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The Poets as Anthropologists
The Representation of Hill/ Forest Tribes in "Classical" Tamil Literature

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ABSTRACT 'Representation' has become one of the major issues not only in anthropology at large but also in South Asian Studies. The present article is concerned with the classical Tamil 'Cankam' literature and pursues the quest of how tribal cultures are depicted in these texts. As the paper shows the poems rather then being mirrors of the social reality of the time are to considerable extent literary constructions. The article thus reveals that the Cankam poets, despite their realistic rhetoric presented a rather fictitious ordered and harmonic social/cultural landscape. Accordingly the poems, often composed in the service of local rulers, can be seen as windows offering a glimpse on the process of political legitimization with poetical means.

INTRODUCTION

At least since S. Iyengar's (1929) elaborate studies in Tamil history it is a well-known fact that in early Tamil literature many aspects of ancient tribal societies are depicted. Anthropologists (Morris 1977; Gardner 1969) and Indologists (Zvelebil, 1975; Sontheimer, 1976) concerned with the South Indian tribal spectrum referred to the so-called *Sangam* literature, when they alleged for the long continuity of tribal cultures in South India. Other Indologists (Clothey, 1978; Hart, III 1978) made attempts to trace back certain features of South Indian religion, for example the concepts around Murukaṉ or the worship and myths regarding Vaḷḷi, to this early poetry, parts of which they claimed to be reflections of a neolithic stratum of tribal culture. Lastly, scholars (cf. S. Singaravelu, 1966) tried to reconstruct an "ancient Tamil Culture" freely neglecting thereby the cultural and tribal complexity, which had been already developed in the region at the time the *sangam* was composed.

Yet it seems indispensable, at least from an anthropological point of view, to analyse the texts in the light of this cultural diversity. Moreover, the *sangam* poems as much as any other literature in India and elsewhere (cf. Ramanujan, 1989) are literary texts and as such are crying for an analysis that recognizes their constructed character. Therefore, instead of treating the poems simply as "windows" offering an objective and realist view of the tribal cultures at that time the present paper will explore, how the poets of the *sangam* literature re-present the tribal cultures and their "worldview." One approach in the former sense, dealing with pastoralism, has been provided by K. Zvelebil (1975). The present paper will therefore concentrate on the cultures of the hill /forest tribes, as they are depicted in early "classical" Tamil literature.

The Sources

The sources on which the present study is based are confined to the oldest, the "classical" stratum of Tamil literature. These are the poems of the so-called *sangam*, arranged in the two great anthologies Eṭṭuttokai, i.e. the "Eight Collections," and the Pattupāttu, i.e. the "Ten Lays" (cf. Zvelebil, 1973).

This poetry was composed by bards, who travelled about in groups through the ancient Tamil-Country and performed their art at the court of kings or, like the famous Kapilar, acted as highly esteemed court-poets, devoting their art exclusively to their patrons. Though this stratum of literature is typically "Kunstdichtung," for it's heroes are idealized types (at least in the Akam-genre), the poetry has a high sense for reality. It reflects not simply the live of a nobility or particular class, though the bards praised their patrons in a high manner, but bears vivid descriptions of all the different communities and geographical regions of the ancient Tamil-Country.

This "realistic" character of early Tamil poetry makes it a unique source for the study of the representation of the early tribal cultures and their value systems.

The early poems were finally arranged in the two great anthologies some time in the middle of the eighth century, but their actual composition can be dated much earlier. As Zvelebil (ibid.: 12) shows, the most plausible time of composition covers roughly the period between middle of the first century and the late third or early fourth century A. D.

The bulk of ethnologically relevant material on the hill and forest tribes is included in only some of the lays of the Pattuppāṭṭu collection, which consists at a whole of ten longer poems. We have relative ample descriptions in the earlier poems Kuṟiñcipāṭṭu, Porunarāṟṟuppaṭai and Perumpāṇaṟṟuppaṭai (all 2-3th. A.D.) and in the slightly later composed Malaipaṭukaṭam and Maduraikāñci (2-4th. A.D.). Finally we have the Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai, the latest of the ten lays, dealing primarily with the worship of Murukaṇ and to be dated somewhere between the fifth and seventh century A. D (cf. Zvelebil, 1973).

Additional hints to the life of the hill and forest tribes are given in poems of the Eṭṭuttokai anthology, mainly in Akanāṉūṟu , i.e. the "(collection of) four hundred short (poems) in the akam genre," in Puṟanāṉūṟu, i.e. the "four hundred in the puram genre," in Aiṅkuṟunūṟu, the "(collection of) five hundred short (poems)" and in the kuriñci theme of Kalittokai, i.e. the "collection in the Kali (metre)."

The Region and It's Tribal Spectrum

The part of India forming the background for the Tamil poetry in question is essentially conterminous with the historiographic area termed by B. Stein (1980) the "macro-region" of South-India, comprising all of contemporary Tamil Nadu, Kerala, the southern parts of Karnataka and the western fringe of Coorg. This macro-region was, by tradition, further divided in several geographical units. For our purpose it is sufficient to follow B. J. Murton (1979) who gives the further diversification of ancient Tamil Nadu by pointing out these units as Kar-, Tondai-, Kongu-, Chola- and Pandya-Mandalam and to which we have to add the Chera-Mandalam. Each of these units, which did not denote political territories, we may term the traditional sub-regions and all of them shared certain ecological characteristics.[1]

Politically, the macro-region was roughly divided among the three great kingdoms of the Chola-Pandya- and Chera-dynasties and several minor feudatory kingdoms, like the countries of Ori, Kari, Pekan or Pari (that will be dealt with below). In poetry, the more it was heroic poetry, this political situation is sharply reflected. But the poetical convention, as it is laid down in Tolkāppiyam, employed a further classification and subdivided the sub-regions along ecological criteria in four and later five separate landscapes, the tiṇais.[2]

Thus the pasture land was called mullai, the coastal regions neytal, the fertile riverine plains marutam, the dry parts were pālai and the hilly- and jungle-regions were termed kuṟiñci. The poetical "grammar" ascribed a specific set of nature, people and their respective occupations to each of these regions, a diversity certainly corresponding roughly with the ecological and cultural reality of the period. So, according to the poets, the mullai was mainly inhabited by pastoralists, called iṭaiyar or āiyar,[3] the neytal was the habitat of the paravar, i.e. the fishing communities, in the marutam tracts lived the farming (ploughing) people, uḻavar, and the pālai was the typical habitat of the maravar (also called "villōr", bowmen), and the eyinar, said to be warriors and robbers. Finally there were the kuṟiñci-regions, representing the typical ecosystem of the hill- and forest tribes (the kuravar or kānavar).

