Peasants, nomadic hillwomen and birdcatchers: Landscape and environmental dialogues in early modern South Indian literature

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Abstract

In "The Drama of the Kuṟavañci Fortune-teller" Indira Viswanathan Peterson explores the ways in which the *kuṟavañci*, an eighteenth-century Tamil dramatic genre, deploys discourses of landscape, continuing patterns from the classical and medieval literature of the Tamilnadu area of South India, yet diverging from them in significant respects. Written by court poets for rulers of small "kingdoms," *kuṟavañci* plays glorify the patron-king, his town (ū*r*), and the god of the temple located in that town. However, the central characters in the *kuṟavañci* genre, the eponymous Kuṟavañci, a nomadic fortuneteller from the hills, and her birdcatcher husband, are marginal figures from the wilderness. Their activities are described in detail, in relation to the hill and field landscapes, and to the upper-class characters in the play, including the lovelorn lady whose fortune the Kuṟavañci (a.k.a. Kuratti) tells. Peterson suggests that the genre's innovative treatment of older landscape conventions, and its focus on new and marginal social identities, embody an imaginative response to changing social relations and relations between person and land in Tamilnadu in the 17th and 18th centuries, an era of migrations and fragmented polities in the Tamil region.

Guide to pronunciation for Tamil names and words

Kuravanci	kooravuhn'ji
Kurralam	kutrah'luhm

Cinkan Sin’gan
Cinki Sin’gi
Vacantavalli Vusuhn’tuhvuhlli
Rācappar Rah’suhppuhr
Kurralak kuravanci Kutrah’-luh kooruhvuh’nji

Introduction: Landscape and Place in an 18th-century Tamil Genre

This essay is an exploration of the innovative ways in which the Kuṟavañci ("Drama of the Kuṟavañci Fortune-teller"), a very productive 18th-century Tamil literary genre, deploys and extends discourses of landscape and place inherited from earlier genres. The landscape-types (*tiṇai*) of classical Tamil poetry, though transformed in significant respects, are central to the themes of the Kuṟavañci drama.[i] Equally important to the genre are constructions of place drawn from the post-classical literature of devotion (*bhakti)* and the cult of sacred places: the temple (*kōyil)* ; and the town or village (*ūr)*, which becomes a sacred place (*talam, pati*) by virtue of the presence of the god and his temple. Praise of the god, and of the poet's patron, whose munificence makes both poems and temples possible, forms part of the Kuṟavañci's tapestry of constructions of space in relation to the natural and human worlds. The most innovative feature of the 18th-century genre, however, is its articulation of its spatial thematics through its central characters, the Kuṟavañci fortune-teller and her birdcatcher husband, wanderers associated with wilderness landscapes and livelihoods.

The Kuṟavañci is an opera-like genre, with a dramatic plot unfolding in a sequence of songs and intended to be enacted through dance. The stereotyped plot unfolds in three segments. Seeing the god of the local temple or the king riding in procession with his retinue, a high-born lady falls hopelessly in love with him. In the second segment, the Kuṟavañci or Kuṟatti, a wandering female of the Kuṟavar hill-tribe and the eponymous principal character of the play, appears, and offers to help the lovelorn woman.[ii] After praising the god and the temple in the lady's town, the Kuṟatti names the hills with which her family is associated and the many places to which she has travelled. She describes the hill landscape and Kuṟavar ways of life, and uses Kuṟavar divinatory techniques to foretell the heroine's union with the hero. The lady handsomely rewards the Kuṟatti with gold and jewels. The third segment begins with a detailed description of the Kuṟatti 's husband, the birdcatcher Ciṅkaṉ, trapping birds in the rice-fields owned by the temple. While hunting, the birdcatcher suddenly realizes that his wife is missing. Maddened by desire, he leaves the birds, sets out to search for her, and finally meets her on the streets of the town. In the lively dialogue that follows, the fortune-teller wittily parries her jealous husband's questions about her activities, and the couple is reunited. The play ends with verses in praise of the god and the temple.

Although the Kuṟavañci drama depicts the love of an upper-class woman for a king or a god, the genre takes its name from the Kuṟatti fortune-teller. A significant

portion of the play is devoted to the voices and activities of the Kuṟatti and Ciṅkaṉ. Mysterious outsiders, persons with marginal social identities, people of the hills, the Kuṟatti and Ciṅkaṉ are not "of the place" in the temple center. Yet the migrant couple's words and acts firmly connect them with the temple and the fields, place them within the boundaries of the town, and establish their relationship with the elites of the place. They are, in effect, the principal agents of the action in the play. In the remainder of this essay I hope to show that the Kuṟavañci genre's representations of these dialogues between wilderness peoples and settled agrarian communities offer an imaginative commentary on changing relations among persons, land, and landscapes in an era of fragmented polities, increased migrations and shifting social identities in the Tamil region.

Eighteenth-century Tamil Literary Genres

The Kuṟavañci is one of a number of Tamil genres that arose and flourished primarily beween the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, at least in part in response to major social, political and economic changes that had been set in motion in the Tamil region. From the sixteenth century onwards, following the migration of the Vijayanagara Nayaka generals from the Telugu region in the north to the Tamil region, Telugu-speaking "Vaḍugar" ("northerner") peasants and warriors as well as members of the Tamil non-peasant Maṟavar and Kaḷḷar castes rose to elite status in the Tamil area (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 1992; Ludden 1985). Migrating southwards in waves

between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, they settled as owners of cultivated land and Pāḷaiyakkārar (English 'poligar') chiefs of estates and "little kingdoms", especially in the remote southern regions of Tirunelveli and Ramnad (Dirks 1987; Ludden 1985). By the 18th century the actors in the political, economic and cultural arenas in the Tamil region included the Telugu Nayakas of Madurai, the Western Indian Maratha rulers of Tanjavur (English "Tanjore"), the Muslim Nawab of Arcot, Mughal military officials, and European missionaries, traders and colonial administrators. Each in its own way, the 18th century genres, which were later classified as *pirapantam* ("sustained composition") or *ciṟṟilakkiyam* ("minor genre"), reflect this rich mix of cultural sensibilities and social agendas.

While in the 17th century the Telugu-speaking Nayakas of Tanjavur (a.k.a. Tanjore) and Madurai had patronized works in their native Telugu and in Tamil, the local language, in the 18th century literature flourished in these languages as well as in Sanskrit and Marathi in the court of the Maratha kings of Tanjavur, which remained the premier cultural center of the Tamil region until the late 19th century (Peterson 1998). Patronage for the majority of the Tamil genres, however, came pre-eminently from the new provincial elites -- the Maṟavar Cētupatis of Ramnad, the Kaḷḷar kings of Pudukkottai, the Maṟavar and Vaḍugar Pāḷaiyakkārar chiefs of the Tirunelveli region in the southern part of the peninsula, and lesser landowners and administrators all over the

region. The Tamil works continued to be authored by *pulavar* poets who came from the high-ranking Vēḷāḷar agriculturalist caste-groups and were trained in the traditional Tamil learning nourished at monasteries (*maṭam*) and temples (Zvelebil 1973 and 1974).

The new Tamil *pirapantam* genres blended many "folk" and popular elements of contemporary Tamil culture -- including colloquial language and mixtures of languages -- with more conventional courtly themes such as the praise of gods and kings. They also shared other important traits. First, like the Kuṟavañci, they tended to focus on representatives of particular social identities (*cāti* , "caste", from Sanskrit *jāti*, "birth"), portraying at the same time milieux composed of diverse linguistic communities and social strata. The *pirapantams* oscillated between a more conventional concern with particular sacred places, settled landscapes and social groups, and a new interest in marginal identities and migrant populations. They had much in common with the genuinely "folk" literary traditions that were developing at the same time.[iii] The principal characters of the three most popular *pirapantam* genres, the Kuṟavañci, Paḷḷu ("Field-laborer's song"), and Noṇṭināṭakam ("The Cripple's play"), are, respectively, a nomadic Kuṟavar couple, Paḷḷar agricultural laborers, and a Kaḷḷaṉ horse-thief who travels the Tamil countryside.[iv] Second, the most popular of the minor genres were musical-dramatic genres intended to be performed, especially by the female Devadasi dancers who were maintained by local rulers to serve the temple and the court. Thematic

connections with local temples as well as courts made them suitable for performance in either or both settings, and ensured their dissemination among diverse audiences.

