

Folk Gods and Goddesses of the Piramalai-Kallar

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The Piramalai-Kallar (shortly kallar or kallan) are dominant group of people in the erstwhile Madurai and adjoining districts, Tiruccirappalli, Putukkottai and Ramanatapuram. Traditionally known as 'Mukulattor' (three-clans), they are an exogamous group; chivalrous in those times, robber gangs (e.g. the Gonds of the north or those of the Chambal valley) during some periods of history, treated a "Criminal Tribe" by the British Government and today play a vital role in the politics of contemporary times. They are bound by their intra-communal ethical precepts of their own creed; fearing to their tribal organization. The "trio" by tradition are known as kallar (robber), maravan (warrior) an akamutaiyan (serf or field labourer, perhaps treated lowest among the three), and take the common caste designation tevan (literally "god"). Maravans during the historic past were commanders and soldiers of the 18th century Telugu palaiyakkarars of the Tamil country (e.g. Virapadiya Kattabomman), and maintained their professional status. The famous Marutu Brothers of Sivaganga hailed lineage from the Setupatis of Ramanatapuram. The Nayakas of Maturai appointed the Setupatis to serve as guardians, kavalkaran of the way to the pan-Indian pilgrim center, Ramesvaram. Though the maravans and kallans are traceable since the Cankam Age (c.500 BCE to 200 CE), they were accorded status of royal dignity under the Vijayanagara-Nayakas.

The word, Piramalai stands for the core zone of their activity in the past. It is identified with Piranmalai where they seem to have originally settled after their migration in the remote past; maybe the Venkatam (Tirupati) region. Piramalai means "the other hill". Its folk usage is puramalai "exterior hill". Hills full of boulders, natural caverns for hiding, shrubs, bushes and rich flora were suitable for the robbers to inhabit, and carry out their traditional profession. In times of need they could also hunt four-legged animals for food, and were variously known as eyinar, maravan and so on (Cilappatikaram, 'Vettuvavari', 'Veru' 4-5). It is about the 16th century, they were settled as vellalar (simple meaning "serfs" and landlords in course of time) as the proverb is: kallar maravar mella mella vantuvellalar ayinar (kallas and maravas come and slow by slow became serfs). In fact it is the anti of what is told (cf. JQMS 2012, Vol. 103: 2, p. 109). These are the megalomaniac tendency of the Tamils who want to find everything simple in them as royally descendant (cf. [d] teva [r/n] with Rajaraja-deva ARE 1928-29, no. 314; 'Devanampiya' in Asoka's Brahmagiri Edict).

The hills were centers of worship for Murukan (e.g. Tirupparankunram), Jina (e.g. Nakamalai) and Tirumal/Visnu (e.g. Alakar hills) where pilgrims resorted and the kallans adopted these gods as their kuladevata to begin with. Fighting and co-living within their own reserved circles in the interior regions of the Madurai country, the kallans had an established pattern of religious organization. By and large, Hindus they seem to have succumbed to the religious practices of the Jains and Muslims through the ages. However, their gods and goddesses are basically Hindu with an overcoat of oral mythologies that are a blend of local traditions with a mix of Sanskrit mythologies. The domestic rituals and religious ceremonies, including the temple building tradition have undergone remifications changes in the recent past (say about 50 years) but the gods and goddesses retain their original

names that is an indelible hallmark of the kallas culture. This small article throws light on the names and myths of the gods and goddesses as may be found current in oral circulation.

In an overall estimation, the kallas cult social organization as it stands today do not to pre-date the Nayaka period. Among the several donors that are listed in the Tiruppanimalai (Madurai) and Koyiloluku (Srirangam) the majority (95%) are Nayaka kings, lords and chiefs. None from the kallas or maravan stock is listed. The outer mandapas in the Ramesvaram temple accommodates a long array of kallas chiefs that are considered donors to the temple. This is on the model of portrait sculptures of the Nayakas that appear in the Putumandapa of the Madurai temple; the royal dignitaries accommodated are from Nagama Nayaka to Tirumalai Nayaka (Rajarajan & Jeyapriya 2013: Annexure V). Tirumalai Nayaka (c. 1623-59) granted the fief holding of western Madurai to the kallas as several copper plates in possession of the land owners in the region would prove. Long before the British Raj, Tirumalai Nayaka undertook measures to reform the kallas. They have great respect for the Nayakas.

