



Kaniyan

Ritual Performers of Tamil Nadu, South India

The Kaniyan are a tribal community residing in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu, South India. Men from this community are known traditionally as experts in *koothu*, which consists of music, dance, singing, and narration. They perform *koothu* in the annual celebration to worship Sudalai—a folk deity celebrated by the non-tribal communities—in order to invoke the spirit of the deity. Men from the Kaniyan community also work as shamans in the worship of Sudalai. The shaman performs the core rituals of *kaivettu* (blood sacrifice by tearing his hand), *theralai koduthal* (offering food mixed with blood at the graveyard), *kaapu kathuthal* (wearing a sacred cord), and *vetaiku potthal* (“hunting” at the graveyard). All these rituals are enactments of myth and are still performed in this region. This article documents the origin myths of Sudalai and the Kaniyan community, and the role the community plays in Sudalai worship.

KEYWORDS: Sudalai—tradition—myth—ritual—*kodai*—performance—sacrifice

THE DISTRICT of Tirunelveli is situated in the deep south of Tamil Nadu, South India. The hills which form the western boundary of the district are a continuation of the great chain of the Western Ghats. The glory of these massive mountains is the famous Pothikai hill, the place where the sage Agastya performed his atonement. It is known for its opulent flora and fauna. Several rivers of the district originate in the Western Ghats. Tamirabarani, the chief river of the region, never goes dry. This river is one of ancient fame, and is referred to in the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The important archeological site Adichanallur is also situated in this district. A unique feature of this district is that it has all five geographical traditions mentioned in Tamil literature—*Kurinji* (mountains), *Mullai* (forests), *Marudham* (paddy fields), *Neithal* (coastal areas) and *Palai* (desert). Tamil is the mother tongue of ninety percent of the population, and here it is spoken with greater purity than in the northern parts of the state. The main occupation of the district's population is agriculture. As a rule, villages conform to a more or less uniform type, consisting of blocks of houses, with each block inhabited by different castes and separated from one another by streets and lanes. The staple food throughout the district is rice. As for religion, the 2001 census revealed that Hindus form the majority of the population (79.76%), followed by Christians (10.89%), Muslims (9.26%), and others (0.09%). Apart from these institutionalized religions, hundreds of folk religious practices still exist, some of the more significant being the worship of Iyannar, Amman, and Sudalai. Several forms of the worship of family deities and of ancestor worship also exist in this region. The district is very rich in folk tradition. Several types of folk performing arts as well as crafts are very popular.

A tribal community called the Kaniyan, who occupy a low status in the social hierarchy, also live here. Generally they are uneducated and live in poverty. They are considered untouchable and uncultured by the upper caste people. Other communities, especially those designated “forward” and “backward,”¹ do not have any social relationship, such as marriage, with the Kaniyan community. The literal meaning of “Kaniyan” in the Tamil language is “to calculate.” Formerly, the Kaniyan were experts in astrology. The men of the Kaniyan community are traditionally experts in *koothu*. In the Tamil language *koothu* refers to a play or a performance, which consists of dance, music, and singing. The type of *koothu* performed by the Kaniyan community is known as *Kaniyan koothu*. There are typically several *koothu* teams in a Kaniyan community. Their traditional occupation is to perform *koothu* during the annual celebration to worship Sudalai which is sponsored by the non-tribal communities. Apart from the *koothu* teams there are Kaniyan men who

function as shamans in the annual celebration, where they lead all the core rituals of the worship of Sudalai. Generally these shamans are older people who have generally retired from performing *koothu*.

The role of the Kaniyan community in the worship of Sudalai is highly significant. Although the non-tribal communities worship Sudalai, the core rituals of the annual celebration of Sudalai are to be performed by the men of the tribal Kaniyan community. This means that though the Kaniyan community is socially backward, it occupies a dominant role in the ritual performances of the annual celebration.

This article is intended to document the role of the Kaniyan community in Sudalai worship. It documents the origin myth both of the Kaniyan community and of the deity Sudalai. Based on fieldwork data, it further describes the various rituals as they are still performed by the Kaniyan community.