In some ways, the representation of distinct social groups and their lives in the 18th century genres is the continuation of a long tradition in Tamil literature. The association of particular communities and occupations with particular natural landscapes is part of the *tiṇai* landscape system that forms the basis of the conceptual universe of ancient Tamil *caṅkam* poetry. The Kuṟavar hill-tribe (Kuṉṟak kuṟavar), and other kinds of hunter and warrior tribes as well -- Vēṭṭuvar, Eyiṉar, and Maṟavar -- are part of the landscape system of the poems in the *caṅkam* anthologies and the narrative works of the later *caṅkam* period, such as Iḷaṅkōvaṭikaḷ's epic *Cilappatikāram*. The conventions of the classical poems were taken over by later *bhakti* devotional poetry, hagiographical texts, and *purāṇam* mythological narrative literature. The representation of communities in 18th-century Tamil literature carries forward many of these earlier currents and motivations; but this literature manifests a new sensibility, as well. In contrast to the earlier literature, the 18th century minor genres, especially those that focus directly on characters from low-class social groups, link and contrast these characters with high class and elite figures. These genres also combine humor with idealization and respect in their depiction of the low-class characters. Both features reveal an interest on the part of poets and patrons in re-examining elite and lower -class social identities -- in other words, in

imaginatively representing 18th-century social relations. I have argued in this essay that the Kuṟavañci is one among several genres that allowed the new elites to articulate and legitimize their newly acquired positions as rulers and Vēḷālar through artistic representations of social relations.

Throughout the 18th century the Maṟavar and Vaḍugar rulers of provincial kingdoms commissioned works in all the minor genres. The most important examples of the Paḷḷu (e.g., *Mukkutarpallu*),which related to labor relations in the agricultural economy, were produced in Tirunelveli, as were celebrated Noṇṭināṭakams (e.g., *Tiruccentur nontinatakam*) and Kuṟavañcis (*Kurralakkuravanc*i). Rulers of small territories with varied topographic features, the new rulers in the peninsula had to establish their claims to Vēḷālarship and agriculture in contestation and collaboration with brahmans and Vēḷāḷar, older, entrenched landowning communities, particularly in the great temple-centers where power was concentrated. They also needed to negotiate anew their relationship with the "folk", i.e., tribes, lower castes, and marginal social groups, especially those from the mountains, forests and wilderness areas which were vital to the political and econ omic well-being of their kingdoms. These themes were strikingly dramatized in the Kuṟavañci play through the intervention of Kuṟavar characters. Some of the earliest and best known Kuṟavañcis -- including some in Marathi and other languages -- were also produced under the patronage of the Maratha court at Tanjavur.

As "strangers" from a different linguistic-cultural region in India, and as rulers of the fertile Kaveri delta with its concentration of temples and agricultural resources, the Marathas of Tanjavur had to undertake their own negotiations with diverse constituencies. The Kuṟavañci was the preferred genre in Tanjavur, especially since it was ideally suited to the rich performance tradition that the Marathas had inherited from their Nayaka predecessors (Peterson 1998). As we shall see, the Marathas were particularly intrigued by the play's nomadic central characters.

In the following sections, I will analyse the Kuṟavañci genre's representations, of the discourses of landscape, place, and social relations that I have sketched above, especially through the characters of the Kuṟavañci and Ciṅkaṉ, In the Kuṟavañci drama not only the structure of the play in three distinct segments, but also the specific themes of the songs in each segment, and the sequence of these songs, are treated as fixed topics. The details of local mythology, history, geography and personalities distinguish these dramas from each other, as do the variations achieved by individual poets on the conventions themselves. My analysis will be focused on the *Kuṟṟālakkuṟavañci,* the most celebrated example of the fortune-teller play genre.

The Kuṟavañci Fortune-teller From the Hills

The *Kuṟṟālakkuṟavañci* ("The Kuṟavañci drama of Kuṟṟālam”) is the best known work of the Śaiva Vēḷāḷar poet Tirikūṭarācappa Kavirāyar (henceforth Rācappar), who

authored several works dedicated to the ancient shrine of Śiva at Kuṟṟālam. A major pilgrimage center, Kuṟṟālam is situated on the Cittāṟu or Citrā river, in the western end of Tirunelveli, on the edge of the Western Ghats mountains and adjacent to the fertile rice-growing valley of the Tamraparni river. Rācappar composed the *Kuṟṟālakkuṟavañci* (henceforth KK) for his patron Ciṉṉaṇañcāttēvaṉ, the Maṟavar Pāḷaiyakkārar of Cokkampaṭṭi (also known as Kiḷuvai) *pāḷaiyappaṭṭu* in Tirunelveli. The play was performed for the first time at the Kuṟṟālam temple in 1718. A copper-plate inscription of that year from the temple records the deed of a grant of irrigated agricultural land (*naṉcey)* to the poet and his family by Muttuvijayaranga Chokkanatha, the Nayaka king of Madurai, in whose presence the play was premiered (KK, Introduction, 13-14).

Kuṟṟālanātar, the god Śiva as the Lord of Kuṟṟālam, is also the "lord" (*pāṭṭuṭait talaivaṉ*) who captivates Vacantavalli, the high-born lady (*talaivi*) in the play. In the first part of the KK Rācappar describes Kuṟṟālanātar's procession (*pavaṉi, ulā)* and its effect on the women who line the streets, watching the procession. Without exception, the women fall in love with the god.[v] At this point, the lady Vacantavalli comes out on the street, playing ball. Seeing the god, she, too, falls hopelessly in love. Vacantavalli's girlfriends (*caki)* are unable to help the heroine, who pines for her lover.[vi] Just as Vacantavalli completes the ancient rite of *kūṭal* (KK, song 48) in which a girl closes her eyes and draws a circle on the ground, believing that a completed circle (*kūṭal*) will

indicate that her wish to be united with her lover will be fulfilled, the *"malaik kuṟavañci",* the "Kuṟatti from the hills", enters the scene.

The poet describes the Kuṟatti in several "entrance songs" (*pāttirap piravēcadaru*), a type of song with which characters are announced in the play (song 48).[vii] The Kuṟavañci of Tirikūṭam Hill "enters the street lined with mansions, carrying a fine basket and a divining rod, swinging her arms adorned with bracelets, singing the praise of Kuṟṟālam's gracious Lord" (song 48).[viii] She comes, "adorned with necklaces of coral and the crab's eye *(kuṉṟi)* seed, a basket perched on her sari-draped hip, a divining rod (*māttiraik kōl*) in her right hand, speaking words of allure, with a bounce of her breasts, a flutter of eyelashes, a coquettish gait." She is "capable of surpassing with her divination the omens told with drums, and every other kind of soothsaying." She has "wielded her divining rod like a royal sceptre in the Aryan, Gurjara and Koṅkaṇa countries", and has "planted a pillar of victory with Tamil in the lands of those who speak Kannada, Telugu and Kaliṅga (Oriya)" (song 49). The Kuṟatti can "perform every kind of divination in an instant, divining past and present events, foretelling the future, reading signs on the body or the palm, in the eye and the word!" (song 49).

The Kuṟatti identifies herself as a soothsayer from the hills who specializes in telling fortunes for young women (song 52). Vacantavalli asks her to describe the splendor of her mountain home. In verses that have become popular songs known

throughout Tamilnadu, the Kuṟavañci describes Tirikūṭam, the hill (*malai*) next to the town of Kuṟṟālam, on which she lives (song 54):

> There monkeys court their mates with fruit,
> apes beg for the fruit the female monkey lets fall.
> Hunters shoot arrows to propitiate the gods,
> flying Cittar adepts grow herbs of immortality.
> There the mist from the waterfall called "Honey"
> strikes the sky and comes down as rain,
> and the sun-god's charioteer and horses
> slip in their tracks!
> Such is the hill from which I come,
> Kuṟṟālam's Tirikūṭam Hill,
> hill of the god whose hair is adorned
> by the young crescent moon!

On that hill, says the Kuṟatti, the hill tribes dig for roots and tubers, extract honey from honey-combs, and dance, singing the hill's praise. There they pound roasted millet with elephant tusks, and great, sweet-smelling aloe and sandal trees grow in the forests that hunters clear for sowing millet . In the Kuṟatti's song Kuṟṟālam's Tirikūṭam hill is more glorious than the sacred Himalayan Mount Kailasa and the mythic Golden Mountain Meru, situated at the center of the universe. It is also related to many other hills, through networks of kinship between the fortune-teller and others of her tribe. The Kuṟavañci's sister Celli lives on Kolli hill, while her brother-in-law has rights over Paḻaṉi. Her mother-in-law hails from Cāmimalai, and her *tōḻi* (girlfriend) comes from Vēḷvimalai in the Nāñcil country (bordering Kerala). The Kuṟatti ends her song of Tirikūṭam Hill

with an account of the marriage customs of the Kuṟavar tribe and a reference to their association with the hill-god Murukaṉ, who is married to the Kuṟavar girl Vaḷḷi.