In general we can say with B. Stein that the geomorphological character of the macro-region affected highly the settlement pattern such "that fertile lands, capable of supporting relatively dense populations, were scattered and isolated modes of prosperity and civilization" surrounded by forest clad uplands and pastoral tracts which supported only small tribal populations.

The Hill and Forest Tribes

To evaluate the information provided by the sources it has to be stated that the old Tamil literature nowhere gives a description of a specific ethnic group or a particular hill/forest tribe. The terms which the poets employed when they referred to such tribes are the more general ones

kuravar or kānavar. Etymologically these terms are derived from "kuṉṟam," i.e. hill, mountain (DED 1548)[4] and "kān," i.e. jungle, forest (DED, 1194), so that kuṟavar/kāṉavar simply denote "hill-people" or "jungle-people" respectively. Thus their designation is related to their habitat.

In contrast, another term often said to refer to forest tribes or even to indigenous hunter-gatherers of South-India, namely vēṭṭuvar (or vētar) is less definite. The word is derived from "vēṭṭam," i.e. hunt, chase (DED, 4547). It is thus related to an occupation, meaning "hunting-people"[5]. Yet it refers to all the people who hunted in ancient Tamil Nadu and these were not only kuṟavar/kāṉavar but, more prominently, kings with their hunting parties, warrior bands like maṟavar/kallar and presumably others. Accordingly, the term "vēṭṭuvar" is applied to kings (cf. Puṟam, 152 and 205; Naṟṟ., 212; Akam, 318), warriors (cf. Puṟam, 324; Mk., 116), the god Murukaṇ (cf. Akam, 28; Puṟam, 214) and, only in a few instances, to a group of people settling in the forest. But even in those latter instances (cf. Puram, 33 and 202) they are depicted as having forts, being overwhelmed by the kings army etc., and nowhere can this term to be taken as synonymous for kuṟavar/kāṉavar. Therefore, I am inclined to suppose, that the term "vēṭṭuvar" was rather employed to denote people of a warrior-class or a tribal population, which served at least partially in armies of local kings.[6] But however this problem will be solved one has to be aware that none of the terms is related to a specific ethnic group so that the poems present a somewhat "ideal-typical" pattern of the tribes in that early period.

Localization

Though in contemporary South-India the most prominent regions inhabited by hill tribes are the forested slopes of the western ghats, we have good reasons to assume that at the time of the old poetry the kuṟavar/kānavar inhabited the other forested hilly parts of the macro-region to a considerable extent as well.

Fortunately we are able to localize roughly the geographic areas some of the poems refer to, so that we can differentiate at least the more prominent sub-regions inhabited by kuṟavar/kānavar.

First we have the poems believed to be composed by the famous Kapilar the elder whose poetry is especially associated with the kuṟiñci theme. He was a highly esteemed poet at the court of the Pandya dynasty, lived first in Madurai and later under the patronage of Pari, a ruler of a minor kingdom. Kapilar ascribes Kuṟavar as living in Pari's country and in many other poems, written in praise of the mountainous regions of his patrons kingdom, he mentions Kuṟavar and Kānavar. Though we can't denote with certainty where exactly Pari's country is to be located, we may follow Kanakhasabai who pointed out that the Paṟambu hill, the dominant mountain in his country, belonged formerly "to Ma-Veḷ-Evvi, the great Vēḷḷāla-chief of Milalaikuṉṟam whose territory lay on the southern bank of the river Kāveri"(Kanakasabhai, 1956: 104, citing Puṟam, 202). Because it belonged until its besiege to neither of the greater kingdoms, it may be justified to localize Pari's country somewhere in the southern parts of ancient Konku-Mandalam, which was a kuṟiñci-region par excellence, comprising the whole of the modern district of Coimbatore and parts of Salem-, Tiruchirapalli- and Madurai-Districts (cf. Arokiaswamy, 1956: 5 and Murton, 1979: 3). This part of South-India formed the background for Kapilar's poetry and thus for his description of the Kuṟavar/Kāṉavar living there.

With more accuracy we are able to localize the region that is depicted in the poem Malaipaṭukaṭām, which is rich in details about Kuṟavar/Kāṉavar. This poem was composed in praise of Naṉṉan who was, according to J. V. Chelliah (1946: 198 ff), a "ruler of the region watered by the Seyaru, now known as Chanmuganathi. The mountains of this land are known as the Naviram hills. His capital was called Chankama and was situated west of Tiruvanamalai, while his country was called Palakunrakoddam" one of the 24 divisions of the Tondai-Mandalam. Thus this poem refers to the north-eastern part of present Tamil Nadu.

Two other odes in which hints on kuṟavar/kāṉavar are given refer also to this northern part of the macro-region. One is the Perumpāṇaṟṟuppaṭai, in which the various regions (tiŸais) on the way to Kanchipuram, situated at the northern fringe of the Tondai-Mandalam, are depicted And the other, the Porunarārruppatai, praises the

country of the Chola king Karikal, lying east and north-east of the above mentioned Konku-Mandalam. Finally, two further poems of the Pattuppaṭṭu collection delineate the western mountains, i.e. the Western Ghat regions from the Nilagiri's in the north down to the Palni-Hills in the south, as inhabited by kuṟavar /kāṉavar. These are the Maduraikāñci, an ode in praise of the area surrounding the present Madurai in the ancient Pandya-Mandalam, and the Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai, also referring to the forested hilly regions in the Western Ghats, like the Palni-Hills.

