as the founder of the *Suryavamsa* or Solar line.

The Anbil grant, however, begins with Visnu and then proceeds through Brahma, but here too there is a solar theme, for verse 5 refers to the Chola family 'whose origin was the light that emerged from the eye of Visnu.' The next verse shifts images and refers to a lotus flower sprung from the navel of Visnu, like the orb of the sun rising from the ocean. Brahma, who caused the creation of the three worlds, manifested himself resting on the golden seat that is the pericarp of that lotus. From Brahma sprang Marichi, from whom was born Kasyapa. From Kasyapa arose 'the great light called Aryaman' (another name for the sun), etc. Obviously the mythological redundancy that we noted earlier can occur even within a single narrative, as in these variant versions of the process of creation.

Mythic thought also tends to be metaphoric, and the Chola eulogies are rich in repetitive metaphor and symbolism. For example, the genealogy presented in the Larger Leiden plates, following the invocation of deities, begins in this fashion in verses 3 and 4:

> From the Sun [*Ahimakara*], the sole eye of the whole world, was [born] Manu, the first of kings. [Next] was born his son Ikshvaku, whose footstool was licked by rows of diadems of kings. In his family was [born] king Mandhatri, who was a storehouse of virtues, who was equal to Dhatri [Brahman] and who justly ruled this earth as far as the Lokaloka mountain.
>
> His son was the heroic king Muchukunda. Born as his son was king Valabha, who was the sole crest-jewel of the Kshatra [Kshatriyas]. In his family was born the illustrious king widely renowned throughout the world of Sibi, whose two feet were worshipped by the entire host of kings.

The images conveyed in these and many other verses are those of power, status, and extensiveness. One of the most striking images utilised in these accounts is that of a mighty ruler before whose feet lesser kings prostrate themselves, and this vivid symbolism is repeated in a variety of ingenious ways. Hence the same record refers to Kokkilli 'whose feet were worshipped by the crests of the entire host of kings' (v. 12), among others thus described.

Examination of the genealogies reveals other common attributes. One is that each account traces the 'descent' of the reigning Chola king in a double sense, both ancestrally and cosmologically. It begins with the generation of the world and then proceeds gradually from the cosmic realm of the Vedic gods down through the names of many illustrious kings to the here-and-now of contemporary Chola kingship. The hierarchical perspective is analogous

to that governing the concept of the *avatar* of Visnu, although the king's alleged divinity by virtue of his descent from the gods is a more ambiguous notion, muted by the many intervening ancestral figures that could claim divinity on the same basis. As other scholars have noted, the Indian king's divinity was highly problematic, qualified in part by the authority of the Brahmans upon whom kings became so dependent for ritual and genealogical legitimation.[21]

The genealogies also veneer a composite structure paralleling and reinforcing their hierarchical arrangement. That is, from a Brahmanical point of view the different sources utilised in constructing the successive parts of these accounts correspond in prestige to the hierarchical organisation of the genealogies, which trace descent from macrocosm to microcosm. Hence the earliest names of gods and heroes can all be identified in the prestigious Sanskrit Puranas. Next there appear names that are not to be found in those texts, but are extolled in regional tradition and can be identified readily in classical Tamil literature. Finally appear the names of recent Chola kings, Vijayalaya and his descendants, whose hagiography consists in large part of the inscriptions themselves. Elements from these diverse sources are spliced together, as it were, to create an appearance of continuous narrative—indeed, a continuum connecting gods and men.

In addition, the initial or puranic segment of each genealogy exhibits a pattern of 'compression'. K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer, who edited the Kanyakumari inscription for the *Tranvancore Archaeological Series*, has noted repeated instances of names preserved in the puranic Solar genealogies but omitted from the Kanyakumari account, and even prepared a chart amalgamating the puranic and Kanyakumari renditions of the Solar lineage into a single pedigree. The resulting composite Solar ancestry contains 84 generations prior to Vijayalaya Chola. But of that number, exactly 49 (or 58 per cent) out of the total of 84 names are omitted from the Kanyakumari version. Or if we narrow our focus to consider only the 67 generations preceding the eponymous Chola, from Brahma to Rama, then the 49 omitted names constitute 73 per cent of Subrahmanya Aiyer's list!

