Internal Iconicity in Paraiyar “Crying Songs”

MARGARET T. EGNOR

Looking at the natural world with its wholeness and seeming unity of purpose, many people come to believe that this world must have a determinable source, a single fundamental law from which all springs and to which all tend. Looking at the cultural world with its peculiar unity, some observers have been moved by a similar belief—that there is some source for the perceived unity, and that to gain an understanding of the source is to gain an understanding of the essence of culture itself. Hence there has always been in anthropology, and there remains, a preoccupation with origins—both with the origins of culture as a unified entity, and with the origins of particular aspects of culture, such as war, sexual inequality, civilization, caste.

We have learned, however, that culture, like the world, was not created once and for all time, but that it is continually being created, and that the sources of cultural organization are found not only in the past but in the present as well. Therefore, just as the study of the origin of species is now largely a study of evolution, the study of cultural origins is as much concerned with ongoing processes of origination as with the particular origins of specific institutions (for example, Boas 1917; Levi-Strauss 1963; Leach 1965; Bateson 1968; Wennerstrom, Labov, and Herzog 1968; Worsley 1968; Hymes 1971; Louné 1963; Fried- rich 1979).

This newer emphasis in the search for origins is of great importance to South Asian studies, since scholars in this field are especially prone to having origins on their minds. They are so prone for a number of reasons: first, there does appear to be a pattern or a set of related patterns uniting the vast civilization of South Asia, patterns so fundamentally consistent beneath their variations as to suggest that they have a single cause or source. These overall patterns themselves have become the objects of study of leading South Asian scholars (Redfield and Singer 1954; Dumont 1970; Marriott and Inden 1974), though such scholars differ as to the patterns’ essential properties. Second, South Asian civilization is very ancient, and many of the institutions fundamental to it today were fundamental also (albeit in different forms) in the past, a past accessible principally through native written texts (Mauss and Hubert 1898; Hocart 1927; Stein 1960; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Appadoorai 1971; Hanchett 1975; Inden 1978). Third, many native informants and texts themselves express a strong interest in the idea of origins (see, for example, Davis 1976; Daniel 1979; O’Flaherty 1976, 1980a).

All of this leads to a concern among South Asian scholars to understand the origins of sources of basic cultural patterns. However, it also sometimes leads to the supposition that, to the extent that there is an overall pattern to South Asian civilization, its sources are to be found in the past, through literature, or in present-day representatives of the literary past, especially Brahmins and brahmanical texts.

Indeed, South Asian cultural organization itself does seem to support such a supposition. Brahmanical culture, strongly identified by its proponents with the ancient lingua franca Sanskrit, represents a set of pan-Indian traditions not confined to a particular locality; hence brahmanical culture lends order to the civilization by creating some cultural cohesion over a wide geographical range. Brahmins regard themselves and are regarded by other Indians as the “head” of created mankind, and their culture is widely imitated. That imitations of brahmanical culture by lower castes often appear to be less developed, less organized, or attenuated versions of the Brahmin model (Colin 1954; Sinukas 1966; Bertram 1971; Khare 1976) only lends further credence to the image of Brahmins as source. Where lower-caste cultural organization departs from the high
caste model, it is often still seen to be determined by this model in some way. Sometimes, for instance, lower castes are described as possessing anti-authoritarian values (Gough 1973), a culture of poverty (Freeman 1979), a religion of catharsis in possession rather than one of ritual and control (Cohn 1954; Kolenda 1968; Egnor 1978), yet all of these are types of subculture whose existence presupposes, and is a reflex of, a dominant other.

It is my intention in this essay not to deny the importance of such observations, but rather to provide an alternative approach to the question of the sources of cultural pattern. Here, rather than looking at a completed pattern, its locus, its implementation, or its spread, I will be looking at the process of pattern-formation, at a stage in which the pattern is still not complete. By “pattern” I mean a conventional, repeatedly manifested mode of organizing or making sense of the world, or some aspect of it, including the social. Caste hierarchy, as seen by those who participate in it, is a pattern in this sense, as are kinship organization, political organization, and economic organization, as understood by those who create and continually recreate such organizations. What I call a pattern, since it is a way of making sense or meaning of things, may also be called a symbolic (or more precisely, semiotic) order.