All these texts mention explicitly the kuṟavar /kāṉavar and we are justified to sum up that in all the sub-regions there were areas inhabited by hill/ forest tribes. In fact, a far greater portion of the macro-region than today was at least until the end of the 9th century predominantly clothed with a scrub-woodland and used by pastoralists and shifting cultivators (Murton, 1979: 9). This confirms the overall pattern in the several sub-regions were small clusters of sedentary 'advanced' peoples lived amidst relative large populations of pasture-, hill- and forest people.

In particular it is said that kāṉavar lived "under the protection of the jungle" (kāṭu kāttu uṟaiyum kāṉavar; Mal., 279) or that the "sounds of kāṉavar" (kāṉavar pūsal; Mk. 293) are heard in the kuṟiñci tract. Other passages state that kuṟavar live "upon high hills" (kuṟavarum maruñum kuṉṟattu paṭinē; Mal., 275) or that the "little village of the kuṟavan" (cirukuṭi kuṟavaṉ; Kuru., 95) is to be found, where waters crash from the peak through mountain caves.

But one has to bear in mind that the differentiation of the several tiṇais was largely employed for poetical reasons and the habitat of kuṟavar/ kāṉavar was not strictly confined to the kuṟiñci. So the kāṉavar are also said to be dwellers of the low forest land (Mullainilamākkal), or to be dwellers of desert tracts (pālainilamākkal; Poru.116 commt.). Yet these interpretations occur solely in the commentaries, while the relation between kuṟiñci and kuṟavar /kāṉavar in the actual texts is maintained all over.

Economy and Ergology

It has been stated already, that the poets of ancient Tamil Nadu did not describe a particular tribe nor did they draw their picture of cultural phenomena very detailed. Nevertheless, the poems distinguish clearly among the different economic activities, the employed techniques and artefacts. They mention many activities that are, though diminishing, still practised by several recent hill/forest tribes in the mountainous regions of South India.[7]

Gathering

Though the tribes called kuṟavar/kāṉavar practised shifting cultivation for subsistence, food-gathering formed an integral part of their economy. According to poetry, the most important items that were gathered were tubers, jack-fruit and honey. But certainly the poets simplified in their descriptions. They mostly used the general term for tuber (kiḻaṅku), which can denote all the different kinds of yams (dioscorea) or even roots of other species, rather then describing the varieties and they simply used the term 'tēn' for honey, though we know that the tribes must have had a keen knowledge of the different kinds of honey to be found in the forested hilly regions of South-India.[8]

Both kuṟavar and kāṉavar are said to use the kiḻaṅku for food. Kapilar states, that in the hills are "deep holes that kāṉavar dig for tubers" (kāṉavar kiḻaṅku akal neṭuṅkuḻi; Aink., 208:1-2) and at least two other poems state that kuravar had tubers to eat. These were probably the various kinds of "dioscorea," termed "vaḷḷi" or "vaḷḷi kiḻaṅku," the wild varieties of which are up to date the most important tubers gathered by many hill tribes of South-India.[9]

Apart from roots and tubers different kinds of fruits were collected by the hill tribes. In particular the jack fruit (palā, Aham., 12) and, more specified, the sweet seeds of jack-fruit (tiṉsulai, Puram. 109, 3) are mentioned. Further the tamarind fruit (puḷi, Mal., 179) and white bamboo-rice (kaḷai nel, Mal. 180) are said to be cooked by women of the kuṟavar (kuṟamakaḷ, Mal., 183). In Maduraikanci we hear of several other plants that were mutually gathered. Green pepper (paiṅkaṟi, Mk., 289), ginger (iñci, ibid.), turmeric (mancaḷ, ibid.) and mustard (aiyavi, Mk., 287) are said to grow, where the kāṉavar live and in Ainkrunuru Kapilar speaks of kuravar who pick up mango (mā) -fruits (Aink., 213).

But the most important and most esteemed

item that was gathered was certainly honey. Explicitly it is said that kāṉavar had honey (tān, Mal., 152) or that kuravar had a drink mixed with honey (tākkaṭṭenal, Mal. 171). Sometimes kuṟavar/kāṉavar are even called those 'who collect honey (tēṉkōl pavar, Narr., 292, 2; tēṉkōl kōllai, Mal., 317). It is interesting to note that the ancient honey-gathering tribes used obviously the same terms and techniques as do the recent tribes who are engaged in honey-gathering. So at least one technique of honey-gathering, which is still practised by some South Indian tribes like the Jēnu Kurumba, Ālu-Kurumba or Irula is clearly depicted in the poems, i.e. the gathering of honey in cliffs and rocks produced by the rock bee (apis dorsata).[10] This was and is still done by using a rope- or bamboo ladder, which was climbed to reach the honeycombs in the middle of steep rocks. Thus Mal. 315 says that honey, stored up (tokutta) by bees for good use on beautiful high rocky slopes (neṭuvarai) was gathered by climbing tall fibre-ladders (mālpu). A similar description is given in Puṟam 105,6 (mālpuṭai neṭuvarai) and in Kuru. 273, 5: "the old fibre-ladder (hanging) on a rocky slope where big honeycombs may be seen" (peruntēṉ kaṇpatu varayiṉ mutumālpu; cf. Zvelebil 1979). The term "peruntēṉ" being employed here suggests that the ancient hill tribes did differentiate between the different kinds of honey, for this term refers to a special kind, namely the honey in rocks and cliffs that is difficult and dangerous to get. In contemporary South-India many honey-collecting tribes distinguish at least two other varieties of honey, namely shrub- and tree-honey and we can assume, that these were also known to the tribes depicted in the poems.[11]