THE ORIGIN MYTH OF THE KANIYAN

The Kaniyan proudly claim themselves to be *Deiva Kaniyan*, that is, “divine Kaniyan.” The following origin myth supports this claim:

One day Shiva, Parvathi, and other Hindu gods were dancing in the heavenly place called Kailasam. While dancing, Parvathi fell down and two bells from her anklet came off. The god Tirumal took these bells and from them created two children, which he named Kaniyan and Kamar. After some days Parvathi found it difficult to identify Lord Shiva and God Brahma because both of them had five heads. So she complained to Shiva about her problem. On hearing this, Shiva cut off the middle head of Lord Brahma and made him four headed. But the head which was cut off stayed in the hands of Shiva, causing him to suffer from *Brahmahathi tosham* (a kind of divinely inflicted illness as punishment for transgression). To cure this *tosham*, Tirumal asked Kaniyan to cut his hand and sacrifice his blood. Kaniyan did so, and this cured the Shiva’s condition of *Brahmahathi tosham*. Then Tirumal took the crown from the severed head of Brahma, and from it he made a *makudam* (drum) and a *mani* (bell). Then he gave the drum to Kaniyan and the bell to Kamar, and asked them to do *pooja* (priestly service) in the temple of Sudalai. They did as they were asked, with Kamar acting as priest while Kaniyan performed the rituals of Sudalai.

SUDALAI WORSHIP

In Tamil literature, there are two meanings for the word Sudalai. One refers to the ground for the burning of corpses—a graveyard. The other refers to a deity, also known as Sudalai Madan or Sudalai Madasamy, whose sanctuary is usually situated near a graveyard. This deity is widely worshipped by the scheduled caste and backward communities of the region, as the hundreds of Sudalai temples found in this area demonstrate. The deity Sudalai is considered a chief and head of all the evil spirits and demons. A Sudalai temple is also known as *pai kovil* (temple of demons). There are separate Sudalai temples for each village or caste. These

temples are generally situated on a road side, the banks of a river, the outskirts of a village, or in a graveyard. Normally Sudalai is represented by altars or stone statues. The size of the altars varies from place to place, ranging from three to thirty feet. These altars are situated in the open air—there are no roofs nor bounding walls. All Sudalai temples are oriented toward the east.

Generally there is no regular or daily worship in Sudalai temples. In some of the popular Sudalai temples, though, worship takes place on Tuesdays and Fridays, in others on the last Tuesday and Friday of every Tamil month. Worship varies from place to place and from temple to temple. However, devotees celebrate an annual festival for Sudalai, which is locally known as *kodai*. This annual festival is celebrated in all Sudalai temples but in different seasons. *Kodai* is generally celebrated for three days, with a Friday or Tuesday as the central day. It can occur once a year, once every two years, or once every several years, depending upon the financial situation of the devotees. *Kodai* is a complex of events, including several rituals, worship, vows, animal sacrifice, and folk performing arts. It is the celebration of a particular group of people gathering at a particular time and place in order to worship the deity with a series of vows and offerings (NAIR 2003).

The very first step in the celebration of a *kodai* is fixing its date. The temple administrators sit together and fix the date according to the vernacular calendar. Generally, the first or last Friday or Tuesday in the Tamil month of Aadi (June–July), or the First of Chitirai—that is, the first day of the Tamil New Year—are some of the important days chosen for *kodai*. After having fixed the date the temple administrators collect a tax from the village people. Usually the tax is collected from all the villagers, but if the temple belongs exclusively to a particular community the tax is collected from that community only. The amount of tax to be collected is based on an estimate of the approximate expense necessary for the *kodai* divided by the total number of family heads. This amount is known locally as *vari*. Every married man is counted as a family head and is called *thalai kattu*, with taxes being collected from each one. In some places the married women of a village are counted as half *thalai kattu*, and fifty percent of the tax is collected from them. If an individual family owns a temple, the family members assume the entire expense.

Apart from this taxation, donations are also collected from the traders and landlords in the region. For the purpose of collecting the tax and donations the temple administrators set up an organizing committee, which normally consists of youngsters and temple administrators. After having collected the designated amount they give an advance of one hundred and one rupees to each of the teams responsible for the decorations and the performance of dance and music, and to the ritual performers, in order to reserve their services on the day of *kodai*. It is a custom in Tamil culture to give an amount of rupees ending with the number one—as in 101 rupees, 501 rupees, or 1001 rupees—as a gift on the occasion of marriages or other auspicious events. The reason why the amount has to end with the number one is not known to the people; they told me that it is simply “our custom.”