Closely examined, of course, any cultural pattern or symbolic order is still incomplete, still in the process of creation, for all patterns change. Alongside processes which maintain, duplicate, deny, or reverse existing patterns are other processes which gradually transform them, expanding the range of possible meanings and leading in some cases to wholly new formations.

The particular pattern-making or meaning-making process that I will describe in this essay is a type of song sung by members of the Untouchable Paraiyar caste in Tamil Nadu. Songs of this type are called by the singers “crying songs” (aiyira pāṭṭu). The singers are females of any age, sometimes includ-

1. The songs presented in this essay were collected from June to November 1980, in the village of Pukkattur, Chingleput district, Tamil Nadu. The project of which the collection of these songs was a part was made possible by a Senior Research Fellowship granted by the American Institute of Indian Studies.

2. In the dialect of the region where these songs were recorded, the term pāṭṭu is pronounced as Pāṭṭu. The term pāṭṭu is thus equivalent to abāṭṭu or abāṭṭu. Tamil
bol, the most developed kind of sign, unlike other kinds of signs (icons and indices), not only functions but has real or potential significance entirely by virtue of its creation of another sign or signs (p. 104). Through this creation of sign by sign, "symbols grow," says Peirce. They grow out of other signs, especially icons, or mixed icons and symbols (p. 115). "A symbol, once in being, spreads among the people. In use and in experience, its meaning grows" (p. 115).

Peirce divides all signs into three main types. An "icon," for him, is a quality (such as redness in an apple) which denotes the same quality (such as redness in a child's cheeks) elsewhere. An "index" is an object (such as smoke) which denotes another object (such as fire) through spatial relation to it. A "symbol" is a law or regularity which denotes a law or regularity (p. 112). The recurring sound-pattern "dog" is a symbol for the recurring object-type, dogs themselves. What I have called patterns are symbols in this sense.

In the Peircean system, icons, indices, and symbols also have subtypes, or mixed forms. One important subtype—having properties of both icon and symbol—is a metaphor. In Peirce's words, a metaphor "represents the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else" (p. 105). To paraphrase, a metaphor is a sign within a sign. It contains, or is, a sign of the same kind as the sign it stands for, and it represents, in its own object, characteristics parallel to those represented by the signified sign in the latter's object. A metaphor may be diagrammed as in figure 9.1.3

Since a metaphor represents its object in the same way that another sign represents its object, the metaphor represents (makes the addressee aware of) the fact that the other sign is a sign. In short, through parallelism, a metaphor creates or uncovers a new sign. An example of Peircean metaphor might be found in a phrase like this: "The fog comes on cat's paws," where "cat's paws" signify stealth. The sign, "paws," with its meaning, stealth, is a metaphor for fog, and imparts the meaning of stealth to it also, so that fog now becomes a sign for stealth, whereas previously it merely possessed that quality.

The sign created or uncovered through metaphor will be

![Figure 9.1: Peircean Metaphor](image_url)

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3. I owe the inspiration for this diagram to a simpler and better one presented by Bruce Mannheim at an informal workshop on semiotics held at Cornell University in 1981.
grammatical class; often they are synonyms or antonyms. Each line (a line being all that is uttered in one breath, between sobs) will contain a word beginning with the prescribed syllable. The position of these rhyme-words, their number, and the total number of syllables in a line is not fixed.

Each of the halves of each stanza in a song is in turn divided into two (occasionally more) pairs of lines. A single melody, which differentiates the first from the second line, is repeated for each pair. The first line of each pair often begins with *injkki* ("today") or the nearly homonymous *yajkku* ("for me"). The second line often begins with an apostrophe, such as "O mother who bore me," or an epithet for the singer, such as "wasted little sister." The first pair of lines in a half-stanza describes an image, usually positive, and the second pair of lines describes a contrast or outcome, usually negative. Figure 9.2 schematizes the formal characteristics of a crying song stanza.