Hunting

In the poems both kuṟavar and kāṉavar are associated with hunting and we have whole passages that depict in detail the animals that were hunted as well as the techniques and artefacts employed therein. Yet, the poets do not provide us with an all-embracing picture. They focused primarily on the more suspicious, larger animals (fit for poetry so to say), that were hunted by kuṟavar/kāṉavar and ignored the minor species of the fauna like snakes or squirrels that were certainly the objects of hunting activities too. The most often cited animal said to be hunted is the wild black boar (paṉṟi). It appears in several passages, where it is described in dramatically fashioned contexts. This is obviously due to the fact that the wild black boar was much feared for his ferocity and his destruction of the field-crops, planted by the hill tribes ("the panri is feared for it ruins the ripe millet field," [...] kēlal viḷai punam niḻattalin añci, Mal., 193). It was hunted with bow and arrow (ēvu), lit. "it died of the too many wounds in his chest [....] caused by those, who stay on platforms with arrows" (kaḻutil cēṉēṉ ēvoṭu [...] niṟam puṇ kūrnda neṟiketak kiṭanda, Mal., 243-246). But it was also "caught in pitfalls" (puḷai torum maṭṭiya, Mal. 194) by kuravar and by those who "kill the hoag that fell in digged pits" (akaḻnda-maṭivāy payampiṉ [...] kēḻal, Mk., 294-295), i.e. in this context the kāṉavar. The kāṉavar are also said to take the meat of the boar after it has been crashed on a pointed stake, after it had been driven by male jackals (kōnāy, cf. Narr., 82, 6-11).[12] A further interesting method of boar-hunting practised by kāṉavar is vividly described in Perumpaṇāṟṟuppaṭai and it becomes obvious, that they had developed elaborate hunting techniques. According to the poem, it was sometimes difficult for game of the muḻlai-regions to get water in the dry season (lit. "in times of failing rain," vāṉ maṭi polutil, 107) and animals like deer (mān) and boar (eṉam, paṉṟi) were in search for waterholes. Therefore the kāṉavar dug pits in considerable distance around waterholes at the forest periphery early in the morning, hide themselves therein and held out, until game approached and came near enough to be killed with the bow and arrow.[13] This method is called "the hunt of the first early half of the day" (araināṇ vēṭṭam 111). It is distinguished from the "hunt of the later half of the day" (pātināḷ vēṭṭam, comm.,117). This type of hunting was practised to catch smaller animals like hares (muyal) and was carried out in co-operative hunting-groups. In this kind of hunt the kāṉavar are said to come "with their open-mouthed hunting dogs, beating the bushes, putting (knotting) nets in the thickets" [...] cutting off the route of the long eared little hares and encircling them,[14] the cruel kāṉavar eat their prey in the jungle, (pakaṉāl pakuvāy -ñamaliyoṭu paim putal erukki tokuvāy vēli toṭar valai māṭṭi [...] neṭuncevi kuṟumuyal

pōkkaṟa vaḷai kaṭuṅkaṉ kāṉavar kaṭaru kuṭṭuṇṇum, Perp. 111-116). Other animals hunted were the iguana (uṭumpu, Mal. 177) and the porcupine (ey paṉṟi, muḷavu, Mal. 176) though the way this was accomplished is not clear.

In sum boar, deer and hare were the more important species that were hunted by kuṟavar/kāṉavar. The poems neither mention the hunt of tiger or elephants nor bird-trapping or fishing. With regard to the later two occupations this does not mean too much. The poets did not live too intimately with the hill/forest tribes but rather wandered through their territories, and for poetry the description of more dramatic events in tribal life was obviously sufficient. Additionally all of the recent hill tribes in South-India are to some extent engaged in bird-trapping and fishing, so that we can assume that they did so in the past too.

Shifting Cultivation

Apart from gathering and hunting the hill tribes of ancient South India cultivated several crops by slash and burn cultivation. The poets were well aware of the particularities of this type of cultivation for they not only described it in various poems but put it in distinct contrast to the wet rice cultivation, practised in the plains.

Again both kuṟavar and kāṉavar are associated with slash- and burn cultivation, which is a further confirmation of the fact that they were not thought to connote different tribes. So the peculiarities of that mode of cultivation are mentioned in Puram 159, were a broad field in uplands (puṉam) is said to be planted with hill rice (aivaṉam) and burnt over by kāṉavar (kāṉavar kari puṉam mayakkiya akaṉkaṇa kollai, aivaṉam vitti [..] 15-17). Kuṟuntokai tells us, that 'those who take the green stubbles of millet (tiṉai) have to cut the yā-trees and burn them first into (a substance) like charcoal (yā koṉṟa maraṅcuṭṭiyaviṟa karumpumarul mudal paindaḷ centiṉai, Kuṟunt. 198, 1-2; cf. also Mk., 286-289 and Kuṟunt., 214, 1-2). The more important crops were hill rice (tōrai/aivaṉam) and at least two varieties of millet; kural (resp. tiṉai/iṟaṭi, panicum italicum, cf. Mk., 287, Kuṟunt., 214 et. al.) and cāmai (panicum nilaceum).