THE ROLE OF THE KANIYAN IN SUDALAI WORSHIP

The men of the Kaniyan community play a significant role in Sudalai worship. A team of Kaniyan men performs *koothu* in order to invoke the spirit of Sudalai, and a shaman who also belongs to the Kaniyan community performs the core rituals of *kaappu kathuthal* (wearing a sacred thread cord), *Kaniyan kaivettu* (sacrificing blood by tearing his hand), *vetaiku pothal* (“hunting” at the graveyard), and *theralai koduthal* (food offering at the graveyard) during the annual celebration. These rituals are described below.

Kaniyan koothu is performed by a team normally consisting of six Kaniyan men. The team includes a lead singer, an assistant singer, two drummers, and two dancers dressed in female costume. In *Kaniyan koothu* the performers narrate the myth of Sudalai accompanied by music and dance. The name of the musical instrument, a drum, is *makudam*; therefore the *Kaniyan koothu* is also known as *makudatam* (*makudam* dance). The lead singer, or *annavi*, is the leader of the entire *Kaniyan koothu* performance. It is his role to sing and narrate the myth of Sudalai. He stands in front of the deity and cups his left hand behind his left ear, while at the same time extending his right hand towards the deity as he sings the myth. The main function of this performance is to invoke the spirit of Sudalai in order to have it possess a *komarathadigal*,² or male medium. While the leader sings the myth in a high pitched voice, the *komarathadigal* becomes possessed by the divine spirit and dances vehemently.

Another man, the assistant singer, repeats part of each sentence performed by the lead singer. He frequently expresses doubts and asks the *annavi* questions about the myth. He is also responsible for ensuring that the performance continues if anything should happen to interrupt the lead singer.

In *Kaniyan koothu*, two men perform on the musical drum *makudam*. This drum is a small circular one-headed drum hung from the left shoulder and tapped with the fingers of both hands. The drum is made of poovarasu (*Thespesia populnea*, or “Portia tree”) or neem (*Azadirachta indica*) wood. Boards of this wood are bent into circular shape and the skin of a young buffalo is attached to one side of the frame using glue prepared from Tamarind seeds. Based on the sound of the drum, or more specifically its pitch, two types of *makudam* are distinguished: the *vucha makudam* (high pitch drum) and the *mantha makudam* (low pitch drum). Both drums are used in the *Kaniyan koothu*. The two drummers perform standing adjacent to the lead singer.

Finally, to complete a *Kaniyan koothu* team, two male dancers are costumed as women. Generally these performers grow their hair down to their shoulders and tie and curl it using hairclips. They put flowers around their hair and wear ear studs and bangles. They apply lipstick and perfumed powder on their faces. They dress themselves in blouses and saris. To form breasts they put paper or cloth inside their blouses. They don anklets in the final stage. The anklets are considered sacred because they give rhythm to the dancers’ steps, and before donning the anklets the dancers worship the deity. When they have finished putting on their

costumes they look so much like females that it is difficult to recognize them as males. These performers dance to the accompaniment of song and music.

Only the Kaniyan community performs this *koothu*, and it is the traditional dance of that community. There are no formal classes or coaching to learn this performance. Kaniyan men who are interested in learning it accompany the performers whenever and wherever they perform. They assist the artists whenever necessary. This familiarizes them with the myth, the techniques, and the formulas of the performance. Whenever the opportunity arises they take up the *makudam* and practice the music. Those who are interested in singing stand near the lead singer and sing with him, while those who are interested in dancing dance together with the performers during an actual performance. Whenever the juniors commit a mistake the senior artists correct and guide them. Similarly whenever the juniors have uncertainties they clarify them by asking the seniors. In this manner they learn the performance by participating in its natural context.

THE ORIGIN MYTH OF SUDALAI

During the annual celebration of worshipping Sudalai, the lead singer of the *Kaniyan koothu* performance sings and narrates the following myth of Sudalai, accompanied by music and dance, in order to invoke the spirit of the deity.

One day, the Hindu God Shiva went around the world to offer food to all the creatures. Parvathi, his wife, wanted to test whether Shiva was actually doing it well. So she captured an ant, put it inside a small box and hid the box in the hem of her sari. No sooner had Shiva come and sat on the throne than Parvathi told him that one creature was still hungry. Shiva replied that he was omniscient and asked her to open the box and look inside. When Parvathi did so, she saw the ant eating some grains.

Shiva asked,

“Is there anything hidden in the box that Shiva does not know?”

“Is there anything hidden in the room that is not known to Shiva?”