Next, Vacantavalli asks the Kuṟatti to describe the glories of the the sacred town of Kuṟṟālam and the land or country (*nāṭu*) in which it is situated (song 55). The Kuṟatti obliges, singing five songs on these themes, including the praise of Kuṟṟālam temple and the god who dwells there. The lady then asks the fortune-teller questions about her origins, her caste, her professional qualifications. The Kuṟavañci declares that she has won countless rewards for her expertise as a soothsayer. Travelling all over the country, far beyond the Tamil region, she has told the fortunes of noblemen and women, not only in South Indian Cochin and Konku, but also in Makkā (Mecca), Maratha, Simhala (modern Sri Lanka), Kasi (Benares) and Bengal (song 62. 1-3).[ix]

The Kuṟatti shows Vacantavalli the beautiful necklace that Ciṉṉaṇañcāttēvaṉ, Rācappar's patron, gave her "in the illustrious Kollam (era) year 887 (A.D. 1712) ", when "he covered with copper the tile roof of the *cittiracapai* hall (Sanskrit Citrasabhā, "hall of many colors or paintings") of the Kuṟṟālam temple". Already in A.D. 1272 (Kollam 444) her ancestors had predicted success for Ceṇpaka Pandiyan in constructing the temple at Teṉkāci (an old Pandiyan capital near Tirunelveli town), and in ancient time, Madurai city's Goddess Mīṉāṭci herself had approached the Kuṟatti's forebears for a divination regarding her marriage with Śiva! [x] Kuṟavañci poets play delightful variations

on these conventions of the Kuṟatti's impressive travels and her illustrious ancestors. For example, the soothsayer of the *Tañcai Veḷḷaip Pillaiyār Kuṟavañci* (TVP*K), a* late 17th-century proto-Kuṟavañci, traces her fortune-telling heritage back to her "grandmother's grandmother's grandmother's grandmother" (*pāṭṭikkup pāṭṭikkup pāṭṭikkup pāṭṭi).*

Before embarking on the ritual of soothsaying, the Kuṟatti asks Vacantavalli for "a little gruel, some betel leaf and arecca nut to chew on, and a bit of the "stuff from China (opium) that comes on the ship". Other Kuṟattis ask their clients for a little gruel for the babies that they are carrying in slings, or a little oil for the hair. Compared to the fortune-teller women's exaggerated claims about their wealthy patrons, these requests are modest indeed, and bespeak a marginal, poverty-stricken existence.

Reading auspicious omens, the soothsayer asks Vacantavalli to set up the sacred space and the implements for the ritual of soothsaying (songs 64 - 66). She reads the lady's palm, and predicts general good luck for her. Next, she invokes the local gods and goddesses in a long recitative set in the *akaval* meter, the meter of the *caṅkam* poems, which has ancient connections with augury and soothsayers.[xi] Beginning with invocations to the "high gods" of the Āgamic temples in Kuṟṟālam and elsewhere, she calls on a large number of "fierce" gods and goddesses -- unpredictable village deities, the guardian gods and goddesses of field and grove, forest and hill (such as Payiravar, Pitari and Panri Matan), asking them to help her divine the object of Vacantamōkiṉi's

desire (song 72). The invocation continues with a long list of signs from which the Kuṟavañci must pick out the right one. Possessed by Jakkammā (a folk goddess of the Telugu region), the Kuṟatti identifies Śiva, Lord of Kuṟṟālam, as the object of Vacantavalli's love, and predicts the certainty of her union with her Lord. Vacantavalli sends the soothsayer off, having rewarded her with many golden ornaments studded with gems (songs 77 -79).

The Identity of the Kuṟavañci Fortune-teller

The central segment of the Kuṟavañci, containing the fortune-telling episode, the high point of the drama, gives insights into the 17th- and 18th- century Tamil fascination with the fortune-teller, hill landscapes, and marginal livelihoods. It also demonstrates the genre's genius for synthesizing aesthetic and thematic elements of classical Tamil poetry with conventions of later origin, perhaps representing contemporary realities. The dialogue between Vacantavalli and the Kuṟatti is a dramatization of the curiosity as well as the stereotyping perceptions of the settled populations of the Tamil region regarding tribal peoples whom they call "Kuṟavar" in the 17th and 18th centuries. The depiction of a Kuṟatti fortune-teller telling a young woman's fortune made its first appearance in Tamil literature as a brief vignette in a 17th century minor genre called "Kalampakam" ("Mixed poem", an anthology of poetic themes), and became the focus of a separate short genre called "Kuṟam" ("The Kuṟatti's divination", also dating from the 17th century), of

which very few examples are available.[xii] Female fortunetellers also appeared in Telugu literary works called Yakṣagāna, which arose in the Telugu region in the late Vijayanagar and Nayaka periods. "Kuramu" (Telugu), the dance of a Kuṟatti, had also become a part of the repertoire of the late Nayaka and Maratha court dance repertoire in Tanjavur (Peterson 1998). But it is only in the 1700's, with the Tamil Kuṟavañci drama, that the Kuṟatti's fortune-telling plays a pivotal role in an elaborate dramatic plot focusing on the Kuṟavar people, presented as a dance-drama performed for large audiences.

The identity of the Kuṟatti as a woman of the mountain Kuṟavar tribe is based in part on the literary identity of the Kuṟavar tribe of the *kuṟiñci* (hill) landscape, one of the five *tiṇais* of the classical poems. In the *caṅkam* corpus the Kuṉṟak kuṟavar ("hill Kuṟavar") are one of the tribes who live in the *kuṟiñci* landscape, hunting, and managing the produce of hill and forest. The classical *kuṟiñci* landscape is connected with dangerous and mysterious sacred powers. The hills are the abode of Murukaṉ (the god of the Kuṟavar) and the landscape of the clandestine sexual union of lovers, a situation which is itself a manifestation of the sacred (Hart 1975). These older associations of the Kuṟavar with hills, Murukaṉ, the sacred, and sexual union are carried forward in the medieval myth of Murukaṉ's marriage to the hill-Kuṟavar girl (*kuṟamakaḷ)* Vaḷḷi, and in the 18th century Kuṟavañci drama. The Kuṟatti's description of tribal life on the hills is based mainly on older conventions about the occupations of the Kuṟavar in *caṅkam*

poems and Murukaṉ myths: hill-Kuṟavar hunt, gather honey, clear forests, and grow millet, and Kuṟavar women chase birds away from fields of ripening millet.[xiii]

In her fortune-telling persona and techniques the Kuṟatti in the Kuṟavañci play combines aspects of various diviner-figures and techniques of divination described in classical and medieval Tamil poetry. The wand or rod (*māttiraik kōl*) that the Kuṟatti carries appears to be derived fom the rod of divination carried by the Akavaṉmakaḷ, the female oracle of a class of bards and drummers called Akavunar in the *caṅkam* poems. [xiv] The earlier literature depicts the hill Kuṟavar worshipping Murukaṉ in a religion which involves possession, dancing, and oracles.[xv] In *caṅkam* poems the *kaṭṭuvicci* ("diviner, shamaness") a female diviner of Murukaṉ, gets possessed by the god, and divines future events by "reading" odd and even configurations of molucca beans (*kaḻaṅku)*, or paddy (*nel*) in a winnowing fan .[xvi] The Kuṟatti of the 18th century plays practises all the techniques of divination described in the classical poems. She gets possessed by a goddess and makes (oracular) utterances. She "reads" the meaning of her client's touching various parts of the body (*meykkuṟi pārttal*), and uses grains (usually *nel*, paddy) in a winnowing fan for divination (*neṟkuṟi pārttal*).

There remain, however, a number of elements in the description of the 18th-century Kuṟavañci drama's Kuṟatti, which cannot be traced back to any earlier source. The typical Kuṟatti fortune-teller of the Kuṟavañci plays carries a basket and wears bead

and seed (especially crab's-eye seed, Tamil "*kuṉṟimaṇi",* Sanskrit "*guñjā*") necklaces. She carries a baby in a sling across her breasts. In many Kuṟavañci dramas she sells beads and needles, and offers to tattoo her clients as well as to tell their fortunes, especially by reading their palms. Palm-reading (*kaikkuṟi pārttal)*, the quintessential technique of fortune-telling used by the Kuṟatti of the Kuṟavañci, is not included among the divination techniques of the *caṅkam* poems and the 17th-century genres. Likewise, the portrayal of the Kuṟatti as a nomad seems to be a late addition to the Kuṟatti fortune-teller's composite persona. Although we may find some echoes of the travelling Viṟali dancer and other female technicians of the sacred from the *caṅkam* poems in the Kuṟatti figure of the Kuṟavañci drama, the details of her wandering life and profession include new elements that correspond closely to the actual practice of particular nomadic communities in the Tamil region from the 18th century to the present. These elements will be examined below.[xvii]

In the Kuṟavañci, the fortune-teller has travelled far beyond the Tamil country, as far as Delhi, Gujarat, Mecca, and China. Although Rācappar presents his Kuṟatti as a triumphant representative of the Tamil language and culture in foreign places, the fortune-tellers in other Kuṟavañci dramas are portrayed as women who have mastered many languages, and can speak to their clients in their own languages. In a number of fortune-teller plays, snatches of Telugu, Kannada, Marathi and Hindi appear in the

dialogue between the Kuṟatti and her client. The Kuṟatti in the Carapēntira Pūpāla Kuṟavañci, written in the early 19th century in honor of the Maratha king Serfoji II of Tanjore, quotes from her conversations with her clients in Kannada, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil and English (song 43). Finally, in her divination rites, after invoking the local gods, the Kuṟatti summons the Andhra goddesses Polerammā and Jakkammā, as well as "Kollāpuriyammā", the Goddess Mahālakṣmī of Kolhapur in Maharashtra, pointing to her community's association with these regions to the north of the peninsula. In the KK it is Jakkammā who possesses the Kuṟatti and directs her oracular utterance.