The poems also reflect the actual working up of the harvest. So we hear that women of the kāṉavar "spread out the millet on an extended rock (to dry)" (viyalaṟai sentiṉai parappi, Kuṟunt. 335, 2) and we know from the context of Kalitokai 40, that women of the hill tribe (koṭicciyar) pound the millet (kural) in mortars (ural) and with pestles (ulakkai, cf. 3-4)[15]. A peculiar feature of cultivation in the hill region was, that the ripening crops had to be guarded and protected from destruction. Indeed, animals like elephant and black boar were and are regarded highly destructive for the cultivation. Therefore the hill/forest tribes built platforms, sometimes high up in the trees surrounding the fields and kept guard there, equipped with bow and arrow or with a kind of sling, called "kavan." It was especially employed to scare away the elephants, for with it stones could be flinged over a fair distance. Accordingly says Mal., that "kuṟavar, ascending lofty platforms (itaṇam, paraṇi) in the high land, scare away the elephants (which stay) in thickets, by flinging stones with force from slingshots (kavaṇ)" (kuṟavar uyar nilai itaṇam eṟi kai puṭaiyū akal malai iṟumpil tuvaṉṟia yāṉai pakal nilai daḷarkkum kavaṇ umil kaṭu kal, Mal., 203-206)[16]

Political and Socio-structural Aspects

Due to the poetic nature of the texts there is not much evidence to reconstruct the political situation or the social structure of the hill/forest-tribes. Yet, some remarks could be made. With regard to the political constellation we can assume that most of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar were not isolated tribal communities, independent of the broader Tamil culture. Many poets, first among them Kapilar, emphasize that the hill tribes lived in areas ruled over by minor kings like Pāri, Kāri, Paṇṇaṉ et. al. These kings were certainly not, as some scholars (e. g. Iyengar, 1929: 71) have assumed, tribal chiefs of the kuṟavar/kāṉanvar. More probably they were nobles of the vēḷāḷar (cultivator) class, for in many poems they bear the respective title "vēḷ" (e.g. vēḷ Pāri, vēḷ Āy, vēḷ Evvi et. al.; cf. Kailasapathy, 1968: 21ff and DED, 4562) and this was a title of superior vēḷāḷar, who held high positions as regional chiefs and army commanders in the Choḻa-country. According to M. Subrahmanian (1966: 280-281) these nobles "owned land and directed agricultural operations," and it seems possible, that they extended their sovereignty over the hill regions in

some areas. So it is known from Puram 110 that vēḷ Pāri, the patron of Kapilar, ruled over 300 villages in the mountain-range. That these minor kings were not tribal-chiefs of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar is further suggested by the fact that their courts were, in comparison with the cultural level of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar, quite advanced. So they were equipped with chariots and horses (Puram, 200 and 126) and at least some of them (e.g. Kāri or Ōri) maintained a temporary army and war-elephants. They waged battles against other minor kingdoms (ibid.) either on their own behalf or as allies of one or the other of the three greater kingdoms of the Chola-, Cera- and Pantiya-dynasties.

However, there is nothing definite to say about the relationship between the smaller kingdoms and the hill/ forest tribes in their domains. But we can speculate that, though they probably had developed trading relations with the plains people or with agents of the minor kings, they were able to maintain a considerable degree of independence and neutrality. The range of time covered by the poems clearly antidates the three great periods of integration to be distinguished in South-India, the first of which did not begin before the 10th century A. D. (cf. Murton, 1979: 5). Only after the 10th. century the influx of cultivators into the mountainous regions increased, and with these changes parts of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar became slowly integrated in the broader Tamil cultural framework and ultimately, in some regions, in the system of right- and left-hand division.[17]

Concerning the internal organisation and normative rules of behaviour the texts are even more limited. We neither hear of tribal-chiefs (the designations "lord of hills," "lord of slopes," "lord of forests," i.e. kuṉṟa nāṭan, sāral nāṭan, kāṉaka nāṭaṉ etc. are entirely poetical in context) clans nor moieties.[18]

In view of this it is significant that many poems emphasize kinship when they speak of the hill/forest-tribes. Thus the term used for the settlements of kuṟavar/kāṉavar is cirukuṭi. This term is of interest for it can denote a "little hamlet" as well as "tribal community," "family" or "lineage" (DED, 1379; and TED). Obviously the poets employed this term intentionally to account for characteristics of the tribal culture, essentially based on kinship. Indeed the texts accentuate this aspect. Tirumurukāṟṟuppatai tells that kāṉavar dwell "on hills in hamlet small with kindred" (kuṉṟakam ciṟukuṭi kiḷaiyuṭaṉ, Tirum., 196), while in Mal. it is mentioned in the context of kuravar life that the poet will be invited "in every family by children there who claim relation-ship" (maka muṟai taṭuppa maṉaitorum, Mal., 185). The seize or actual composition of the tribal-hamlets however is not clear in the poems. Unfortunately the same has to be stated with regard to the Dravidian kinship system with its features of "prescriptive" cross-cousin marriage and the respective kinship terminologies. It has already been realised by scholars concerned with the reflections of this kinship system in ancient Tamil-literature (cf. Hart III, 1974 and Trautmann, 1974) that "it contains little reference to cross-cousin marriage" (Trautmann, 1960: 5). This is not surprising for almost everything concerned with intra-societal aspects belongs to the Aham-genre, i.e. love-poetry -and "its settings typically lie outside the framework of arranged marriage" (ibid.). If we focus on the kuṟavar/kāṉavar alone, the problem becomes even more evident because only one of the poetic love-themes, namely the kuṟiñci-theme, has the culture of the hill/ forest tribes as its "stage." This theme is, by poetic convention, strictly confined to certain stereotype situations and characters, primarily to the heroine, her lover, his friend, the girl's parents and her girl friend. Furthermore, the kuṟiñci-theme derives its attraction from the fact, that it describes "a situation which did not accord with the norm" (Hart III, op. cit.), i.e. a relationship between a girl and a young kuṟavar/kāṉavar not having a kinship relation in accordance with the rules (cf. Kuru., 40).[19] The situation is sometimes further dramatized for they know that the girl's father (or her brothers) will not agree with their later marriage. There are other interesting features of the kuṟiñci-theme, but for our purpose it is suffice to sum that some form of arranged marriage was the norm. However, no positive rules are mentioned in detail.

Religion

As it is with the social structure or the political organisation of the hill/ forest tribes, the material revealed by the poems allows only for a

superficial, rather descriptive and often stereotype picture of the religious life of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar.