There is another way to conceptualise this compression. If we replace the names in Subrahmanya Aiyer's amalgamated list with numbers, so that Brahma is 1, Marichi 2, and so on down to Rama as 67, then the sequence of numbers representing names included in the Kanyakumari genealogy shows us the compression process at work: 1–8, 10, 16, 24–25, 35, 43, 47, 53, 62, and 67. Needless to say, the shorter Chola genealogies are even more compressed. Ambiguous language facilitates the generational 'jumps' in these records, as in the statement that: 'In this family there was king Bhagiratha.' Declining to specify a king's exact relationship to the ruler named before him enables the eulogist to omit any number of intervening puranic generations.

[21] See J.C. Heesterman, 'The Conundrum of the King's Authority,' in J.F. Richards, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–27.

The selectivity not only telescopes generations vertically, but laterally as well, for siblings and collateral lines mentioned in puranic sources are also omitted. A unilinear logic has been imposed on the material, so that only a single patrilineage is traced and digressions are dispensed with. For example, we learn from the *Visnu Purana* that Manu's son Iksvaku had 100 sons, of whom three were illustrious: Vikuksi, who established a kingdom at Ayodhya; Nimi, who did likewise at Videha; and Danda, who migrated to the south. When we turn to our Chola accounts for comparison, we find that the Tiruvalangadu and Kanyakumari records (containing the longest genealogies) do mention Iksvaku, then his son Vikuksi, then the latter's son Puranjaya, the same sequence as indicated in the *Visnu Purana*. The Leiden account mentions Iksvaku, but not Vikuksi or Puranjaya, instead skipping seventeen puranic generations to mention Mandhatri, characterised in the *Visnu Purana* as the miraculous offspring of Yuvanasva. Yet another of the Chola records mentions Nimi or Danda or their offspring. Those collateral lines are simply ignored.

It is likely that this particular form of simplification served a very practical aim, that of discouraging the claims of the kings' real-life collaterals, along with the ambitions of other potentially dissident elements in the kingdom. After all, the aim of the genealogies, along with the panoply of state ceremonies, titles, conquests, and other state paraphernalia was to enhance the centripetal forces of royal authority. But this effort to effect centralisation was undertaken in the face of contrary reality, consisting of a political system grounded in a segmented social system whose natural tendency was toward fragmentation in the hands of chiefs and other notables, local assemblies, and so on. The artificial tidiness of the genealogies is therefore consistent with other ideological features of Chola rule, which sought to effect an 'editing' of reality in conformity with an idealised vision of effective centralisation.

One might also characterise the tidiness of the Chola accounts as teleological, since the succession of names proceeds steadily from its beginning at the moment of creation to its culmination in the reign of the current Chola king. But this teleology is not a progressive concept of continual improvement. On the contrary, it is premised on a gradual cosmic decline and the steady deterioration of humankind. Hence the Cholas were presented as great kings for gravely troubled times.

This perspective derives, of course, from the familiar four-*yuga* concept of puranic cosmology, according to which the world passes through a repetitive succession of four ages of increasing degeneration, known collectively as a *mahayuga*. The cycle begins with the idealised Krita Age and ends with the degenerate Kali Age through which the world is now passing. In the current age of woes kingship is an essential bastion against ever-threatening evils. Since this thesis of gradual decline pervades the Puranas, it is not surprising that it colours the mythic content of the Chola genealogies as well.

As an explicit structural element, however, it is utilised only in the Tiruvalangadu plates, in which the successive names of putative Chola ancestors are compartmentalised so that the pattern of descent from macrocosm to microcosm is rendered parallel to the pattern of decline in human fortunes. Thus the first nineteen names, beginning with the Sun and Manu, are assigned to the Krita Yuga; the next sixteen, including king Chola, are attributed to the Treta Yuga or age of declining virtue; two are assigned to the Dvapara Yuga or age of confusion; and fourteen names, including the eleven imperial Chola kings from the time of Vijayalaya to Rajendra I, are assigned to the Kali Yuga. It is noteworthy that all three of the names preceding Vijayalaya's that are likewise assigned to the Kali Age—Perunatkilli, Kalikala (Karikala) and Kochchengannan—are appropriated from ancient Tamil tradition, rather than from the Mahapuranas.