The newer details of the Kuṟatti's appearance as described in the Kuṟavañci have their visual counterparts in the life-size sculptured images of female "folk" figures (these are identified by local guides as "Kuṟatti") at the Madurai Mīṉāṭci temple and in Śiva and Viṣṇu temples in Tirunelveli, most notably in Krishnapuram and Tirukkurungudi (Silpi, n.d.). Like the Kuṟavañci dramas, these sculptures date from the 17th and 18th centuries (Thomas 1985). The non-classical elements of the Kuṟatti's descriptions of Kuṟavar occupations and ways of life match the portrayals of these occupations in 18th century "Company" paintings from Tanjavur and Trichinopoly, commissioned from local artists by British patrons who collected albums of paintings recording the costumes and occupations of the peoples of South India (Archer 1972 and 1992). The same details also appear in the descriptions of "Kuṟavar" groups in 19th- and 20th-century ethnographic

accounts (Thurston 1909, William 1912-13, Hatch 1928, Malten 1989, Werth 1996). The correspondences between the fortune-teller's descriptions and the ethnographic writing suggest that the Kuṟavar of the Kuṟavañci might well represent migrant peoples of the 18th century, with identities, occupations, and relations to the land that are considerably different from those of the "Kuṟavar" of the classical and medieval poems. In order to complete our understanding of these 18th century identities, however, we must first consider Ciṅkaṉ, the birdcatching Kuṟavaṉ of the fortune-teller play, who offers an image of Kuṟavar life not found in Tamil literature prior to the appearance of the Kuṟavañci drama.

The Birdcatcher in the Paddy Fields

In the third segment of the KK the scene changes from the courtly setting and the interior of Kuṟṟālam town to the rice-fields surrounding Kuṟṟālam's temple. The segment begins with the arrival of Ciṅkaṉ or Kuḷuva-Ciṅkaṉ, a Kuṟavaṉ birdcatcher (the term "*kuḷuvaṉ*" appears to mean "birdcatcher"). The birdcatcher appears, announced thus in a song:

> "Wearing a necklace of cockle-shells,
> a heron-feather bound in his hair,
> a tiger-skin tied neatly
> into a sash around his waist,
> frightening tigers with his ferocity,
> a quiver slung over his shoulder,
> a curved bamboo-staff in his hand,
> carrying various weapons, and snares for birds,

here comes Ciṅkaṉ, the famed Kuluvan birdcatcher,
Ciṅkaṉ, the Kuṟavaṉ of Kuṟṟālam's Tirikūṭam hill! (KK 81)

Announcing himself, Ciṅkaṉ declares: "I am Ciṅkaṉ the birdcatcher! I set snares all day long. Springing like a lion, I catch birds in the sacred fields in the land of Tirikūṭam's Lord (song 84). The birdcatcher goes about setting up snares and traps for birds in the paddy fields. Then Ciṅkaṉ's clownish assistant Nūvaṉ enters, carrying special traps and snares for different kinds of birds -- for jungle fowl and red wagtails , for quails and partridges, and special snares for water- and shore-birds, including herons and terns. In the songs that follow, Ciṅkaṉ and Nūvaṉ discuss the species of birds they expect to catch, and the specialized traps and snares that they will set up for their prey. At this point Nūvaṉ climbs up a tree and imitates birdcalls in order to attract the birds. The next sequence of songs weaves a complex tapestry of themes. Songs with descriptions of Kuṟṟālam temple's rich lands alternate with songs on the details of birdcatching, and others which delineate Ciṅkaṉ's passion for his wife, whom he misses so much that he cannot concentrate on his work. In his songs, Ciṅkaṉ calls his wife "Ciṅki" (the word is the feminine form of "Ciṅkaṉ").

Approaching the fields belonging to the temple, Ciṅkaṉ describes the many water-birds that are feeding on the fish in each field-canal and tank, at the same time naming each field and its owner and describing his contributions to the temple.

The birds are landing, sir, the birds are landing! (refrain)

In the *mēlvāram paṟṟu* fields of fertile Ceṅkuḷam,
In the Kāṭuveṭṭi field, and the field of the long *cuṇṭai* grove,
In the fine field of Kāṅkēyaṉ of Pēṭṭaikkuḷam,
In Srikrishnan *mēṭu* land, Muṉikkurukaṉ *pēri*,....
the birds are landing, sir! (KK 91. 1, 3.)[xviii]

The birds are feeding, sir, the birds are feeding!
Circling above every tank and field
Owned by Kurralam temple, the fields in Kulacekarapatti,
Ayirapperi and Tenkaci,
the birds are swooping down on *ayirai* and minnows and *teli* fish,
the birds are feeding, sir! (KK 93.1, 2.)

The birds are feeding , sir,
in the canals of the fields endowed for the morning worship rite
by pious Ciṉṉaṇañcēntiraṉ of Kiḷuvai (Cokkampaṭṭi) ,
hereditary servant of Kuṟṟālam's Lord
whom Brahmā and Viṣṇu praise,
the donor who built the wall around the temple,
who built an almshouse for feeding the poor,
built a bridge in Teṉkāci, and steps to the river as well,
he who is devoted to the service of the Lord's devotees. (KK 93.3)

In Taṭṭāṉkuḷam field, in Camphor Strip l field,
watered by Lower New Pond in Kāṉāṅkuḷam ,
in all the *tiruttu* fields of generous Piccaip Piḷḷai
who wrote an Antāti poem for Kuṟṟālam,
younger brother of Cēṉaic Cavarip Perumāḷ,
Śaiva devotee, father of Kuṟṟālanātaṉ,
and of wealthy Vaittiyappaṉ of Marutūr,
commander of troops,
the birds are feeding, sir! KK 93. 4

Ciṅkaṉ's list of Kuṟṟālam temple's paddy fields, tanks, and landowners, and his "history" of the temple and the relationship between the townsmen and the temple are richly detailed. The fact that these careful descriptions of land and temple relations (in no less than five long songs) are placed in the mouth of a forester and birdcatcher requires comment. Before turning to the details and implications of Ciṅkaṉ's praise-poem to Kuṟṟālam's fields, however, we need to see how the birdcatcher fits into the Kuṟavañci's plot, and how the play comes to closure.

While Ciṅkaṉ raves about Ciṅki's beauty, wit, and self-confidence, and especially her alluring physical charms, the birds fly away from the traps, but the passion-crazed birdcatcher pays no heed. He begs Nūvaṉ to find his Ciṅki for him, offering him in return magic spells, recipes for herbal medicine, potions for improving sexual performance, aphrodisiacs, and talismans for sexual potency, including a "jackal-horn". Nūvaṉ tracks Ciṅki down in Kuṟṟālam town. After searching for Ciṅki in many towns, Ciṅkaṉ finally finds his wife on the main street in Kuṟṟālam town. A lively dialogue follows. Sick with lust, and insane with jealousy, he at first accuses her of running off with a lover, but his anger turns to admiration when she tells him that she had only set off to tell fortunes "to women with flowers in their long hair" (song 125). The naive birdcatcher expresses puzzlement at the ornaments the Kuṟatti is wearing, and she explains the ornaments to him, one by one, in a clever and witty style.

You are wearing strange things, Ciṅki,
I am afraid to ask you what they are,
I'm afraid to ask! !
No man ought to be afraid to say what he thinks!
Speak up, don't be scared, Ciṅkā,
tell me what 's on your mind!
Why is a king cobra
coiled around your ankle, Ciṅki,
coiled around it?
The anklet I got as my fee
when I told a fortune in Salem country,
That's what you see wrapped around my ankle, Ciṅkā!. (KK 125. 3 -6).

The dialogue ends with Ciṅkaṉ once again declaring his passion for her. Ciṅkaṉ and Cinṉki dance together. The play ends with the poet's invocation to the god, and a benedictory verse.

With the last segment, the Kuṟavañci drama, which began in the context of the town and temple, and moved through the hill landscape, the classical landscape of lovers' union, brings us to the agricultural landscape surrounding the temple and town. The focus of the segment alternates between the themes of birdcatching and cultivation. In Ciṅkaṉ's search for Ciṅki and in his sexual jealousy the Kuṟavañci drama draws upon the classical associations of the *marutam* (field) landscape with marital jealousy and quarrels. At the very end of the play, we return to the temple and town, and marital harmony is re-established, paralleling the union that has already been predicted for the lady and her lord. The genre's representations of the three landscapes can be fully understood only when we see the activities of the Kuṟatti and Ciṅkaṉ in relationship to each other, and the

activities of the Kuṟavar couple in relation to the town, temple, and clients /patrons under whose auspices they have come to practice their occupations.