Names of the gods and goddesses

A variety of gods and goddesses that do not conform to the Sanskritic namavalis are current among the kallas folk. These names might suggest an indigenous origin for the names. Again, most of these divinities are feminine as pointed out by Henry Whitehead 1988 in his pioneering study (for a brief bibliography see Lositha 2012: 122-24). These names of the goddesses scattered all over the south, particularly in Andhradesa, Karnataka and Tamilnadu seem to have their common origin in the Dravidian matrilineal nom, Amma “Mother” that corrupts into Atta, Aya or Ayi. Those that are typical of the Piramalai-Kallas are listed hereunder. To begin with these divinities are brought under five heads:

1. ‘Kulateyvam’ (kulam-teyvam “clan deity”)
2. ‘Kavateyvam’ (kaval-teyvam “guardian deities”), guardians of villages and cities.
3. ‘Potuteyvam’ (potu-teyvam “common deities”), common to villages
4. ‘Natukalteyvam’ (natukal-teyvam “Hero-stone deities”)
5. Sastric corruptions (accommodating the “higher tradition”, e.g. Brahma within the “little tradition” is Viruman/Piraman or Virumanti)

Kulateyvams are worshipped by those belonging to a particular family group, who share the ancestral properties; called pankali (literally “one who shares rights or properties”). They may periodically or once in a year get together to offer common festivals to the God, Goddess or both God and Goddess. Dr Jeyapriya Rajarajan 2009 says the kuladevatas are called illuraiteyvam (deity living in the house) in the Cilappatikaram. Among the Nayakas/Naidus Virabhadra and Alamelu Mangamma are kuladevatas, and those they migrated from the Kannada-Telugu speaking zones. She also affirmed telling that her great grandmother, Ramakkara-avva Nayakamma used to deliver oracles in Kannada when possessed by the Goddess, which language she could not speak fluently.

The gods are usually brought under clusters of twenty-one or its double forty-two. The basis for all these divinities is the masculine. Ayyan (masculine equal of feminine Amma). It denotes a dignified person and seems to have been later equated with Ayyanar or Sasta, a popular divinity in Kerala-sabharimala. A list name of these gods and goddess may be listed in the following alphabetical order.

Gods

Ayyanar*of Punnur: Sasta

*God of the common genre , counted under separate heads: note prefixes such as punkoti(flower creeper)and Urkkalai(Village bull)

Kaluvanatan: heroes mounted on stakes (fig. 1)jain origin[14]

Katacarinalla-kurumpan: kurumpan belongs to the hunter caste
Pillayar Ganapati

Ponnankan: one with golden mien, siva[15]

Karumputinra-vanai Elephant that eat sugarcane

Karuppu:* The black [16]

*With several prefixes such as Kalyana (auspicious), tenkarai(south bank), conai(means “dark” or “moisture-laden” Tamil Lexicon, Vol. III, p.1680)[17], kottai(fort), Patinettampatti(of eighteen steps), pappara(brahmana)

Peddanacami: (Big God,p[b]edda is a pure Telugu word that means”elder”)

Peyakkaman	:	Kama, the ghost
Aticivan/Adisiva	:	Tamil Civan, Sanskrit Siva
Perumal	:	Tamil way of addressing Visnu
Malai-Raman	:	Rama of the hill
Mayan	:	Maya/Visnu
Mayanati	:	Maya, the mendican; anti “mendicant”
Nakar	:	Naga
Nantievaran	:	Nandisvara
Ulakanatan	:	Loka-nayaka
Vala-Kurunatan	:	Gurunatha, Daksinamuru?
Vayiravan	:	Bhairava
Virapattiran	:	Virabhadra (see Jeyapriya 2009)
Virumant	:	Viruman/Brahma, the mendicant