Semantically, each stanza of a song is an internally coherent unit—describing an image and its contrast, then repeating that same image and contrast with variations. The semantic relationship between the stanzas is more problematic and more interesting. On the surface, there seems to be little semantic connection between the different stanzas of a given song. The images described from stanza to stanza present no temporal sequence of events, nor are they necessarily all drawn from the same domain, such as household, forest, or garden.

What does unite all the stanzas in a song, besides a parallelism of form, is a parallelism of concept. For any particular song, there is some abstract quality, a complex but cognitively unitary property, shared by all of the image-clusters created by different stanzas. This property is the topic of the song. Hearing any one image-cluster or stanza of a song, one is often unable to tell what is the salient property of that image-cluster, the property which is the song's unifying concept. The same image may have a different significance, a different salient property, in different songs. However, when all the stanzas or image-clusters in a single song are considered together, their semantic parallelism becomes apparent, and the topic of the song, the significance of each image-cluster within the context of that song, emerges. That a particular image-cluster designates a particular concept (or in other words, the fact that the image-cluster is a sign of a particular type) is brought to the
herself. The first-person pronoun is repeated again and again. She calls herself a lily, a lotus, gold, paddy, gram, fresh green herbs; she is perfect; she is deserving of protection. The kinship term she uses for herself is "younger sister." But her perfection has brought her harm, through no fault of her own—she is gold that has been crushed, a lily that has been injured, paddy that has been sold for the price of chaff, "the wasted younger sister."

The songs that I collected were recorded out of their usual context; I would not have been able to collect them under the ordinary circumstances of their singing, as they are sung spontaneously, in solitary places, and not for the purpose of entertainment. In order for me to hear and record their songs, the singers came to my house in a field near the village. At the singers' request, nobody was allowed to be present except the singer herself, one or two of her female friends, and me. All males, including husband and kin, were driven away. The singers knew, however, that the tape recordings of the songs would be heard by others, including members of the landowning caste in the village, who were my official hosts. This knowledge did not prevent obscenity, sarcasm, or scathing curses being directed against upper castes (or for that matter, "white people") in other songs that I collected from the same singers under similar circumstances. The present set of songs, likewise, is not conciliatory, and their privacy, like all village privacy, is only partial. Both their content and their mode of singing confirm that crying songs are not meant to be hidden, at least not completely, from those against whom they are sung. Only the semiprivate quality, both of context and of code, protects the singer from the consequences of overboldness.

The songs included here have been arranged in a more or less random order. Any of them could serve as a starting point from which to reach all the others, for the lines connecting them are many. My commentary to these songs has a loosely sequential organization, but the songs themselves do not.

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4. Other cultures exhibit related modes of song-construction. For instance, the Xhosa ntshoni (Schuh 1977) is a narrative composed of stock images or "core images," represented verbally as "core clichés," repeated, expanded, and joined in a sequence to form stories. The artists of both Tamil and African cultures are thus "basileus" of a sort. However, the coherence among images in ntshoni is a sequential coherence; they tell a story, and common to all ntshoni is a continuous action and movement. The coherence among images in a crying song is entirely metaphorical; there is no story or sequence, attribution, and no action, develops the theme, and common to all crying songs is not movement, but a kind of dream-like turbulence.

5. In his study of Ful folk-heroes, Peter Clas finds that undeserved suffering, or righteous suffering in the midst of unrighteously inflicted suffering, is an important component in the mythological creation of heroes, and goddesses (personal communication, see also Ein 1974).
The first song in this collection will be used to help readers get their bearings; hence this song may seem to set the tone for the rest. Themes that it establishes clearly will be heard to reverberate through the other songs. But the other songs have their own clear themes, which will be found in softer form in this song. Only several readings of all the songs together can reveal the way they speak to each other.

First Song

I. A. 1. For you, a young girl’s garment of makanan flowers,
2. O mother who bore me, a folded skirt for you.
3. The fold has not parted for me,
4. O mother who bore me, and I do not know the hidden place to which you have gone.

B. 1. For me, a young girl’s garment of tålan flowers,
2. O mother who bore me, a skirt stitched for me.
3. The stitching has not yet parted for me,
4. O mother who bore me, since the day you parted, since our searching.