Land, Landowners, and the Temple in 18th century Tamilnadu: An Outsider's Perspective

The details of Ciṅkaṉ's description of the fields and irrigational tanks on which the birds land and feed serve as an exposition of the networks of cultivational rights and landownership by means of which the town (*ūr*) of Kuṟṟālam functioned as a social community in the early 18th century. The Kuṟavaṉ's description tallies remarkably well with the portrayal of the above relationships in recent scholarship on agrarian history in south India, especially in David Ludden's analysis of peasant history in Tirunelveli, the province in which Kuṟṟālam is located, and the region of Tamilnadu in which Kuṟavañci dramas proliferated under the patronage of Pāḷaiyakkārars such as Ciṉṉaṇañcāttēvaṉ in the 18th century.

Ciṅkaṉ uses a precisely nuanced agricultural vocabulary to name the various types of fields *(cey, paṟṟu, tiruttu, viḷaiyāṭṭam, nēri, pēri)* in which rice is cultivated in and near Kuṟṟālam. He also lists a large number of irrigational tanks (*kuḷam, ēri)* which attract the water-birds that he can catch only in this kind of habitat. Throughout the Tamil region, a basic distinction is made between *naṉcey* (irrigated or "wet" land), and *puṉcey,* land which does not receive irrigation and therefore cannot support "wet zone" crops such as rice. David Ludden has shown that the construction of irrigational tanks is

an important water-management strategy through which extensive rice cultivation has been made possible in the Tamraparni River valley in Tirunelveli since the 15th century.[xix] The cultivational land in this valley is "wet zone" land, containing the most fertile and well-irrigated soil in Tirunelveli, contrasting especially with the province's large black-soil tracts ("mixed zone"), and the wastelands (*taricu*) with which its "dry zone" areas abounded.

In his litany of the fields, Ciṅkaṉ praises not only Ciṉṉaṇañcāttēvaṉ, the poet's Pāḷaiyakkārar patron, but the landowners of Kuṟṟālam as well. While the Pāḷaiyakkārar chief belongs to the Maṟavar caste, the names of the other men show their affiliation mainly with the high-ranking Vēḷāḷar "peasant" caste subgroups, and some high-ranking non-peasant castes as well. In addition to managing Ciṉṉaṇañcēntiraṉ's interests in nearby Vaṭakarai and Teṉkāci (an old center of Pandyan rule), bearing the offices of "minister, accountant, and manager", Piccaip piḷḷai, a Śaiva Vēḷālaṉ, also wrote an Antāti poem on Kuṟṟālam. The same Piccaip piḷḷai is the father of the wealthy Vaittiyanātaṉ, who bestowed several endowments and charities on the Kuṟṟālam temple. Ōmalūrk Kiruṣṇaṉ is the "king of merchants", Rāmanāyakaṉ of Karuvai might hail from a Telugu caste-group, and Caṭaittampirāṉ is a Śaiva Vēḷāḷar mendicant. Other landowners, also mainly from Vēḷāḷar castes, are praised in other verses throughout this section.

In praising the landowners, in addition to their wealth or learning, the birdcatcher speaks of the donations, endowments and other charitable services they have provided for the Kuṟṟālam temple and to nearby temples as well. Ciṉṉaṇañcēntiraṉ, who covered with copper the tiled roof constructed by an earlier Pandiyan king, gets the highest praise. Nevertheless, the Vēḷāḷars who serve under the Pāḷaiyakkārar have also given much to the temple, including portions of the crop (*vāram)* as *kaṭṭaḷai* (endowment), and have undertaken the construction and maintenance of the temple and the institutions under its auspices. A number of the fields Ciṅkaṉ names are *kaṭṭaḷai* fields (*paṟṟu, cey*) part of whose yield is donated to the temple, in exchange for temple honors that confer status.

The situation depicted in the Kuṟavañci neatly summarizes the social dynamics of land control David Ludden has described for the wet zone of Tirunelveli in the early 18th century: " In the wet zone, an institutionalized structure of shareholding embraced whole irrigated communities and pervaded village life." (1985, p.167). After the break-up of the early medieval insitutions of the *nāṭu* and other translocal assemblies that regulated agriculture, landownership and commerce, and certainly by 1500, land rights were regulated at the level of the *ūr* (village, town). Upper caste men in the *ūr* held *paṅku* shares in the cultivation of irrigated land, which made them owners of *kāṇi* (rights to land). Throughout the Tamil region, already in the 6th to the 8th centuries the temple, whose ritual structure based on the Āgama texts was controlled by Brahmans (followers

of priestly professions and arbiters of Sanskritic learning) and Vēḷāḷar, had become the central agency for the distribution of power and status among kings and other elites (Stein 1980; Ludden 1985, map 10). Corresponding to the historical information we possess, the birdcatcher's songs in the Kuṟavañci depict land rights and control as being managed by *ūr* collectivities, showing at the same time the centrality of the temple as a mediator in social transactions related to land, and in the bestowal of status on individuals in the town. During much of the 18th century, the period of the rise and popularity of the Kuṟavañci dramas, British colonial reorganizations of land-holding and revenue systems had not yet displaced the older organizational patterns described above for the lands under Pāḷaiyakkārar rule.[xx]

There is, however, one point on which the Kuṟavañci's account diverges from the historical record. Kuṟṟālam is an ancient Brahmadeya, a village /town gifted by the king to brahmans. The most important Brahmadeya centers in the Tamil region are found in river valleys where rice is cultivated, and the Kaveri river valley is the location for the oldest and densest concentration of such centers. In Stein's formulation (1980), these settlements participated in a brahman-Vēḷāḷar (Vellala) alliance, a collaboration between brahmans and Vēḷāḷar cultivating groups, resulting in land control and rights to land resting primarily with these groups. Ludden's study of Tirunelveli shows the continuation of the Brahman-Vēḷāḷar alliance in Tirunelveli temple-centers of the wet-

zone well into the 18th century (1985, chapters 2, 3 and 4; maps 8-12). The Kuṟavaṉ birdcatcher's list, on the other hand, emphasizes the Vēḷāḷar landowners and their relation to the Kuṟṟālam temple, of course, under the leadership of a Maṟavar patron-king. The poetic narrative replaces images of brahman-Vēḷāḷar domination in areas of high-yield rice cultivation with an idealized picture, a celebration, of the alliances that Tamil Vēḷāḷar cultivators had been making, from the 16th century onwards, with Nayakas, Maṟavars, and other non-peasant groups of diverse backgrounds.

Ciṅkaṉ's livelihood is a symbiotic affair. Though he is a man of wilderness, a hunter, *not* a cultivator, the birdcatcher earns part of his living on agricultural land. The *naṉcey* fields and tanks of Kuṟṟālam and surrounding wet-zone towns are the ideal habitat of the waterfowl he is expert in catching, and for whom he has developed so many specialized snares and techniques. Is the birdcatcher merely poaching, or is he indulged by the peasants because he helps them rid their rich crops of the birds who eat them, even as he bags the water-birds who feed mainly on fish? The poet portrays the cultivators of Kuṟṟālam as benefitting from Ciṅkaṉ's activities, just as they benefit from the Kuṟatti's soothsaying. Why, by placing the praise of the temple, the god, and the landowners in the capacity of "patrons", does Rācappar makes the Kuṟavaṉ a part of the18th-century socio-economic-cultural complex? Before investigating the Kuṟavañci drama's motives

in this particular construction of the Kuṟavaṉ, we need to complete our enquiry into the identities of Ciṅkaṉ and the Kuṟatti in this genre.

From Hill People to 18th-century Nomads: The Literary Transformation of the Kuravar Community

There are no models in classical and medieval Tamil literature for the vividly drawn character of the birdcatcher of the Fortune-teller play. There is a single extant example of an 18th or 19th century genre with strong "folk" features, called "Kuḷuvanāṭakam" (the Play of the Kuḷuvaṉ Birdcatcher), a genre whose plot is essentially that of the third segment of the Kuṟavañci *(Cinnamakipan Kuluvanatakam*). It is possible that the Kuḷuvanāṭakam and the birdcatcher segment of the Kuṟavañci dramas arose from a shared antecedent in a 17th or 18th-century folk dramatic genre focusing on a Kuḷuvaṉ birdcatcher (Muttuccaṇmukaṉ and Mōkaṉ 1977, 45 -49). It seems as though the poets of the 18th century Kuṟavañci forged a composite literary portrait of the Kuṟavar community by linking the fortune-telling Kuṟatti and the birdcatching Kuḷuvaṉ who originally appeared in diverse literary contexts. As we have seen, the occupations of both characters are organically connected, both with the play's plot and with the delineation of the temple-town around which the play unfolds. What are the contemporary elements that fed into this composite portrait?

In classical and medieval Tamil sources the Kuṟavar tribes are hunter-gatherers, dwellers in forests and mountains, and millet-growers. As we noted earlier, the wandering life of the 18th-century play's Kuṟatti fortune-teller is a new element, as are many of the details of her description of her tribe. The pairing of the Kuṟatti with Ciṅkaṉ completes the portrait of the Kuṟavar as a wandering tribe whose women earn a living by telling fortunes and whose men trap and sell birds, not only in the wilderness landscapes, but also in cultivated fields. While the hill-Kuṟavar of the older texts were always portrayed as part of the hill (*malai)* landscape, Ciṅkaṉ and Ciṅki practice their livelihoods in urban centers. As A.K.Ramanujan has pointed out, the Tamil poets have always been "literalists of the imagination" (Ramanujan 1985, p.250), fashioning the symbolic vocabulary of their poetry out of closely observed details of the objective world. In their construction of tribal characters the 18th-century poets of the Kuṟavañci combined older literary conventions regarding the hill people with new stereotypes of migrant peoples who had emerged on the Tamil landscape from the 16th century onwards. Indeed, there are remarkable correspondences among the 18th-century genre's descriptions of the "Kuṟavar" way of life and the portrayal of real-life groups called "Kuṟavar" in the 18th-century paintings mentioned earlier, the writings of 19th and 20th century observers and ethnographers, and the usage of settled populations in modern Tamilnadu.