Goddesses

Angalamman/Angala-Isvari Likely to be a Telugu Goddess

- Cinnakka Amman : Elder sister, the second
- Cuntaravanniyamman : Goddess of the vanni tree that is
sundara (Beautiful) Elu-Kannimar Seven Virgins;
cf. Sapata Matrkas
- Kamatciyamman : Kamaksi
- Kannattal : kan-atta “Mother of the Eyes”; cf.
Minaksi and Kamaksi, aksa means
“eye” Kattantamman/Kattanta-Isvari
Devi that protects; kattal (sthiti), may
be a variation of Maha-Lakshmi
- Nallatankal : Good younger sister
- Occantamman : occam in folk usage is “one with
deformed features”; maybe lame (e.g.
Nontik-Karuppu “Lame Black”);
myths reveal she was discovered from
a bush of nocci (chaste tree, Vitex
negundo) and so called Noccayi
(Fig. 2)
- Oyyantal : maybe sustaining Mother
- Pecciyamman : corruption of Peycci “ogress” (Tamil
Lexicon, Vol.V,p. 2887), cf. Tiruppavai
v. 6: Peymulai nancuntu...

RakkammalIrakkini (queen) or irakkici (ogress), worship of the feminine power
(Peruncollakarati, Vol. II,p. 472)

Tankammal* cf. Nallatankal, means Golden Woman

*Cinna (little), Periya (elder) and Akkini /Agni(Satti?) are the variants

From the above list of names, it may be understood that the gods and goddesses
present a strange spectrum of amalgam from various sources such as folk, local
beliefs and pan-Indian mythologies: e.g.

Folk Katarinalla-Kurumpan, Ponnankan, Karuppu, Peykkaman,
Cinnakka-amman, Pecciyamman, occantamman, Rakkammal

Telungu-Kanada Peddanacami, Virabhandra, Angamma

Regional-tamil Kaluvanatan, Karumputinra-yanai, Perumal, Mayan,
Mayanti

Pan-Indian

Ayyanar/Sasta, Pillayar, Adisiva , Malai-Rama, Naga, Nandisvara, lokanayaka, Gurnatha, Bhaiava, Kamaksi, Minaksi

These gods and goddess seem to have had no form [rupa] in early times.

During the past century they are represented in sculptural forms that are stylistically Nayaka. The image of Occantamma (Fig.2) looks like Antal with the bun on headgear slanting to the left. Samapada-sthanaka , the image is divibhuja holding a gaddi-like (or flower band) object in the right hand. The left hand is dolahasta in sticimuddra (warning) expression.

Mythologies reveal the fact that the Kallar gods and goddess arrived from the north (see pulli in note 1), Palaru (Kancipuram region) and settled at Karumattur.

'Peykkaman' went to the Aralvay/Aramboly pass in the Nakarkoyil region, The gods in the west are said to have moved up to Doddappa-nayakanur, a settlement of the Nayakas of Vadakarai (cf. Parthiban 2014: see note 13), The entire landscape was occupied by the Nayakas during the 14th -16th century CE, Tirumalai Nayaka seems to have rehabilitated the Piramal-Kallans in these regions in order that they may be civilized by taking to agriculture (Vellalar) and give up their hereditary profession of mid-day robbery. Toward this end the Telugu and Kannada landholders were moved to safe regions at the foothills of the Western Ghats. A number of Nayaka zamindaris and Kannada – Speaking people are found in the valley of western ghats. It is visible subject for research as this region is totally neglected in recorded histories. The Nayakas are respected and treated higher to the Kallans in social status. The Nayakka zamindars were philanthropic in their serfs (16th -19th centuries). Muslims were pocketed in certain villages, called Tulukkapatti (Village of Turks) so that they could be busy with their mosques and dargahs. The history of the Piramal-Kallans is interwoven with the history of the Nayakas. It still remains hidden, and efforts to further unravel the scenes behind the curtain need to be undertaken.

Acknowledgement

I am obliged to Prof.R.K.K.Rajarajan (Gandhi gram Rural University) for having permitted me to consult his papers in press , and suggest steps to improve the first draft of the article .He wants to add conversion in the region is slowly going on under the “veil”. Dr.Jeyapriya is thanked for the interview.