II. A. 1. For you, a plantain tree grew in the river,
2. O mother who bore me. With a thread from the base of that tree,
3. A garland was made and placed round me at five,
4. O mother who bore me, a garland without love.

B. 1. For me, a plantain tree grew in the pond;
2. O mother who bore me, vine-jasmine blossomed for me.
3. But the garlands placed round me in childhood.
4. When I was a lotus, still so young, were not good garlands, mother.

III. A. 1. Knowing the sun would burn me,
2. O mother who bore me, in your fingers you held an umbrella.
3. But now you have parted your fingers;
4. On the day you left, you threw us into the sun.

B. 1. Knowing the heat would burn me,
2. O mother who bore me, father, you held an umbrella in your hand.
3. Now, the umbrella has parted from your hand
4. On the day you left, you threw us into the waste land

IV. A. 1. For me, every month, an axe.
2. O mother who bore me, splits my heart, for me.
3. For me, don’t think there is medicine.
4. Since the day you left, for me, the unfortunate girl, the hurt has remained.

B. 1. For me, every day, an axe,
2. O mother who bore me, splits my heart, for me.
3. For me, don’t think that there is any moon.
4. Since the day you left, for the girl you bore, in her heart the hurt has been there.

V. A. 1. I had a white goat on the doorstep,
2. O mother who bore me, and a colored parrot who would watch for me.
3. To come and listen to my troubles,
4. And to see me on my way, now there is no one.

VI. A. 1. In the south, mother, the rain would fall for me;
2. O mother who bore me, father, on the south wall the clouds would come.
3. Today, to search for things to tie in the fold of my sari,
4. O mother who bore me, and to see me down the road, I have no mother.

B. 1. In the north, the rain would fall for me,
2. O mother who bore me, on the north wall the clouds would come.
3. There, curved bangles were sold.
4. O mother who bore me, for me different good things were sold.
5. To buy them and tie them in the fold of my sari, for me.
6. O mother who bore me, father, and to send me on my way, there is no mother.

VII. A. 1. I had an unfading lamp,
2. O mother who bore me, father; if dust fell upon it you wept.
3. Now I am a poor wasted sinner.
4. Now, when I suffer here, mother, why don’t you see?

B. 1. I had metal from ten miles away;
2. O mother who bore me, if our shaded lamp
3. Was blown by the wind, you would weep.
4. Now, when I am a wasted girl, and am troubled, mother, why don’t you see?
This song was sung by Pushpam, a woman in her mid-twenties, with three young children. Both of her parents are dead. Pushpam, like all the singers whose songs are discussed here, is an agricultural laborer belonging to the Paraiyar caste, which comprises nearly 40 percent of the population of the village in which these songs were collected.

The central topic of Pushpam’s song is separation, and interwoven with this major theme is a subtheme—the oneness of mother and daughter. The mother is the source and spirit of the daughter, and cut off from her, the daughter senses her own death. Each stanza of the song is in metaphorical relation to all the others, because each stanza contains one or more images embodying the central themes. In stanza I the unparted cloth, still folded and sewn, contrasts with the parted mother and daughter—the mother in a “hidden place,” the daughter searching for her. In stanza II the wedding garland, a conventional image of the bond of love, becomes an image of love’s severance. The heat of the sun and the wasteland, sung of in stanza III, are conventional images of separation, hatred, and death, contrasting with water, which is a symbol in Tamil thought for love, unity, and flourishing life. Where water appears in this song, it is seen as a thing of the past. In stanza IV, the protecting hand is parted into useless fingers; in stanza V, the month into painful days. The singer feels that her heart itself has split. In stanza VI, she has no companions, and no one to send gifts of love with her when she departs from home. In the final stanza, the darkness of death hides mother and daughter from each other’s sight.

By itself, a particular stanza may point to a dozen themes; many stanzas have no clear focus. But when they are in juxtaposition, whatever meaning or meanings the different stanzas share come to the forefront. In some cases, a meaning may be imparted to an image, or extracted from it, by neighboring images. Thus the images which more obviously or conventionally denote the central theme act as metaphors for those which less obviously denote it. In this way the signhood of each stanza, the fact that this particular image or cluster of images has this particular meaning, is brought to light through the internal parallelism of the song.