The relevance of this premise of cosmic decay for sustaining kingship was surely identical to the argument for patronising Brahmans. Just as it is imperative in such a degenerate age to undertake pilgrimages and make generous gifts to Brahmans, so too it is necessary to rely on kingship to hold the elements of disorder in check. That such elements included threats posed by the marauding forces of rival kings made the logic no less compelling.

## Crafting the King's Charisma

Contrary to what many theorists have maintained, there is no single type or function of myth. To posit such a unitary function—as an explication or ritual, as an expression of class interests, as a dreamlike product of the unconscious mind, as a wish-fulfilment fantasy, as a form of primitive speculation about the nature of the world, or even as an attempt to resolve or restate problems—is to vastly simplify this complex phenomenon. There are many kinds of myths, many functions.[22]

Yet one can readily identify myths that share certain characteristics and capacities, some of which are relevant to our inquiry. One function is validation, an essential capacity in myths, like the ones considered here, that happen to serve as political charters. There is an explanatory element in all validation myths, since they attempt to account for the origins of specific institutions and practices. As political charters, they demonstrate how a ruling house was founded under remarkable circumstances that constitute a continuing mandate for its exercise of authority. Present practices are thereby firmly rooted in past events. There is an element of historiography in all myth-making, just as there is an element of myth-making in all historiography.

Another way of describing this validation capacity is to say that the

[22] The relevant literature is vast, but these contributions are pertinent to the argument: Percy S. Cohen, 'Theories of Myth,' *Man*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (September 1969), pp. 337–53. Also G.S. Kirk, *Myth; Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Cambridge University Press and University of California Press, 1970, 1973.

genealogies served to reconcile socio-political theory with reality. The Brahmanical social model was both hierarchical and static, in that ascribed statuses were alleged to be divinely ordained. But since experienced reality was necessarily one of gradual social and political change—because no society is completely changeless—the apparent contradictions had to be dealt with by the theorists, which is to say explained in a manner that sustained the static model.[23] Myths were instrumental in reconciling such discrepancies, including the periodic rise to power of new families from apparently obscure origins, with a body of social theory that denied the possibility of radical change. The very looseness of the puranic compilations encouraged their association with a wide variety of such phenomena requiring explanation. Not only could the reality of a newly-arisen dynasty's exercise of power be explained by reference to descent, but alternative genealogies could be invoked to explain the same set of political facts.

The egocentric premise of these and other efforts by the kings to secure political validation had its counterpart in the pride of the eulogists who praised them. Pious anonymity was not the attitude of either the rulers or the prideful poets who boasted of their patrons and of their own literary accomplishments as well. Eulogists revelled in their acts of individual creativity, and this aesthetic (and sociological) factor further clarifies the toleration of variance in the genealogies.

The wide contacts and influence of the Chola kings—to which their marriage alliances, as well as their military campaigns, testify—profoundly shaped their roles as patrons. The description in the Kanyakumari record of king Chola's importing Brahmans from the North reflects this sense of sweeping powers, a projection into the remote past of the imperial Cholas' grandiose self-image. But beyond the rhetoric, their actual exercise of wide-ranging powers and contacts affected the very conditions and content of artistic production, whether in temple-construction or in literature. The mythic merging of Vedic gods, ancient Tamil kings, and imperial Chola monarchs into a single genealogical account was not only a status claim, but also an aesthetic blending of all-India themes with regional traditions and local events.

Of the ancestral names appropriated from regional tradition, two are especially noteworthy. One is Karikala (or Kalikala), who is included on every list. This ancient Chola king is celebrated in the ancient Tamil poem *Pattinappalai* (a description of the ancient port of Kaveripattinam), contained in the compilation *Pattupattu* or 'Ten Poems'.[24] Karikala's salient characteristic

[23] This statement may seem like an endorsement of the structuralist dictum that *the* function of a myth is to mediate contradictions. But the point to emphasise is that such mediation is only one of many functions.