Parvathi fell at his feet and begged forgiveness. Then she prayed for a son. Shiva told her that the Gods Ganapathi and Murugan were her children. She turned deaf to his words and again prayed for a son. Shiva said that her request would be granted and asked her to stand at the gate of heaven and to spread the end of her sari in the *kandamani*³ lamp. She did exactly as Shiva had told her. At that time a baby without a head was born to her.

Parvathi cried:

“I prayed for a boy. But you have given me a grinding stone.”

Shiva told her “you wanted to test me. That is why I have caused it to happen like this.” Then he called for a potter and asked him to shape the child’s head. Parvathi raised the child. When the child was three years old he thought to himself:

Breast-feeding will not quench my thirst,
 Mother's milk will not enable me to run around.
 I will go to earth and eat the corpses.

So one day he started off at dusk with a lantern and a staff in hand and went to the place called Thillaivanam. There he saw a burning corpse. He removed its intestines and wore them as a garland around his neck. He plucked out the liver and started munching it as if it were a mango. He broke the bones and gnashed them as if they were sugarcane. After he had eaten everything he returned to heaven. He also did the same thing the next day. He thought that Parvathi hadn't noticed what he had done. So he took the remains of the corpse and placed them under his cradle as a footrest. When Parvathi noticed that he was eating the corpses, she told him that he was unfit for heaven and asked him to leave for the earth. He replied that if he must go to earth, he should be honored with a festival lasting eight days. When the festival was over, he said that he would not go unless some further demands were answered.

His demands were:

The sick should be healed with the sprinkling of my ashes.
 Chronic illness should vanish with my miraculous power
 The devils should run away from my staff.

His petition was granted and he left Thillaivanam for the earth where he knocked at the door of Bagavathi's house. A voice from inside asked: "who is that?" And he replied that he was Sudalai, the son of Parvathi. To this he added, "If I am a son to Parvathi, I am a son to you also!" She opened the door and said, "If you serve as a watchman for all these seven treasures, I will offer you a human sacrifice at midnight." But while he was performing this job, Pulayan—a famous magician from Kerala—began to disturb him.

Pulayan had only one daughter. He didn't possess any wealth to arrange her marriage ceremony. The magician utilized his power to reveal hidden things. With that power he saw the treasures in the house of Bagavathi. Having seen them, he ordered a thousand evil spirits to bring him the treasures from the store of Bagavathi, saying that if they failed they would be sentenced to death. The spirits went to the store and stole the treasures when Sudalai was asleep. When he awoke he was shocked to find that the treasures were missing. Since he had been born with miraculous power he was able to see Kerala. He told Bagavathi that he would go to Kerala to retrieve the treasures. Bagavathi pleaded with him not to go there since it was the place of a great magician. But Sudalai paid no heed to her plea. He set out on his way, carrying with him a thousand snakes, one of each species. Upon reaching Kerala he performed a display with the help of the snakes.

A damsel who was a friend of the daughter of Pulayan witnessed the performance and praised Sudalai. Pulayan's daughter was herself induced to go out of her house to see the show. When Sudalai noticed her, he picked up a serpent and let it loose among the crowd. The crowd scattered hither and thither. Then Sudalai bore a *thiruvodu* [begging tray] in his hand and went to Pulayan's house where he begged for water. Pulayan's daughter replied:

There is plenty of water in the river,
 There is plenty of water in the channel,
 Go there to quench your thirst.

Sudalai replied:

I have not come as a beggar.
 But I have come to marry you.

Then he entered into a dense forest of seven hills. There he met the members of a hill tribe. Sudalai was all the while thinking about how to win Pulayan's daughter. So he took the form of an ant, and crossed the seven hills. When he reached Pulayan's house he took the form of a rose and played with Pulayan's daughter. She embraced the rose and fell asleep. Sudalai made her pregnant. The next day seven men from the hill tribe came to Kerala in search of Sudalai. They asked him for a lamp to destroy the flies in their farm.

Sudalai asked them:

Give me six roosters for sacrifice.
 Give me seven goats to sprinkle blood.
 Give me eggs together with twenty-one earthen pots and a fiber tray.

When these things were offered, Sudalai picked them up in his hands, and immediately everything broke into pieces. Sudalai got annoyed and demanded the tribesmen sacrifice Pulayan's pregnant daughter; otherwise he threatened that he would kill them. They went to Pulayan's house and told him about the matter. Pulayan replied that if his daughter were pregnant he would sacrifice her to Sudalai, and went into his home. There he saw that his daughter had already conceived. He was stunned and told her that he would go to the jungle to worship Kali, and he asked her to accompany him.