Much of the significance of a crying song lies, not in its open declarations, but in its allusions. A single word opens, for those who share the singer’s world, onto complex realities with multiform meanings; but for those who do not share the singer’s world, her words are closed and opaque. This density of word-pictures greatly deepens the song—deepens it, first, because much of the song’s meaning is not immediately accessible, but takes intimacy with the singer’s subculture, and time, to “sink in.” To the extent that the meanings expressed by the song are encoded in the culture, they may be unconscious or only partly conscious, perhaps even for the singer herself. The song is deepened, secondly, because this dense imagery touches upon dimensions of human relations that no words express directly. The more profound the relationship itself, the more is this true.

Most profound, perhaps, of all for South Indians is the bond between mother and daughter—a bond which is felt to be part of all growth, of all continuance and creation. The bringing to birth of one like oneself, who in turn will bear another, is an image engraven everywhere in Tamil culture. Hence a song need not seek far to find metaphors for mother-daughter continuity, and often a single word will go a long way in this regard.

As an illustration of how much meaning is contained in a few words, consider two lines in this song, A.I., and its echo, B.I., in the first stanza:

For you, a young girl’s garment of mukuṭam flowers . . .

For me, a young girl’s garment of tālam flowers . . .

“A young girl’s garment” (cittātai) is the top piece draped over the shoulder, worn by girls come of age but not married. The same garment is tied on statues of female deities, because a deity is always young and always a virgin. The cittātai is also offered to certain women on their death anniversaries, because after their death they are deities. In many households in the village, a deity named pūvottakkāri (“she with flowers”) is worshiped in this way, as the principal household deity. Pūvottakkāri represents all the women of that household who died still unwedded or still unmarried—still wearing flowers—for flowers are forbidden to widows. Thus the mother who died in her youth, and the young daughter she left behind, have in common the garment and flowers and the unorn perfection they represent.

But the particular flowers allotted to mother and daughter
are different. The makuṭam (makilam) flower is a small, very fragrant flower growing in clusters on a large tree. The tālām flower is a large, strongly scented single flower growing by the sea on a spiky bush frequented by snakes. The tālām is never permitted at weddings and is rarely used in worship, an exception being the Varalakṣmī ceremony, a household ceremony performed by women honoring the goddess Lākṣmī.

On the contrast between these two flowers, a high-caste male informant hearing the song recited to me a poem which he attributed to the poetess Auvaiyār:

matāl periti tālām, makil intu kantam
katal periti manārum akatānṛku
citturum umirum ākivitum

The tālām has great breadth,
the makilam has sweet scent;
The sea is great, its water muddy;
Is water to drink.

In other words, what is small and fine is more powerful in certain ways than what is great.

Though Pushpam, who cannot read, would not know the poem by Auvaiyār, she shares with the ancient poetess a knowledge of the two flowers, their properties and their uses, and the sentiments associated with each. In her song, the contrast between the small and desirable makilam flower and the large and aggressive tālām flower parallels the contrast between “you” (the spirit of the mother, the small subtle body with great power of the dead) and “me” (the lonely and tangible living singer).

In the second stanza, the plantain tree becomes the basis of comparison, and the symbol of the bond between mother and daughter. The plantain tree is of utmost importance in Tamil ritual and poetry, and to understand its meaning there and in this song we must know some of its characteristics: (1) An immature plantain tree is called a valai kaṇṇu, “plantain calf,” because the plantain tree is like a cow—no part is useless; it gives many things to eat and to use for other purposes. (2) The plantain tree grows from the base, not from the tip like most green plants. (3) When the tree dies, new trees are started from the roots. (4) Until the tree fruits, new trees are not allowed to grow from its base, as they will divert nourishment from the fruit. (5) The fruit, because of its shape, has a male/phallic significance. (6) After one fructifying, the tree dies. (7) After the tree fruits, new trees are allowed to grow. (8) They must be transplanted to grow well and bear fruit of their own. All of these characteristics of the plantain tree’s growth contribute to its metaphoric nature, especially as a metaphor of mother-daughter separation through death and marriage.