From the early 18th century onwards, descriptions of wandering tribes locally called "Kuṟavar", are found in foreign accounts of South India, written by missionaries, travellers, British and other historians and administrators, and private diarists. We gather from the above sources that several groups of these nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples migrated from north and western India to South India in tandem with Nayaka and Mughal military enterprise in the region.[xxi] Similar and related migrant groups have been circulating in India and far beyond India for centuries, and the South Indian nomads may also have travelled back to the North. The Banjara, Lambadi and Vagri (a.k.a. Vagrivala or Pardhi), three major migrant communities spread in South India, speak some variety of a Western-Indian Indo-Aryan language related to Gujarati, Rajasthani, or Marathi, with an admixture of Hindi, Dakhni-Urdu, and Telugu or Tamil.[xxii] They are clearly related to groups in Maharashtra (Kaikadi, Pardhi), Gujerat, and elsewhere in the North. These wandering communities are described in detail in Edgar Thurston's compendium *Castes and Tribes of Southern India,* published at the beginning of the 20th century, and have been further investigated in recent ethnographic studies.[xxiii] In Tamilnadu today the Tamil word "Kuṟavar" is applied especially to the Korava and the Vagri, who specialize in fortune-telling, hunting and bird-catching, and the ethnographic record confirms this situation for the 19th century as well.[xxiv] It is reasonable to suppose that the Kuṟavañci's descriptions of Kuṟavar ways of life draw on the activities of these groups.

The activities of the Kuṟatti and Ciṅkaṉ closely resemble the ways of the Korava / Yerukala (Telugu *yeruku,* "prophecy") of Andhra and of so-called "Narikkuṟavar" ("Jackal Kuṟavar)" or "Kuruvikkārar" ("Bird-sellers") groups (these are really none other than the Vagri) we may encounter camping in towns and villages in Tamilnadu today. Narikkuṟavar men peddle "jackal horns", birds, and stuffed small animals, forest produce, baskets, and aphrodisiacs. Narikkuṟavar women hawk beads and trinkets in baskets, tell fortunes (mainly by reading palms and getting possessed), and tattoo clients.

The following description in Thurston, of Korava / Yerukala women is strikingly close to the depictions of the Kuṟatti's fortune-telling in the Kuṟavañci drama:

"It is said that Korava women invoke the village goddesses when they are telling fortunes. They use a winnowing fan and grains of rice in doing this, and prophesy good or evil, according to the number of grains found on the fan [*Madras Census Report,* 1901]. They carry a wicker tray in which cowry shells are imbedded in a mixture of cow-dung and turmeric. The basket represents Kollapuriamma, and the cowries Poleramma. When telling fortunes, the Korava woman places on the basket the winnow, rice, betel leaves and areca nuts, and the wicker tray. Holding her client's hand over the winnow, and moving it about, she commences to chant, and name all sorts of deities. From time to time, she touches the hand of the person whose fortune is being told with the stick." The Kuṟavañci's mention of the Kuṟatti fortune-teller's ability to communicate with her clients

in their own languages is amply supported by the ethnography of Yerukala and Vagri women fortune-tellers.[xxv]

The Vagri / Narikkuṟavar specialize in birdcatching, fortune-telling, and hunting jackals and the small animals.[xxvi] The term "Vagri" is derived from Sanskrit or Prakrit (Indo-Aryan) *vāgura,* net, snare, and is related to *vāgura, vāgurika,* birdcatcher. As noted earlier, the local Tamil populations use the Tamil term "Kuruvikkarar" ("birdcatcher" or "bird-seller") to refer to the birdcatching Vagris. It is also the Vagri who have earned the modern Tamil soubriquet "Narikkuṟavar" ("Jackal" Kuṟavar) by peddling the "horns" of jackals, which are really the sharpened skull bones of jackals covered with some fur, as fertility talismans. The name also relates to the Narikkuṟavar practice of eating the meat of jackals and other small wild animals. The descriptions of Ciṅkaṉ's birdcatching most closely fit the Vagri, who continue to live as professional birdcatchers and hunters of small animals, and pride themselves in their expertise with water-birds. The snares, slings and techniques the ethnographers decribe as being used by Vagri birdcatchers match the ones described in Kuṟavañci dramas and Kuḷuvanāṭakams.[xxvii] The convention of calling the Kuṟavaṉ and the Kuṟatti "Ciṅkaṉ" and"Ciṅki" is found for the first time in the Kuṟavañci drama, and remains confined to the genre. It seems to me that "*ciṅkaṉ"* is a Tamilization of "*singh*", a common surname among Rajasthanis and Marwaris and other Indo-Aryan-speaking communities of

Western India, and also of men in the nomadic Vagri tribe. The appearance of this terminology in the Kuṟavañci play is another piece of evidence connecting the 18th-century drama's portrait of the Kuṟavar with "Narikkuṟavar" identities.

Apart from the details of Ciṅkaṉ and the Kuṟatti fortune-teller's occupations, the generalizations regarding "Kuṟavar" customs in the Kuṟavañci dramas are a mixture of factual detail and popular perceptions among settled populations regarding these intriguing nomads. Vagris and Yerukalas apparently do practice the custom of *couvade,* in which the Kuṟavaṉ takes medicine when his wife is confined for childbirth, a very common reference in Kuṟavañcis. But other of the statements made by the Kuṟavañci's fortune-tellers, such as "We (Kuṟavar women) sleep with our brothers-in-law" are simply inaccurate. A major difference between the Kuṟavañci and the ethnographic and popular accounts is that the former never mentions the dominant 19th- and 20th- century stereotype of Kuṟavars as thieves.[xxviii] It is not clear whether this stereotype did not exist in the 18th century, or whether it was omitted in the Kuṟavañci in order to sustain the play's positive image of the Kuṟavar. In sum, it appears that the Kuṟavañci poets selected from the lives of the wandering groups they knew just those details that would help create a portrait of the Kuṟavars as intriguing nomadic people, in command of mysterious powers and skills associated with their wilderness origins. The nomadic "Kuṟavar" groups easily lent themselves to such selective portrayal, for, while all of these groups have maintained

identities distinct from the settled society around them, they have always adapted their "ways" to fit their local environments. The observation that H.Childers (1975, p.248) makes about the Ghormati Banjaras seems to fit the Vagri, Korava /Yerukala, and other migrant groups as well: "In addition to peculiarities of dress and language, Ghormati think of themselves as sharing an integrated complex of religious, social, economic, and political characteristics which distinguish them from other populations. At the same time, these distinguishing characteristics are subject to manipulation in ways which facilitate the linking or articulation of their activities with whatever populations are in contact." What does the particular slant of the Kuṟavañci's portrait of "Kuṟavar" tell us about the relations between wilderness and settled landscapes and identities in 18th century Tamilnadu?

In praise of Wildness: Nomads, Birdcatchers, and Kings

Despite its insistence on the incorporation of the Kuṟavar couple into the agrarian landscape and the economy of the settlement, the Kuṟavañci drama makes it clear that the powerful fascination of the Kuṟatti and Ciṅkaṉ for the populations of the *ūr* -- the patrons and audiences of the drama -- depends in fact on their indisputable and essential "otherness". The fortune-telling Kuṟatti brings with her the mystery of the world-traveller, the mystique of the mountain landscape and the hill-people's way of life, and the powers and wisdom associated with these. At the heart of the birdcatcher's appeal are

his own sexual drive, his command over the secrets of sexual potency, and his direct association with birds, animals, the forest, and hunting. The implications of these attributes for 18th century Tamil understandings of land, landscape and place need to be viewed in symbolic as well as social historical terms. Together the Kuṟavar couple reminds the people of the town of the necessity of the wilderness as the ultimate source of the power and vitality of life in settled communities.

As we have seen, the continuous association of "Kuṟatti" soothsayer figures with hill landscapes, goddesses, and occult powers allows the Kuṟavañci to mould this figure very easily into a new plot that connects the hill with the field landscapes, and the nomads with the populations of the town. The KK's undisputed position as the best of the Kuṟavañcis owes something to the especially vivid way in which the correspondences between real and imagined landscapes are realized in the setting of Kuṟṟālam. Kuṟṟālam is actually situated on the margins of the hills that are the habitat of the Kuṟavar tribes. By always focusing her praise of the *ūr* and its temple on the "Tirikūṭam hill", the KK's fortune-teller reminds us that, underlying the urban agricultural center.there is a primitive sacred associated with the hills. Her songs articulate an experience that is vividly present for pilgrims to the Kuṟṟālam shrine in the juxtaposition of the temple and town with the great hill, the famed waterfalls, and the mountain landscape.[xxix] Through her oracular

gifts the Kuṟatti becomes a conduit for channeling the sacred powers of nature-goddesses and natural landscapes into the lives of the people of the town.