Notes and References

1] Stealing (steyam) is not a crime according to them, which is one among the pancamahapatakas according to the Manusmṛti . Surapanam (spurious drinks) is quite common with the male and female, and the young and old. They do not employ brahmana priests but have a God called Pappara-karuppu (Black-brahmana) and are promiscuous in sexual behavior that involve the other two harvas. They do not eat beef, cow being their source of living, and celebrate ponkal with great enthusiasm and are famous for staging the heroic play, jallikkatta (But Play), celebrated in the ancient Tamil classics Kallittokai and Cilappatikaram. Vide, R.K.K.Rajarajan Tears of Kannaki: Annals and Iconology of Cilappatikaram , Annexure II, Part II (Delhi 2014 in press), The Tamil works find Kṛṣṇa and Balarama taming the virulent bulls to please Nappinnai, the proto-Radha. This is not himsa, cf. Dhenukasura-vadham in the Bhagavata Purana. In fact the bulls kill and mortally injure men.

2] Muttu-Kṛṣṇappa Nayaka (1601-1609 CE) appointed Cataiyakka Teven (1601-21 CE) the first setupati (Master of Setu). His Federal job was to collect taxes, send

an army in times of war, and see to it that pilgrims from the north get access to Ramesvaram without molestation from the Kallar bands occupying all the way from Srirangam to Ramesvaram via the dense forests that go via Tirumeyyam, Tiruppattur and kunnakkuti, the religious centers of those times, extolled in Tamil bhakti hymns. This zone is also noted for the presence of a number of rock-cut temples of the early medieval period. Vide, Raju Kalidos History and culture of the Tamils (Dindigul 1976), p. 265; also Encyclopaedia of Hindu Iconography: Early Medieval, Vol, I Visnu (Delhi 2006), chap II. For detailed accounts of their history and brave adventures see the works of Prof. K.Rajayyan (e.g. Administration and society in the Carnatic, Poligars of Tamilnadu. History of Madurai, South Indian Rebellion, History of British Diplomacy in Tajore, Tamilnadu A Real History – 2005 and so on). They are called “Rajputs of South India)

3) N.Subrahmanyam, Pre-Pallavan Tamil Index (Madras 1990), pp 243, 656-57; kallar “thieves” maravar “robbers”, a “community which supplied warriors to royal armies”, maravan “army chiefs”, marakkuti “marital tribe”. It seems there were several factions among the kallans and maravans that proliferated into several endogamous groups in course of time down to the 16th -17th century.

4) For Piranmalai during the Cankam Age see R.K.K.Rajaraman, “The Hoysala Mystery in Cankam Literature”. The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society, Volo.105:2(2014), pp.9-19. A chief of the Venkat, called Pulli is considered foreunner of the clan. He was chief of a robber gang, and hunter chief (vide, Akananuru 61, Purananuru 385). the Akananuru says Pulli took the title, Kalvarkoman (chief of robbers).

5) Certain living and dead cultural traits among the Piramalai-Kallans are pointers of their link with the Jains (pre-and early centuries CE) and Mussalmans (c.14th century CE). For example women used to have their ears lobed long to be fitted with special ornaments peculiar to them. The ear-lobe culture was peculiar to the Jain mendicants (cf.Rajaraman & Jeyapriya 2013: pl.124-d). Sculptures to this effect are found in the region around Madurai in rock-cut caves dated down to the 4th century CE. It might suggest the Kallans were adherents of Jainism at one point of time. Later when the Madurai country was occupied by the Muslim army sent from Delhi, they seem to have adopted rituals such as circumcision. Prof.S.Krishnaswami Aiyangar (South India and her Muhammadan Invaders 1921) has recorded the genocide in the Kallarnadu; merciless killing of desperate kallans in the Putukkottai-Tiruppattur region. Perhaps they followed circumcision due to necessity (or Compelled to do so, Movement in Nigeria”, Annali dell’ Istituto Universitario Orientale (Napoli 2009), Vol. 69, pp. 105-16.

M Lositha, “Folk Rituals in Harmony with Agamic Temple”, The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society, Vol. 103:4 (2012), pp.114-24.