Single words in these songs, then, can harbor great allusive significance. It is not only the presence of such key words, however, but their place in the sound-structure of the song, that gives them impact. Earlier in this essay, it was noted that the two halves of a stanza usually duplicate each other except for a few variant words, which form contrasting pairs, both semantically and phonologically. In the first stanza of the present song, these words are: “for you” (mukku)/“for me” (makku); “makuṭam flower”/“tālām flower”; “folded” (mati)/“sewn” (taci); “hidden place” (mavam)/“searching” (iti).

The two members of each of these pairs of contrasting words occupy parallel contexts in the song. In sound and in meaning, they share many or even most of their features. Their differences, therefore, become all the more significant. Here, they encapsulate in formal symmetry the dominant feeling of the song; the daughter (represented by the second member of each pair) is an image of the mother (represented by the first member), but a changed and lesser one; the daughter is one with the mother, but at a crucial point departs from her. In other songs (for instance, the third), such contrasting word-pairs serve to highlight other messages.

The themes and characteristics of this first song are not unique to it, but flow into other songs, where, however, other themes become central. The cry engē petta tāyē, “mother who bore me,” is repeated throughout almost all of the songs, and the bond between mother and daughter is a vital point of reference for all of them. So also is the idea of separation, of division, of cutting off. But the themes of the bond and the severance of the bond have many aspects and lead on to other themes which join them. The following song is one step away from the preceding one, and develops in a slightly different direction the vegetal imagery of the mother-daughter bond.
Second Song

I. A. 1. Today above the edge of the tank,
   2. O mother who bore me, you sat like a cuckoo.
   3. Today, not knowing you were a cuckoo,
   4. That god of borders and edges took you and burned you, mother.

   B. 1. Today on the edge of the pond shore,
   2. O mother who bore me, you sat like a peacock.
   3. Not knowing you were a peacock,
   4. That god of borders and edges poisoned and burned you, mother.

II. A. 1. We took root in your belly,
   2. O mother who bore me; if we had taken root in a forest.
   3. We would be colorful trees,
   4. O mother who bore me, we would be flowers for the doorstep.

   B. 1. We fruited on a vine,
   2. O mother who bore me; if we had fruited in a tank
   3. We would be koovai trees.
   4. O mother who bore me, after you left, we would be flowers for the temple.

III. A. 1. You tied a small reed,
   2. O mother who bore me, you made us a small reed basket.
   3. On the day that you blessed us with gifts,
   4. O mother who bore me, you went to stay in a strange land.

   B. 1. You cut a large reed for us,
   2. O mother who bore me, you made us a large basket.
   3. On the day that you named us,
   4. O mother who bore me, you parted from us and left.

IV. A. 1. I had a plantain tree on the doorstep,
   2. O mother who bore me; what you grew us was a full body, a beautiful crop.
   3. Now, having grown, we blacken,
   4. In this distant land of Pukkatturai, and we have no mother to send us on our way.

   B. 1. [Inaudible] you are the greatest of sinners.

V. A. 1. We are a measure of grain, mother,
   2. O mother who bore me; though we consulted the almanac,
   3. Today, mother, our measure has become chaff.
   4. The almanac we consulted, mother, was a lie.

   B. 1. I am a measure of grain.
   2. Though I, poor woman, observed the signs and astrology.
   3. Today my measure, mother, has become chaff.
   4. The signs and astrology we observed, mother, were a lie.

VI. A. 1. We took a leather bag,
   2. O mother who bore me, my husband and I left all and came home.
   3. If the mother who bore me was alive,
   4. Today she would take the child of her breast.
   5. As soon as she saw my husband,
   6. She would take a folded mat and lay it out for him.

   B. 1. If she saw us in the distance, if she saw us in the distance,
   2. She would put on warm water for us to wash our feet.
   3. O mother, she would take the child of her arms.

VII. A. 1. For me, by the river,
   2. O mother who bore me, for us, long ago, came slavery.
   3. The garland put on us when we were five, the garland put on us when we were five.
   4. For us, poor sinners, was a garland without love, mother.