She replied that she was the eldest daughter and born by the gods' grace, and she refused to go to the forest. But he did not listen to her words and took her to the forest. There he laid her on a wooden platform and tied her up tightly. She was crying. Sudalai ordered Pulayan to sacrifice her quickly. Thereupon Pulayan became very distressed and requested that Sudalai kill him but spare his daughter. Finally Sudalai compromised with Pulayan and married his daughter. Pulayan's daughter's name is Isaki⁴ (JOHN 2001).

The narration and singing of this myth in the *Kaniyan koothu* takes from two to three hours. During this performance the *komarathadigal* are possessed by the spirit of Sudalai and dance vehemently. They perform divination and offer sacred ash to the devotees. Generally in Sudalai *kodai* several people are possessed by the spirit of Sudalai and dance. Traditionally each Sudalai temple has several *komarathadigal* attached to it. It is important to note that in Sudalai worship the *koothu* performers and the shaman do not have any direct relationship with the devotees who are assembled in the temple for worship. Only the *komarathadigal* have direct contact with the devotees. *Komarathadigal* listen to the problems of the devotees, perform divination, and apply sacred ash to the devotees. The main function of a *Kaniyan koothu* performance is to invoke the spirit of Sudalai upon

the *komarathadigal*, and the function of a shaman is to perform the rituals, which are directly related to divine and evil spirits.

Apart from the *koothu* performers there is a man from the Kaniyan community whose role is to perform rituals such as *kaappu kathuthal*, *Kaniyan kaivettu* (sacrificing blood by tearing his hand), *vetaiku potthal* (“hunting” at the graveyard), and *theralai koduthal* (offering food at the graveyard) during a Sudalai *kodai*. Usually this is an elderly person who has retired from the *Kaniyan koothu* performance. He works as a shaman and leads the entire ritual component of the *kodai*. Generally the shaman is paid fifteen hundred to two thousand rupees as a fee for his ritual services, and the *koothu* team receives three thousand to five thousand rupees as a fee for each performance. The rituals described below are those performed by the shaman.

KAAPPU KATUTHAL: WEARING A SACRED CORD

On the central day of the *kodai*, that is, on a Friday or Tuesday, the shaman ties a *kaappu* around the wrists of the *komarathadigal* (spirit-possessed persons). In Tamil, *kaappu* means “to protect” or “to prevent.” Here, *kaappu* refers to a yellow cord with several items attached to it. A small iron ring is fastened to its center, while a piece of turmeric is tied to one end of the cord and some betel leaves to the other. The whole is called *kaappu*. The *kaappu* is placed into a tray together with a coconut, incense sticks, saffron, vermilion, betel leaves, and areca nuts, and all of this is given to the shaman. The priest or the temple administrators put twenty-one rupees on the tray as an offering to the shaman. The shaman receives this tray and ties the *kaappu* around the wrists of the *komarathadigal*. This ritual is known as *kaappukatuthal*, or “tying the sacred chord.” *Komarathadigal* believe that the *kaappu* will protect them from evil spirits, because the iron piece they use in making the *kaappu* serves as a protective device. The *kaappu* will be removed by the shaman at the end of the *kodai*.

KANIYAN KAIVETTU: BLOOD SACRIFICING BY THE SHAMAN

The most important ritual in the *kodai* for Sudalai is the sacrificing of blood by the shaman. This ritual is known as *Kaniyan kaivettu*, which means that the shaman cuts his own hand. It too is performed on the central day of *kodai* following the *kaappu katuthal*. The shaman puts bananas, betel leaves, a coconut, incense sticks, and a mask made of clay or fiber representing the evil spirit into a tray and offers it all to the deity. He walks three times around a stone mortar used to make flour, finally stepping up onto and standing upon the stone for a time while wearing the mask on his face. He rubs his left hand, the one he is going to cut, with the coconut and circles it three times with the coconut. Then he ties his left arm tightly with a cord and cuts the upper part of his wrist with a small sharp knife until blood begins to flow. He clenches his hand tightly and pours the blood on some plantain leaves, which are spread out in front of the *komarathadigal*. The

shaman often sprinkles water on the wound to keep the blood from clotting. The blood sacrificed by the shaman is mixed with bananas and eaten by the *komarathadigal*. Devotees believe that only those whom the spirit of the deity has entered can eat the blood. After sacrificing his blood, the shaman removes the cord from his arm and covers the wound with it. By doing this, the shaman told me, the wound will quickly heal without the use of other medicine. In a similar kind of ritual known as *Kaniyan naakuvettu*, blood is again sacrificed, but this time by cutting the Kaniyan shaman's tongue. The shaman bites his tongue tightly, then looks into a small mirror held in his left hand while cutting his tongue with a sharp knife until blood begins to flow. Then he pours his blood on plantain leaves and has it eaten by the *komarathadigal*.