For case studies of these works see R.K.K. Rajaraman, Art of the Vijayanagara-Nayakas: Architecture & Iconography (Delhi 2006), chap. II.

R. Sundaravadiyattevan, Piramalaik Kallar Valvurm Varalarum in Tamil (Chennai 2012), pp.678-82 (copies of plats).

Cf. ‘Ayi’ in Laitasahasranama 427 is the nominative address to the affectionate Mother: Vide, C. Suryanarayana Murthy, Sri Lalita sahasranama (Bombay 1975), p. 117.

Jeyapriya rajaraman, Terrific Manifestations of Siva: Virabhadra (Delhi 2009). This free Lance art historian has presented a graphic account of the Kannada-Telugu born Viruabhadra who came to the Tamil country along with the train of Vijayanagara saviours since the advent of Kumara Kampana (c. 1371 CE). More than

life-size images may be found in the Great Madurai temple (vide, R.K.K. Rajarajan & Jeyapriya rajarajan, *Minaksi-Sundaresvara: Tiruvilaiyatar Puranam* in *Letters, Design and Art*, Delhi 2013, pls. 116-116a). The author is Telugu-born and may have her own bias because Virabahdra is worshipped by the Piramalai-Kallar also. When the present author had an interview with Dr Jeyapriya she simply said “Vira is our gift to Tamil culture. He is the Lord of Heroism, anti-melccha and against brahmanical monopoly in religion”. Another Telugu-author, S. Ganeshram (S.R. Naidu College, Sattur) claims to have written about the “kuladevatas” in a major project of the ICHR (“Village Gods and Family Deities of Southern Tamilnadu” 2014) but is “semplice” and “riproduzione” in Italian methodological terms.

Cf. Maturapati or Campapati (Jambadevi, protectress of Jambudvipa) in Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai, the protectors of Madurai and Kaviriuppumpattinam.

Some absurd writers employ the name, “Birma” that is a linguistic fallacy.

Interview with Dr Jeyapriya (March 2014). It is part of oral history of the family, Vide, R.K. Parthiban, *The Spice Road Vadakarai Jamindari: Its Architectural Remains*. *Acta Orientalia* (Oslo 2014 in press). The Vadakarai zamindars live today in a palace in Periyakulam, and continue to maintain contact with the rajas of Anegondi. They are Telugu-speaking and related to Nagama Nayaka, father of Visvanatha Nayaka (c. 1529-64).

Cf. *Tiruvilaivatar Puranam*, Episode 63 (for summary see Rajarajan & Jeyapriya 2013:41). An American scholar claims to have translated this mega-purana in English, which is replete with technical inconsistencies. What the author has presented is neither Tamil nor English. Vide, Amy-Ruth Holt, *Shiva's Divine Play: Art and Literature at a South Indian Temple* (Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University, 2007). Iron or wooden stakes are common objects of worship in the region (Fig. 1). For more details see J. Soundararajan, *Glimpses of Nayaka Art* (Delhi 2014 forthcoming).

Stone-elephant eating sugarcane is part of the Tiruvilaiyatal myths, Episode 21 (cf. Rajarajan & Jeyapriya 2013:27).

Prof. Raju Kalidos finds the rudiments of Karuppu in Mal (Black) – Visnu of the early Tamils. Lord Saundararaja (known as Kallalakar “Lord Handsome Thief”) is kuladevata of the kallans in and around Alakarmalai, known as Maliruncolar in ancient and bhakti Tamil literature. Vide, the author's article presented in the 22nd International Conference of IAHA, Surakarta/Solo (Java) 2012. See Abstract of 22nd IAHA, Jeyapriya Rajarajan, “Pre-Medieval Phase of Visnuism in Tamilnadu”, p. 64.

That is to say doubly “black”; the native population is of this mien and seems related to the Nagrito ethno group. In the contemporary movie-land one may find several “white-kallas” that is due to racial mixture.

Tiruppavai of Antal, v. 5: ‘Mayanai mannu vatamaturai maintanai’. This is a very popular male-name among the Piramalai-kallar folk.

Figures

'Kalu' (stake), Object of Worship

Goddess Occantamman (the iconographic features betray Nayaka style)