At least two factors which are responsible for this should be mentioned. First of all, the poets were court poets, primarily composing to praise their patron qualities and their domains. As such, they were not too deeply interested to depict the actual conceptions of the hill-tribes but were eager to show them as "somehow happy forest-dwellers" that contributed to the glory of their patron's often rather small kingdoms. At the same time, the poets idealised and in fact "tamilized" the tribal cultures, if not in practise so at least in poetry. These factors make it sometimes impossible to distinguish between the distinct institutions and ideological concepts of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar and the broader Tamil culture.

Murukaṉ, Ceyyṉ, Kaṭavul

Despite the fact that many scholars think of Murukaṉ as being a deity especially associated with the hill tribes,[20] we have actually no evidence that he was primarily worshipped by kuṟavar/kāṉavar. Indeed, no poem speaks of Murukaṉ as being worshipped by them. Other scholars regard Ceyyōn as the deity primarily worshipped by the ancient hill tribes, but this seems equally doubtful. Though Ceyyōn is mentioned in Tolkāppiyam (Ahattiṉai iyal, 5) as the deity belonging to the kuṟiñci-tract, so that therefore his relation to the tribes of this region seems probable, the poems do not prove such a conjecture. In connection with rituals of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar for example, only Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai mentions a deity "Ceyyāṉ, the reddish clothed" (Ceyyāṉ civaṇta āṭaiyan, 206) who is said to appear among the kāṉavar while they are dancing in the hill region (see below). But to evaluate this passage, one has to remind, that Tirumuru is the latest, most syncreticised ode of the Pattupattu collection. It is essentially devotional poetry and shows as "guide to lord Murukaṉ" (so the title) the local manifestations of the god all over Tamil Nadu. As such he is of course also, but not exclusively, prevalent in the hill regions and therefore depicted as appearing among the kāṉavar (cf. Zvelebil 1973: chpt. viii). Indeed this is the only poem where Ceyyōn is put in relation to the hill tribes and we may assume, that neither Murukaṉ nor Ceyyōn can be said to be "autochtone" deities of these cultures.

With regard to religious aspects of the kuṟavar/kāṉvar the poets, rather than mentioning specific deities, applied the broader and more unspecific term "kaṭavul." Though the etymology of the word "kaṭavul" is still a matter of discussion, we may follow the position of G. L. Hart (1978: 27) who holds, that kaṭavul certainly means "that, to which sacrifice or debt pertains."

This would be well in accordance with the meaning of kaṭavul as it appears in those passages regarding kuṟavar/kāṉavar. There the term is employed to denote either a tribal/family-deity (kulamudal) or a deity of the ancestral-line (marapiṉ kaṭavul).

So we hear, that "the formless deity of the ancestral-line is honoured by kuṟavar, giving a necklace of sandal" (aru marapin kaṭavul pēṇi kuṟavar tanta cantiṇ āramum, Aham., 13, 3-4) or that kuṟavar- "girls, holding some blooms of abundant venkai, praise the great kaṭavul tribal-deity" (maṭamakal maṟai vēṅkai malarsilai koṇṭu malaiyuṟai kaṭavul kulamutal vaḻutti, Aink., 259, 1-2). In both poems no further details are given.

Other poems mention kaṭavul in the context of rain bringing prayers, for example Puram, 143, where a deity is said to be praised for rain. The details given are that certain prayers were expressed as: "May take the mountain rain" (malai vān koḷka, Puram, 1) or "May the water raise high" (māri āṉṟu maḻai mēkku uyarka, ibid., 2). In this way "the kuravar people praised the deity" (kaṭavul pēṇi kuṟavar makkaḷ, ibid., 3), says the poet. The same expression is employed in Naṟṟ., 165. There the poet depicts a kāṉavar who is hunting in the hills, and exclamates that there "the mountain stood with affliction, may it receive some rain" (anaṅkoṭu niṉṟatu malai vān koḷka, Naṟṟ. 165, 3) and lastly we should mention Aink., 251 where the poet says that 'because of the loud noise of the kuravan the clouds melt into a myriad little drops of rain' (kuṉṟa kuṟavan ārppiṉ eḻili nuṇpal aḻituḻi poḻiyum naṭa, ibid., 1-2).

I think it is significant, that in all these contexts no priest or mediator is said to celebrate a ritual. Instead it is simply people, obviously men and women (resp. girls), who are shown in praise of the deity.

That is almost all we know about katavul

among the hill tribes and it should be stated clearly that we have no reason to equate this term with Murukaṇ or Ceyyōn, as it is almost everywhere done. Of course, it can denote both, as much as it can denote any other deity, but regarding the hill/ forest tribes such an equation is not justified. In the early poems, neither Murukaṇ nor Ceyyōn are explicitly mentioned and only in commentaries is the god (kaṭavul) interpreted to be Murukaṇ (or Ceyyōn or even Vēlan).

Finally we have to discuss the place of one of the two wives of contemporary Murukaṇ, the popular deity Vaḷḷi or Vaḷḷiyamma. She is the only deity, which is brought in explicit relation to the hill tribes and to them only. We cannot deal here with the fascinating concepts of this goddess, as they are revealed in the "great" and "little" traditions of South-India (cf. Kantapurāṇam, Cto. 24, Cilapatikāram, Cto. 24, et. al.).[21] We should state, however, that her features and the fact that she is apparently a prominent deity, worshipped by at least some of the recent hill/forest tribes of South India, suggest her to be, though probably not an indigenous hill tribe deity, so probably a deity based on an indigenous tribal concept. Examining both, the more recent traditions like Silapatikāram or Kantapurāṇam and the modern mythology built around Vaḷḷi and Murukaṇ (like Taṇikaippurāṇam) K. Zvelebil comes to the conclusion, that "Vaḷḷi might have been the primitive, tribal goddess of fertility and procreation" (Zvelebil, 1977: 237 note 29). Indeed it seems probable that Vaḷḷi is regarded a goddess of fertility and love in contemporary South Indian religious notions. However, this does not necessarily mean, that she is "ex-origin" a tribal deity.[22] On the contrary it can be demonstrated that the concept of Vaḷḷi as a goddess is historically grown and has been shaped to a large extend by non-tribal influences and mediators. In fact we have to state that in the oldest stratum of Tamil poetry the term Vaḷḷi does nowhere appear in a religious context.