We have also seen that the emergence of the Kuṟavar and other marginal figures in 18th-century Tamil literatures had much to do with the upward social mobility and newly acquired elite status of caste-groups that had formerly occupied marginal and "outsider" positions in the Tamil social hierarchy. The Kaḷḷar were known for earning their livelihood through systematic banditry; the Maṟavar began as fierce, marauding warriors (Dirks 1985, and Shulman, 1985, p. 351 ff.). Rulers from these very groups were the principal sponsors of the innovative 18th-century minor genres. The proliferation of such figures as the Kaḷḷaṉ horse-thief of the Cripple's Play and the Kuṟavar of the Kuṟavañci in the *pirapantams* suggests the fascination of patrons and poets with marginal characters in these genres. It would seem that this fascination arose from the affinities and the sense of identification, however ambivalent, that elites of uncertain and marginal origins felt with various kinds of "outsiders".

What aspects of marginality do the figures of Ciṅkaṉ and the Kuṟatti contribute to the spectrum of "outsider" characters in the 18th-century genres? As David Shulman (1985) has shown, the portrayal of the king as the object of desire for courtesans and other female subjects in various medieval and Nayaka period South Indian genres represents an affirmation of the king's role as a virile figure whose sexual energies

underlie his role as the center of the vitality of his realm. In the Kuṟavañci drama, too, the king, or his divine counterpart, the god, is the object of the high-born heroine's desire. However, in this genre the symbolic sources of the king's virility are also expressed in his identification with the persona of the lusty birdcatcher in search of his mate. The dialogue between Ciṅkaṉ and Ciṅki at the end of the play contrasts the birdcatcher's naivete and crude sexuality with his wife's sophistication, wit and self-control. Here, Ciṅkaṉ is bewildered by the ornaments that Ciṅki has earned as her reward, and mistakes them for wild beasts, birds and insects. The Kuṟatti laughs at him and corrects his mistakes. The dialogue underscores what we have been told about the Kuṟavaṉ all through the birdcatcher portion of the play. Unlike the scheming Kaḷḷar horse-thief of the Noṇṭināṭakam, Ciṅkaṉ is a naive wild man, a hunter who loses his catch because of his sexual passion, a true fertility figure. In these qualities, as much as in the aphrodisiacs he peddles, is the key to his appeal for kings and commoners in 18th century Tamil society. This unique balance of "primitive" qualities -- of wildness, vitality and innocence -- in the birdcatcher's persona distinguish him from Kaḷḷar horse-thieves and other mock-heroic or wild personae who inhabit the universe of Tamil *pirapantam* literature.

Such genres as the Cripple's Play portray the marginal figure in an ambiguous light. Although the Kaḷḷaṉ hero's escapades are the focus of the genre, he is crippled as a result of his misadventures, only to be cured in the end by the god whom he worships

after repenting his deeds. In spite of the attractiveness of their identification with wild landscapes and transgressive behavior, the Kaḷḷaṉ bandit and other low-caste heroes are also viewed as figures of disorder whom the king (and society) must subdue, especially because of their participation in the caste order. The low-caste heroes of true folk ballads, such as the hero Maturai vīran, pay for their trangressions of the caste order with their lives. The balance between identity and opposition in the relationship between king and marginal figure is a delicate one in the 18th-century genres. The Kuṟavaṉ of the Kuṟavañci, on the other hand, is finely contrasted with the other low-caste figures. As a nomad, he only fleetingly participates in the life of the settlement. As a true man of the wilderness he does not really depend on agrarian society. As his rough and naive ways demonstrate, he has only the most tenuous ties with settled life. In fact, it is by *retaining* his identity as an outsider that he can relate to the kingdom and cultivated land. The Kuṟavaṉ's symbolic status in the Kuṟavañci as a person situated outside the caste-order is an important expression of the positive and essential nature of his "outsider" identity.[xxx] Ciṅkaṉ thrives on his marginality, without compromising his transactions with the people of the *ūr*.

The Kuṟavar couple's nomadic identity must have been among the most attractive aspects of the Kuṟavañci for 18th-century patrons and audiences. The genre offers a fluid discourse of place, landscape and social identity. Praisers of places and settled

populations, the Kuṟatti and Kuṟavaṉ nevertheless retain their dedication to livelihoods that demand movement across landscapes. Indeed, their mysterious origins and associations with diverse "places", a key component of their identity, is also the key to their fascination for 18th-century populations. Equally importantly, the migrant quality of the Kuṟavar couple's identities allowed 18th-century patrons, poets and audiences alike to share in an imaginative articulation of their own shifting identities and changing relations with places, landscapes and "others" in the Tamil land.

It was easy for the Marathas of Tanjavur to discern in the Kuṟavar linguistic and ethnic connections with wandering nomads (Kaikāḍī) of their own western Indian homeland.[xxxi] The enthusiastic response the genre evoked in the Maratha kings, from Shahji II in the early 18th century to Serfoji II in the early 19th, resulted in the creation of some of the best known Kuṟavañcis, including several works in Marathi, and even in a combination of Marathi, Sanskrit and Tamil.[xxxii] It was also in the multi-cultural and mutli-lingual atmosphere of the Maratha court in Tanjore that the Tamil Christian poet Vedanayaka Sastri wrote the celebrated *Pettalēm (Bethlehem) Kuṟavañci* (1800) under the auspices of the German missionaries of the Danish Halle mission in Tranquebar (Peterson 1999). In the multilingual works of the Tanjavur Maratha court we may discern a resonance with another aspect of the cultural and spatial mobility embodied in the Kuṟavañci, especially in the polyglot persona of the Kuṟatti. It is also significant that

both Vedanayaka Sastri and the European-educated King Serfoji II of Tanjavur incorporated accounts of modern European terrestrial geography in their innovative works *Bethlehem Kuṟavañci* and the (Marathi language) *Devendra Korvañji* (Peterson 1999).

Eighteenth-century Tamil society's fascination with the wandering fortune-teller and the birdcatcher appears to be located in the oscillation between identification and otherness that is characteristic of the relations I have described above. On the one hand, mysterious identities, wilderness livelihoods and nomadic habits define the Kuṟatti and Kuṟavaṉ as persons who are not fully included in the cultural system ordered by the temple-town-field complex and the culture of places. On the other hand, the shifting strategic location of selves *vis- a-vis* "others" in the fortune-teller play, reflected especially in the largely positive portrayal of the Kuṟatti and the birdcatcher, hints at a more flexible conception of selves and others than would be allowed by a merely exoticizing attitude towards marginality. The Kuṟavañci genre represents a flexible, creative, 18th-century Tamil combination of geography, social history and ethnography. The genre's fluid discourses of space, place, and identity are embedded in 18th-century realities and expressed in enduring metaphors of the relationship of human beings with the Tamil land and its real and imagined landscapes. At the same time, they enabled

Tamils in the 18th century to encounter imaginatively an expanding world in terms of newer geographies.

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[i] The Caṅkam poems, a body of classical Tamil poems dating from the 1st -3rd c. A.D, developed a sophisticated poetics, expounded in the Tolkāppiyam, an early poetic grammar. For the *caṅkam* poets the two great themes of poetry are love and war, expressions of the "inner" and "outer" lives of the kings and local chiefs who are the patrons and heroes of the poems. At the center of classical Tamil poetics is a scheme of five "landscapes" (*tiṇai*). In this scheme each of the actual landscape-types of the Tamil countryside connotes both a natural phenomenon and, in precise correlation with it, an aspect of love between a man and a woman. Each landscape is named after a flower or plant characteristic to it. Thus, the hill landscape is called *kuṟiñci* for the *kuṟiñci* (mountain conehead) flower; the pasture is named "*mullai* ", for the jasmine; the field is "*marutam* ", for the queen's flower; the seashore is "*neytal"*, for the blue waterlily; and the wasteland, "*pālai*", for the ivorywood, an evergreen tree in the desert. Poems which are set in a hill landscape (or allude to some of its features) signal lovers' meetings; pastoral poems are about domestic happiness or patient waiting after marriage; field poems, about the married hero's infidelity (usually with courtesans) and lover's quarrels; seashore poems evoke separation and anxious waiting; and the wasteland landscape suggests elopement, hardship, or the hero's journey across the desert or the drought-parched wilderness in search of wealth. The *caṅkam* poets use the scheme of conventional landscapes as a language of symbols to create intricately designed, richly suggestive poems. For detailed introductions to caṅkam poetry and poetics, see Ramanujan, 1967 and 19991, and Hart, 1975.