VETAIKU POTHAL: "HUNTING" AT THE GRAVEYARD

At midnight on the day of the *kodai* another ritual known as *vetaiku pothal* (going to the graveyard) is performed. Several *komarathadigal* are active at this time. They wear black knee-length pants decorated with red borders and a bell attached at the bottom. They also wear a crown made of black cloth and decorated with red borders. They hold a *pantham*⁵ (a torch) in one hand and a big sword in the other. All *komarathadigal* dance ferociously and vigorously. A *Kaniyan koothu* is performed energetically in order to keep the *komarathadigal* in a state of possession. At midnight, both the shaman and the *Kaniyan koothu* performers start leaving the temple and head to the graveyard along with the *komarathadigal*. Only the shaman, the *Kaniyan koothu* performers, and the *komarathadigal* are allowed to go to the graveyard during this time.

These are moments filled with fear and terror. The ritual's name, *vetaiku pothal*, means "going for a hunt."⁶ While engaged in this hunt, no one should cross the path of the spirit-possessed hunters, for devotees believe that the deity will beat and kill anyone who does. On the way to the graveyard, the hunting party is led by the shaman, who holds a clay pot on his head or shoulder. Along the way the shaman throws eggs in all directions. This is known as *thisai pali* (offering to all directions). The *komarathadigal*, shaman, and devotees in general believe that through an offering of eggs they will protect themselves from the evil spirits. Because eggs are thrown the evil spirits will not cross the path of the hunters and disturb them. After reaching the graveyard, all the *komarathadigal* dance vehemently and start searching for corpses. Sometimes they bite a human bone obtained from the graveyard or nearby and dance. My informants told me that formerly the *komarathadigal* searched for an actual corpse and ate it, but that nowadays this is no longer practiced.

THERALAI KODUTHAL: OFFERING FOOD AT THE GRAVEYARD

The clay pot, which is held by the shaman, contains food that had been offered to the deity in the temple. It consists of boiled rice, meat curry, vegetable

curry, boiled eggs, curd, and ghee. After reaching the graveyard, the shaman spreads a plantain leaf on the ground and puts bananas, incense sticks, sacred ash, vermilion, sandal paste, betel leaves, areca nuts, and camphor on it as an offering to the deity. He sacrifices a young lamb, a pig, and a cock and pours their blood into the clay pot. He cuts his hand with a sharp knife and offers his blood as a sacrifice, pouring it into the pot and mixing it with the animal blood. He then shapes the food into several balls and places one in each of the four cardinal directions on the plantain leaf. Finally, he takes some of the balls of food into his hand and throws them in all directions.

By throwing the balls of food, the shaman and the *komarathadigal* believe that the deity will partake of the food along with the shaman. Therefore, in order to protect the shaman from evil spirits a *komarathadi* holds the shaman tightly in his grasp while the shaman throws the balls of food in all directions. They believe that the thrown food will not come down to the earth. In the vernacular these balls of food are called *theralai* and the ritual of throwing them is known as *theralai koduthal*, which means “offering balls of food.” After the completion of this ritual the shaman takes the animals that were sacrificed for him, looks up, and asks the deity in a loud voice, “Shall I stay here?” After receiving the divine answer, “Alright, you may stay here,” he takes some eggs in his hand and circles them three times around the head of each of the *komarathadigal* and *Kaniyan koothu* performers in order to protect them from the evil eye. Finally, he throws the eggs away and begins to leave the graveyard. The main function of this ritual of *theralai koduthal* is to keep the deity in the graveyard and prevent him from entering the village. The ritual performers told me that on the way to the graveyard they are possessed by the deity’s spirit, but they return as ordinary people. After the ritual they come back to the temple. The next day, the Kaniyan remove the *kaappu* from the *komarathadigal*’s hands. This marks the end of the *kodai*.