In the majority of instances the term Vaḷḷi refers to a creeper, namely the upper part of the kilanku root, the dioscorea, which was gathered and probably also cultivated by the kuṟavar/ kāṉavar and which constituted an important item of staple food (cf. K. Zvelebil, 1977: 232). In other instances the term also refers to the creeper but is used in the context of love poetry. Thus the picture of a creeper, coiled around a tree, is taken as a simile for a girl embracing her lover or the waist of the girl is said to be "slender like the vaḷḷi creeper" (vaḷḷi nuṇṇiṭai, Aham., 286, 2).

So far, we have well documented botanical and poetical contexts. In contrast, references to Vaḷḷi as a deity, as we find them in the later religious-and folk traditions are exceedingly rare. In fact only one poem of the earliest strata, namely Narr., 82, refers to Vaḷḷi as a goddess and even there she is not an independent deity but only mentioned in her being the beloved of Murukaṇ.[23] The poem follows the conventional theme of love-poetry in the kuṟiñci-region where the hero addresses a girl of the hill tribes, exclaiming: "You, girl of the mountain tribe whose gait is beautiful, will you come to me like Vaḷḷi who had gladly agreed to go to join Murukaṇ" (nīyē ennuya vaṟitiyō nannaṭaik koṭicci murukupuṇarnta tiyaṉṟa vaḷḷi pōlaniṉ, ibid., 1-3). So it is clear that even this poem reflects the myth built around Vaḷḷi/Murukaṇ and does not regard Vaḷḷi as an independent goddess. As we saw already, Murukaṇ is very unlikely to be a hill tribe deity and this seems likewise to be the case with regard to Vaḷḷi. We have no reason to think that the hill tribes did worship a goddess, who is exclusively defined through her relationship to Murukaṇ, a god of the "broader" Tamil culture. Nevertheless the framing of Vaḷḷi in later traditions was certainly based on indigenous tribal notions, concerned mutually with fertility, procreation and their related rituals.[24] However, her actual tribal conception has to remain diffuse until we know more about her perception in recent tribal cultures of South-India.

Religious Dances

In connection with religious or "ritualistic" activities of kuṟavar/kāṉavar, the poets of ancient Tamil Nadu depict two types of dance (kuravai). One was obviously performed in such a way that the common kuravar people (kuṟavar mākkaḷ) were dancing together in the little hill villages (cirukuṭi). Summarizing the various descriptions given in the poems we get a vivid picture of the dance. It was performed in the courtyard of the village by men and women (kuṟavar

mākkaḷ [...] munril kuravai ayarum, Puram, 129), toddy was drunk (vāṅku tēṟal, ibd.), the women were adorned with venkai-flowers and the tondoka-drum was beaten (vēṅkai cūṭi toṇtaka paṟaiccīr peṇṭiroṭu, Aham.,118: 2-3).

Most probably this "kuravai" was a ritual kind of dance for we have a passage in Kuṟiñcipaṭṭu, where the poet claims that the women (makaḷir) who are dancing in the dancing place (āṭukaḷam) got possessed (aṇaṅku) or afflicted (Kp., 175),[25] and we saw above that among the hill tribes a deity (kaṭavuḷ) was worshipped with vēṅkai-flowers.

A second type of dance is called veṟiyātal (dance of possession or wild dance). This term was employed to circumscribe the dance of a priest who carried a spear (hence his name vēlaṉ) and acted as a diviner and probably as a kind of healer. At least in poetry he is regarded to be able, to reveal the causes of sickness, i.e. in poetry love-sickness.[26]

This vēlaṉ (according to the commentaries he is a "paṭimattān," i.e. one who utters oracles in the state of possession) is said to "perform the dance of possession in excess that the place will throb" (vēlaṉ veṟi ayar viyaṉ kaḷam kaṭukkum, Aham. 182, 16-17) in the land of the kuṟavaṉ who is showing the occupation peculiar to his tribe (or family) the chase (vēṭṭam pōkiya kuravan kāṭṭa kuḷavittaṉ, ibd. p. 5-6). [27]

Unfortunately we do not know very much about the actual performance of his dance nor do the poems mention that a god is involved in the activities of the vēlaṉ. We know from other poems, that he used nuts (kaḷaṅku) in the process of divination (cf. Naṟṟ., 282) but one cannot say from the given evidence how they were employed in the ritual. In sum the material provided by the poets with regard to rituals of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar does not allow for far reaching conclusions. We cannot even say that the institution of the veṟiyāṭal was peculiar to the hill/forest tribes, because we have many other poems who clearly prove that the vēlaṉ was thought of practising among other communities resp. tribes of Tamil Nadu as well (e.g. in Madurai, Mk. 610 ff.; among shepherds, i.e. iṭaiyar, Kuṟu. 362, 2-4; and in the Choḷa capital, Paṭṭi., 155 ff.). On the other hand it is quite likely that the diviners among the other communities were indeed from the hill tribes as they are often in contemporary Tamil Nadu.[28]