[24] K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, who paraphrases this account, remarks that 'Karikala also promoted the reclamation and settlement of forest land, and added to the prosperity of the country by multiplying its irrigation tanks.' *A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*. 2nd edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1958, pp. 19–20.

is a reputation for having constructed embankments along the Kaveri river to check its annual flooding. Thus the Leiden plates assert that 'king Karikala, [who was] death to his enemies, was born in that family. This [king] constructed embankments to the Kaveri' (v. 11).

Scholars have generally accepted Karikala's historicity, but have assigned him various dates ranging from about the second to the fifth centuries A.D. That the imperial Cholas appropriated his name for their genealogies suggests they were anxious to claim a special and enduring relationship with the Kaveri. Karikala's name invariably appears far down the list from that of king Chola, who also, as we have seen, had a special relationship with that river. King Chola cleared the forests along its banks and introduced colonists and crops; Karikala subsequently protected the settlements from flooding.

This preoccupation with the Kaveri may reflect a problem of credibility confronted by Vijayalaya and his immediate successors in establishing their authority as regional hegemons, a problem insufficiently addressed by claiming descent from Vedic gods alone. It was not until the ninth century, a rather late date in the evolution of agrarian society in the South, that Vijayalaya seized Tanjavur and established Chola power there. Although the expansion of agricultural settlement in the Kaveri region continued steadily thereafter, it is clear that the imperial Cholas were really latecomers as leading participants in that process. Claiming descent from earlier kings who were believed to have exercised a pioneering role in settling and controlling the riverine tracts may have constituted a response to this perception of tardiness.[25]

Similarly, the Cholas claimed descent from Kochchengannan, another figure renowned in early Tamil literature. He is described in the Anbil plates as having erected many temples to Siva throughout his domain. His construction projects had been referred to in the *Tevaram* hymns of the Tamil Saiva saint-singers, and the *Periyapuranam* also preserves a tale concerning his previous birth as a pious spider that wove cobwebs over the *linga* at the Jambukesvaram temple on Srirangam island. Kochchengannan's incorporation into the imperial Chola ancestry, like that of Karikala, strengthened Chola claims to a long-standing connection with development of the riverine tracts, and moreover with the construction there of temples, which were visible markers of the more prosperous and settled areas. Similar themes relating Chola ancestry to the Kaveri appear in other literary works of the Chola period, such as the *Kalingattupparani* and the *Vikrama-Solan-Ula*.[26]

[25] There is a distinct possibility that the ancient name of Chola may itself have been revived and appropriated for the same reason. However, that suggestion does not lend itself to rigorous proof.

[26] Thus, the *Kalingattupparani* includes as its nineteenth name 'He who brought the river Kaveri from the west' and as its thirtieth, 'He who made kings (conquered by him) build the embankments of the Kaveri.' For a synopsis of the Chola ancestry in the *Kalingattupparani*, *Vikrama-Solan-Ula*, *Kulottunga-Solan-Ula*, and *Sankara-Solan-Ula*, see *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 18 (1925–26), pp. 28–30.

Less distinctly characterised in the genealogies, but prominent in Tamil tradition, is Killi or Kokkilli, said by the composer of the eulogy in the Leiden plates to be 'of clear intellect, the lord of prosperity, whose feet were worshipped by the entire host of kings' (v. 12). Of this ruler, the epigraphist E. Hultzsch observed that he 'can hardly be considered a historical person, as he is credited with having entered a subterranean cave and there to have contracted marriage with a serpent princess.'[27] Thus Kokkilli is associated with another well-known genre of Indian dynastic mythology, one that traces a royal family's origins to intermarriage with a serpent princess or Nagi. This tradition of Naga-lore, with its patently erotic symbolism, is by no means peculiar to southern India, and indeed proved popular even in the royal courts of Indianised Southeast Asia. Again we are reminded of the markedly assimilative character of our genealogies, for elements of different origin myths and other edifying lore have been incorported into the Chola story and exhibited, not as alternative or incompatible explanations, but as episodes in a single account.