[ii] In some Kuṟavañcis the heroine's girlfriend *(caki, tōḻi*) fetches the soothsayer, hoping that she will end the woman's suffering by predicting her union with her lover. In this essay I have conformed to Tamil usage in the naming of social groups. The customary plural "r" ending indicates a generic reference to tribes, groups, etc.: e.g., Kuṟavar. The "ṉ" ending in words such as Kuṟavaṉ, Kaḷḷaṉ, etc. refers to a single male person belonging to the particular group or tribe. Csste and tribe names have specific feminine forms, e..g., Kuṟatti. While the Kuṟavar woman fortune-teller is usually called "Kuṟatti" in much of the literature, the Kuṟavañci drama preferentially uses the special form "Kuṟavañci". To minimize confusion, in this essay I will use the term "Kuṟatti" for the fortune-teller of the Kuṟavañci drama.

[iii] Genuine folk genres, including "epics" and ballads such as *Maturai vīraṉ katai* and the popular theater of the Terukkūttu ("Street theater"), took shape contemporaneously with the literary *pirapantam* genres.

[iv] Matappuli, the Kaḷḷar hero of the *Tiruccentūr noṇṭināṭakam,* travels from Tirupati on the northern edge of Tamilnadu to Tirucchendur on the southern coast of Tirunelveli,

tracing the path of Vaḍugar migrations to the south. The Viṟaliviṭutūtu, a poetic genre which portrays the travels and adventures of a brahmin playboy, belongs to the picaresque mode as well. The Viṟali dancer, through whom the repentant hero sends a message to his wife, is also a peripatetic character.

[v] Beginning his play with several songs of invocation to the gods, and praise of Kuṟṟālam, its temple and the god who resides there, the poet devotes the 38 songs that follow to the delineation of the theme of Śiva's procession, and the love-sickness of the heroine Vacantavalli. The next forty songs focus on the soothsaying Kuṟatti, while songs 81-122 are devoted to the bird-catcher Ciṅkaṉ's bird-catching, his search for his wife, and eventual reunion with her.

[vi] Vacantavalli's love-sickness is portrayed in terms of a sequence of conventional descriptions and tropes, such as the heroine's angry address to the moon and the breeze, whom she accuses of adding to her torment.

[vii] The *daru* is an important song form in the Kuṟavañci and several other 18th-century musical dramatic genres in Tamil and Telugu. See Peterson 1998.

[viii] No translations of Kuṟavañci dramas have been published. All translations from the Kuṟavañci and other *pirapantam* genres in this paper are mine.

[ix] In Song 62.2 the fortune-teller mentions important towns and cities in 18th century Tamilnadu, including Tanjavur, Maṅkalappēṭṭai, Gingee and the fort-city of Trichy.

[x] Teṉkāci is 5 km. east of Kuṟṟālam. The Malayalam Kollam era (Kollam 1= 825 A.D.), prevalent in Kerala, was also used in adjacent Tirunelveli.

[xi] On these associations, see Kailasapathy 1968, pp. 110-112 and Muilwijk 1996.

[xii] See the *Mīṉāṭciyammai Kuṟam* of the 17th century poet Kumarakuruparar. On the differences among Kuṟavañci, Kuṟam, the Kalampakam vignettes and a lost genre called Kuṟattippāṭṭu, see Mōkaṉ 1985, and Muilwijk 1996.

[xiii] Examples include *Akanāṉūṟu* 308, *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu* 251-260 and 281-90, and *Kuṟuntokai* 82. The trope of Kuṟavar women guarding millet fields is deployed as a pivotal device in the Murukaṉ-Vaḷḷi myth.

[xiv] The Akavaṉmakaḷ's staff is called the "*piṟappuṇarttuṅ kōl*", "the staff that reveals birth".

[xv] E.g., Nakkīrar's *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai 5* and 6 (Ramanujan 1985, pp. 226 -228 and 215 –217).

[xvi] E.g., *Kuṟuntokai* 23, *Akanāṉūṟu 9*8. See Hart 1979, p. 118, and 44-45. The Vaiṣṇava poet-saint Tirumankai Āḻvār (8th-9th c.) describes a female diviner (Kaṭṭuvicci) in action (*Ciṟiya Tirumaṭal 1*9-22). The Vēlaṉ, the shaman-priest of Murukaṉ, also practices divination using *kaḻaṅku* (molucca beans): e.g., *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu* 243 and 244.

[xvii] On the Viṟali dancer see Kersenboom-Story 1981 and Kailasapathy 1968, p. 105 ff.. The Caṅkam genre called "guide poem (for bards and artists seeking patrons) " (Āṟṟuppaṭai) focuses on the life and image of the travelling artist.
[xviii] "*Mēlvāram*" is the "superior (*mēl)* portion of the crop, claimed by the landlord or by government, in contrast to the cultivator's share, *kuṭivāram*." (Ludden 1985, Glossary, p.264.)
[xix] Tirunelveli also abounds in great *aṇaikkaṭṭu* dams used for diverting the Tamraparni's water for cultivation (Ludden 1985, Maps 8 and 18).
[xx] On the effects of the British East India Company's interventions, especially with the introduction of Thomas Munro's *ryotwari s*ystem, see Ludden 1985, chapters 4 and 6.
[xxi]Thurston 1909 and Childers 1975. The Lambadi came to the South in several groups as commissaries to the Mughal and British armies, supplying salt and other necessities. Their numbers increased dramatically, and many settled in various parts of South India, primarily in Andhra and Mysore. Among the traditional commodities supplied to local populations by subgroups of the Lambadi Kuravas are salt and curry leaves. these Kuravas were named after what they sold: "Salt (*uppu)* Kuṟavar" and "curry leaf Kuṟavar" (*kaṟivēppilaik kuṟavar*). During the later part of the British period the Banjara were displaced from their various trades, and had to find new occupations, including ironmongering and working in mines.
[xxii] The Vagris speak Vagriboli, an Indo-Aryan language with a strong Western Indian (Gujarati /Rajasthani) cast to it (Srinivasa Varma 1970). A fourth group, of uncertain regional origin, the Korava, called "Yerukala" in Telugu, are found mainly in the Telugu linguistic area (in what is now Andhra Pradesh), and speak a mixture of Telugu, Kannada and Tamil, all Dravidian languages.
[xxiii]See "Korava", Thurston 1909, volume 3; and "Banjara" and "Kuruvikkaran", Ibid., volume 4.
[xxiv] The migrant groups in Andhra and Mysore appear to be related to those in Tamilnadu, but no clear picture of their relationship has emerged from studying their similarities and differences.
[xxv] Thurston 1909, vol.3, 464-65. The Banjara, Korava /Yerukala, Vagri and Badhanyo offer blood sacrifice to particular goddesses, whose images they carry with them. Malten (1989) and Werth (1996) report that Vagri men practise divination in odd and even numbers when they worship the Goddess. "Narik kuṟatti" women usually dress in the western Indian gathered skirt and short blouse, and carry their infants in a sling accross their breasts. Some also wear the more common Tamil sari. The skirt costume is attested for the 18th century in Tanjore paintings of "Kuṟavar" couples. In the 17th- and 18th-century temple sculptures and in the Kuṟavañci dramas the Kuṟatti wears a sari. The

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paintings and sculpture as well as descriptions such as the one in the *TVPK* portray the Kuṟatti carrying her infant in a sling.

[xxvi] The Banjara have traditionally been pack-bullock transporters of goods, and the Badhanyo or Dombari have always been acrobats.

[xxvii] For descriptions, sketches and photographs, see Jagor 1894, Hatch 1928, Malten 1989, and Werth 1996.

[xxviii] The identification of Kuṟavar groups as criminal tribes is the main thrust of the essays on these groups by Hatch (1928) and Williams (1912-13).

[xxix] We are also reminded of the famed hill-shrines of Murukaṉ.

[xxx] Theoretically, Kuṟavar are included among the lowest castes in the Left-Right division of caste-groups. In practice, however, the status of nomadic Kuṟavar is treated in widely differing ways. "Kuruvikkarans are peripheral to Endavur and to the local Untouchable castes in every way. Their relations with the other Untouchable castes are intermittent and of little importance to the other Untouchables." (Moffatt 1979, p.144). But also see Werth's comments on the caste status of the Vagri (Werth 1996, pp. 67 –75).

[xxxi] On the Kaikāḍīṇ fortune-teller in Marathi literature, and the connection between Kaikāḍīṇs and Kuṟattis, see Dhere and Bhavalkar1975. In Serfoji's Marathi Kuṟavañci *Devendra Korvanji (*see below) the Kuṟatti and Kuravaṉ are called Buruḍ and Burḍīṇ.

[xxxii] The Marathi Kuṟavañcis include: *Śrī Korvanjhi* and *Pratāpa Rāma Korvañji* *s*ponsored by Pratapasimha, and *Devendra Korvanji,* attributed to Serfoji II (1798 -1832) himself. King Shahji II (1698 -1715) patronized the multilingual *Mohini vilāsa Kuravañji.* Shahji and Serfoji were the patrons of two of the best known Tamil Kuṟavañci dramas, the *Tiyākēcar Kuṟavañci* and the *Carapēntira Pūpāla Kuṟavañci*.