NOTES

1. Cf. B. Stein ibid.; K. Zvelebil, 1973: Chapt. VI and VII; X. S. Thaninayagam, 1966.
2. Interestingly according to some scholars the pālai-region and its associated features where only later added for poetical reasons.
3. For the depiction of these tribes in the ancient literature cf. K. Zvelebil, 1971, and G. D. Sontheimer, 1976.
4. The etymology of kuravar is not all clear, because it could also be derived from 'kuru', i.e. "short, defective," so that kuravar may also denote the "short people," Cf. DED, 1537.
5. This is in accordance with the statement in Tolkāppiyam, Poruḷ 22, that the names of the tribes of the regions are of two kinds: those derived from nouns (e.g. kāṉavar) and those derived from verbs (e.g. vēṭṭuvar). Cf. also K. Kailasapathy, 1966: 12-13.
6. The notion that the vēṭṭuvar represent the indigenous hunter/gatherers of South-India (M. Subrahmanian, 1966: 247, 283, et. al.) is not proved by the poems.
7. Compare e.g.: A. M. Kurup/R. Burman (eds.), 1961; S. Nandi et. al., 1971; CI, 1971, series 9, V-b-(I) or S. G. Morab, 1977; B. Morris, 1977; U. Demmer, 1996, 1997.
8. Cf. S. G. Morab, 1977: 40-41; K. Zvelebil, 1979; D. B. Kapp, 1983, U. Demmer, 1996, 1997.
9. See the above cited literature.
10. For Ālu-Kuṟumba see D. B. Kapp, 1983. For Irula see K. Zvelebil, 1979, and for Jēnu Kuṟumba see Demmer, 1996 and 1997.
11. The Soliga differentiate three kinds: kirjēnu (shrubhoney), hejjēnu (rockhoney) and tuduvejēnu (treehoney), cf. S. G. Morab,1977: 41-42.
12. B. Iyengars translation of this poem (1929: 198) is rather free, giving details not mentioned in the actual text. A kuravan, hunting with dogs, is also mentioned in Aham,182.
13. In this way, says the commentary, boar and deer were hunted by kāṉavar and Malaipaṭukaṭām 177 mentions that iguana (uṭumpu or dāṭi, i.e. acerta iguana) was hunted with female dogs (piṇavu) and bows, while drinking at a pond.
14. This type of net-hunting is practised today by the Mullu-Kurumba as a ritual-hunt, cf. R. Misra,1966: 26.
15. For the practice of shifting-cultivation among recent South-Indian hill tribes, see the above mentioned reports and monographs.
16. Indeed these platforms are sometimes impressive constructions. See e.g. the tree-huts built by contemporary Urali high up in the trees: cf. CI, 1971, series-9 part V-B-(I).
17. In the Chola country e.g. one of the most important functions of the left-hand division was, according to B. Stein, the "assimilation of groups to the expanding order" (Stein, 1980: 182). Rare inscriptions from the early thirteenth century (South Arcot) confirm, that hill people (malaiyamakkal) shall be admitted into the itangai-talam (left hand division of men, ibid. Cf. also pp. 04-5 ibid.). Stein thinks

also, that in this period some hill tribes might have been recruited as warriors for local kings (pp.188-9). However- early literature does not mention the divisions who came into being with the developing process of cultural integration not before the 9th. century A. D.

18. The notion of S. Singaravelu (1966: 155) that there were phratries of kuṟavar and kāṉavar is not based on textual evidence and rather speculative.
19. That spouses should be relatives is clearly expressed in Kuṟu. 40, where the hero exclaims:
"My mother and yours,
what were they to each other ?
My father and yours, what kin ?
I and You,
how did we come to know each other ?
And yet, like falling rain on red fields
our loving hearts have mixed together."
20. E.g. F. Clothey, 1978: chpt.2; S. Iyengar, 1929: chpts.5 and 17; S. Singaravelu, 1966: 103-104.
21. For preliminary studies on the topic, cf. K. Zvelebil, 1977; D. D. Shulman, 1980: 275-289 and F. Clothey, 1978: 35.
22. We know e.g. that she occupies an important place in one creation myth of the Irula (cf. Zvelebil, 1982: 220-221). But no study has yet been undertaken to examine her relation with the Irula culture or others.
23. K. Zvelebil (1977: 233) states therefore, that the story of Vaḷḷi/ Murukaṉ must have been known to the poets who composed poems or interpolated such phrases in the already existing poems.
24. In Tirumu. 196, kāṉavar are said to dance the kuravai with their relatives (kilai).
25. For the term "aṇaṅku," cf. C. L. Hart III, 1973 (interpreting it as "sacred power") and its recent critique by V. S. Rajam 1986. It is noteworthy, that the dance- place in the kuṟavar village courtyard itself was regarded by the poets to be "aṇaṅku" (Puṟam, 247) so that indeed the term might denote in that context a "sacred power." But even if so, that does merely mean that the poets regarded this to be so while the conceptions of the kuṟavar/kāṉavar remain hidden.
26. It seems possible to me, that the term nĕtuvĕl (long spear), taken by the commentators (e.g. in Kp., 175) as a synonym for Murukaṉ, originally referred to the priest (vĕlaṉ) of the hill tribes. Even today the priest of the Malai- Vetan in the Kerala-ghats performs his rites by handling a staff and a small drum. Their religious customs, as far as they are known through ethnographic notes (CI, 1971, above cited, p. 59) resemble the descriptions provided in ancient literature very much.
27. He is also depicted in Tiru. 190 as dancing among the kāṉavar.
28. See e.g. the observations of M.-L. Reiniche (1979: 7-8) were she states, that the kuravar act as dancers and musicians at village festivals and their women (kuṟatti) are associated with the functions of sooth-saying. They in particular are believed to know the demons which harm the people (ibid.: 245)

Abbreviations

CI - Census of India.
DED - Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (1961), T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau, Oxford.
TED - Tamil - English Dictionary (1877), M. Winslow (Reprint edited 1977 by K. L. Janert), Wiesbaden.
Kp - Kuṟiñcipāṭṭu
Poru - Porunarāṟṟuppaṭai
Perp - Perumpāṭaṟṟuppaṭai
Mal - Malaipaṭukaṭam
Mk - Maduraikāñci
Tirum - Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai
Aham - Akanāṉūṟu
Puram - Puṟanāṉūṟu
Aink - Aiṅkurunūṟu
Kurun - Kuruntokai
Narr - Naṟṟinai

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