## The Context of Validation

Important as the content of a myth may be for understanding its significance, it must ultimately be understood in a social and historical context. But when the myth supports a status claim, we can more readily understand the attitude of those whose interests it serves than the views of others who are expected to accept the claim. Social science research has demonstrated the continuing relevance of fictive ancestry to modern caste mobility movements, but not all of these social uplift campaigns have been successful.[28] This means that some claims are perceived as unjustified. In fact, different status groups may advance directly incompatible claims, each expressed as a distinctive account of the past. Therefore to say that fictive genealogies provide validation is not to say that the claims of a particular group are necessarily accepted.

Veena Das, who has studied in a most enlightening way the origin myths preserved in some caste Puranas from Gujarat, demonstrates that a community whose origin myth seeks to explain why its members are entitled to be treated, say, as Brahmans rather than as wrestlers, may be confronted by the counter-claim of a prestigious community whose own origin myth not only accounts for its high status but also explains why the other group fully

[27] *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. 2, Pt. 3, p. 377.

[28] Here too the literature is vast, but see, *inter alia*, M.N. Srinivas, 'Mobility in the Caste System,' in Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn, eds., *Structure and Change in Indian Society*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968, pp. 189–200; Bernard Barber, 'Social Mobility in Hindu India,' in James Silverberg, ed., *Social Mobility in the Caste System in India; An Interdisciplinary Symposium*. Comparative Studies in Society and History, Supplement III. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1968, pp. 18–35; Edward B. Harper, 'Social Consequences of an "Unsuccessful" Low Caste Movement,' *ibid.*, pp. 36–65.

deserves its presently low status.[29] Obviously a royal family's claim of miraculous origin has greater plausibility than that of a clearly low-status group But the fact remains that to say a genealogical charter helped to validate a king's exercise of power is not to say that the claim was generally accepted. This is especially true when we consider that the data we have been examining, consisting of eulogies written in an esoteric language and inscribed on copperplates or temple walls, scarcely constitute an ideal medium through which to conduct what today would be called a public relations campaign.

But surely what *was* generally accepted was the cultural logic of the validation process, to which the eulogists made an implicit appeal. If, as I have already suggested, one purpose of fictive genealogies was to explain apparent discrepancies between theory and experience by demonstrating that no fundamental social change has really occurred, than it can also be said that such an argument follows the canons of legitimisation in traditional Sanskrit learning. Or rather, it reflects a general attitude toward the past to which Sanskrit learning necessarily conformed. Ancient practices were valid practices, and new texts and ideas could be considered valid only if they were shown to be ancient, or at least connected in some way with texts and traditions known to be ancient, such as the Mahapuranas.

It is in this sense that the apparent variability of our Chola genealogies is misleading, for it is a pattern of variation within a limited range of sanctioned possibilities. The mythographers did not have an infinite range of choices. Drawing extensively on puranic materials was an appropriate response to the logic of validation, which required that recent materials—in this case, the account of Vijayalaya and his descendants—be appended to other accounts believed to be ancient and prestigious.

We may conclude, then, that the mythological aspects of Chola genealogies in their many variations are wholly in accord with Leach's observation. What was essential for politico-ancestral validation was not consistency of detail or the elimination of variation, but rather a logic of connectedness, the demonstration of a direct relationship between past and present, between gods and kings, between the order of the cosmos and Chola power. It is difficult to say to what extent these claims were widely accepted, but the fact that imperial Chola rule continued for roughly three centuries and thereafter petty rulers sought to appropriate the Chola name and prestige suggests that these mythical accounts constituted, along with other features of Chola rule, important elements in a coherent and enduring system of authority.

[29] In one example cited by Das, the Jethimallas, a caste of wrestlers, claim to be a subcaste of Modh Brahmans who, due to the declining morality attendant upon the Kali Age and the failure of kings to protect Brahmans properly, took up a different style of life at the urging of the god Krishna, who imparted to them the secrets of wrestling. But the real Modh Brahmans resist that claim by contending that while the Jethimallas indeed were formerly Brahmans, their degradation is so complete that they can no longer claim to be Brahmans, equal to others who never compromised their way of life. The logic of the Modh Brahmans' rejection of the Jethimalla claim suggests that not only are there different versions of the same myth, but a single story may also be subject to conflicting interpretations. See 'A Sociological Approach to the Caste Puranas: A Case Study,' *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (September 1968), pp. 141–64.