All these myths and rituals are traditionally transmitted from generation to generation. Most of the people claimed not to know the reason and meaning of several of the rituals performed in the temple, saying that they were merely following the example of their ancestors. There are mythological antecedents for the rituals performed in Sudalai worship and for the role of the Kaniyan community in these rituals. The mythical account explains that Sudalai is very fond of eating corpses, and because of this is considered to be the chief of all evil spirits. That is why temples worshipping Sudalai are erected near graveyards. In order to be protected from all evil spirits people celebrate *kodai* and sacrifice animal and human blood. Rituals such as *Kaniyan kaivettu*, *Kaniyan naakuvettu*, *vetaiku pothal*, and *theralai koduthal* are all related to blood. People in this region, or more specifically devotees of Sudalai, believe that these blood offerings will satisfy Sudalai so that he will not disturb their lives. Sudalai temples are also famous for divination, black magic and healing practices. The sacred ash available at a Sudalai temple is considered to be very powerful for driving away evil spirits and for healing illness. Drawing on myth, people believe that Sudalai derives his power from his parents, Lord Shiva and Parvathi.

CONCLUSION

The Kaniyan, a tribal community, plays a dominant role in the Sudalai worship of the non-tribal communities. The rituals performed by the Kaniyan in the worship of Sudalai have a mythological background. The origin myth of the Kaniyan community says that the Kaniyan were created by Lord Thirumal from the bells of Parvathi's anklet. The boy Kaniyan was asked by Lord Thirumal to sacrifice his blood in order to heal the *Brahmahathi tosham* of Shiva. Then Lord Thirumal created a musical drum and asked Kaniyan to perform ritual services at Sudalai's temple. This is the reason that men from a Kaniyan community perform *koothu* and other rituals in worshipping Sudalai. According to the origin myths of Sudalai and Kaniyan, both were born to Lord Shiva and Parvathi. Sudalai was born from the sari of Parvathi and Kaniyan was born from the bell of the anklet of Parvathi. Sudalai was not fit for Kailasam because of his habit of eating corpses. Therefore, Parvathi asked him to leave Kailasam for the earth, but gave him some divine power. On the other side Kaniyan was created to sacrifice his blood in order to satisfy Sudalai. The myths and rituals of Sudalai worship performed by the Kaniyan, which I have mentioned and discussed above, reflect how myth is enacted in worship practices. These ritual practices are still followed in several parts of the region of Tirunelveli. Due to the impact of modernization and urbanization, however, these ritual practices are fading away in some places. The younger generations are no longer interested in performing the rituals. The data I have presented in this article documents, however, how the myths told and the rituals performed by the Kaniyan community in Sudalai worship are interrelated. The data will hopefully prove to be helpful for the understanding of folk religious practices in this particular region. Finally, it is hoped that the data will underscore the importance of carrying out comparative studies in the field of folk religion.

Informants

Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Place
Iyaathurai	Male	65	Agricultural laborer	Vijayanarayanam village, Tirunelveli district
Thangavelu Kaniyan	Male	68	Koothu performer	Aaraikulam village, Tirunelveli district
Murugan Kaniyan	Male	67	Ritual performer	Muneeerpallam village, Tirunelveli district

NOTES

1. Forward communities are those who are at the top of the caste hierarchy whereas backward communities refers to those who are at the bottom.

2. *Komarathadigal* is the vernacular term for spirit-possessed men, and *komarathadi* is its singular form.

3. This is a lamp made of bronze. Lamp oil is poured into it and wicks are used for lighting.

4. The storyteller's husband's name is Isaki. In Tamil culture a wife does not mention her husband's name. The storyteller's husband's name and Pulayan's daughter's name are similar, so the storyteller did not mention Pulayan's daughter's name throughout the story, but refers to her only as "Pulayan's daughter." I asked the storyteller to mention Pulayan's daughter's name. Only at the very end does the storyteller mention the name Isaki.

Storyteller's name: Iyyammal, Age: 101, Sex: Female, Caste: Pallar, Occupation: Agricultural labor, Place: Thiruvenkatanathapuram village.

5. A *pantham* is a traditional torch made of cloth. A large amount of cloth is tied securely to a wooden pole and dipped into lamp oil. The cloth is then lit and continues burning for several hours.

6. It is termed hunting because the shaman is going to the graveyard to eat a human corpse.

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