VIII. A. 1. Today on top of a ten-story house, on top of a ten-story house,
   2. We poor sinners are the kinds of paddy drying in the sun.
   3. Today without declaring the price of paddy, without declaring the price of paddy.
   4. Those sinners, for this sin, to that treacherous sinner, declare the price of chaff.
hatred of boundaries is conveyed, a hatred that appears often in these songs.

As in the first song, the early loss of the mother is linked to the early marriage of the daughter, and the daughter's marriage is seen as a kind of death, a sudden sharp end to her thriving. But if the daughter's marriage is like the mother's death, a further parallel between their two fates is drawn: the husband who seizes the daughter is the same as death himself, who seized the mother. One is reminded of the Greek Demeter-Persephone myth. The singer calls the village into which she has married “this distant land” (cimai), a euphemism for the place of the dead, and she sings, the god of death has become our shelter and guru (ideally, for a Tamil woman, the husband should fill these roles).

The singer also links marriage and death with birth, for childbirth is closely associated with death in South Asia, and often leads to it. Childbirth, too, is a fate shared by mother and daughter, simultaneously drawing them closer together, for it makes them more similar, and pulling them further apart, for once the young daughter has borne a child, her own childhood is gone forever.

Thus the singer cries to her mother, you made a reed basket to carry us in, you gave us gifts and named us, and on that day you left us. The reed basket is a crib. “On the day you gave us gifts” (cimai nālaiyilē) refers to the custom of gifts given by parents and others at the time of birth, first menstruation, marriage, first pregnancy, and other auspicious ceremonies, ceremonies of beginning. On the sixteenth day after a child is born is the naming ceremony. They give the child bangles, ankle bracelets, a necklace, and a name, sing to it and bless it. The import of Kamala's lament, therefore, is that the daughters were cut off from their mother at the very beginning of their lives, and all the possibilities, all their “gifts,” were lost.

But the dominant imagery of this song is of plants and foodstuffs that are wasted. The singer and her sisters are these plants and foodstuffs. They are, first, seeds that have fallen on the wrong soil, the soil of this mother's belly, and fruit that has grown on the wrong vine, the vine of this mother’s family. Next, the singer complains to her mother, you gave us a full crop, but now that we are grown, we die. "Full crop" (man) also means, "beautiful or perfect body." Evidently both mean
ings are intended in this song. The mother gave her daughter the gift of a body, but now this body, the daughter herself, like a field of grain parched by the sun or stricken with disease before it is harvested, withers, blackens, and dies. Not only, therefore, was she wasted in the planting (seed fallen "on the wrong soil"), but she is wasted in the growing.

At the next stage, she is wasted in the harvesting. She sings, I was worth, and I myself was, a full measure of grain. But though I followed all the lawbooks in the husbandry of my grain, my measure has become chaff. The grain of the singer is wasted because she has harvested it according to the rules: she has spent herself in a fruitless marriage. Following upon the harvest, she sings, we are like the many kinds of paddy and sesame drying in the sun on top of a great house—our value is high. But we poor sinners have been sold by sinners to a treacherous sinner for the price of chaff. Our value has gone unrecognized and we have been sold for the price of chaff.

The word that is glossed as "sinner" (pāvi) refers in these songs both to someone who does wrong and to someone who is wronged. However, it does not necessarily always carry both meanings. The singer regards herself as guiltless, innocent as grain. When she calls her husband and parents pāvi, it means that they do wrong to her. The person named here as "that treacherous sinner, the prattling boy Subramani" is Kamala's husband, with whom she has recently quarreled. This line is significant because, according to the "rules" of village society (which, however, Kamala has already questioned), a woman is never supposed to utter her husband's name.

The singer has sprouted on bad soil, grown and withered, been harvested and turned to chaff, been dried in the sun and sold for a low price. Finally, she must be cooked and eaten, but at this stage, too, she is wrongly used. She sings, if I cook food and offer it to the temple, because I am without children and my husband is not home, not even a crow will touch it. (There is a tradition of not accepting alms from a household without children or from one in which the husband is dead or absent.) The food she cooks (the terms used are ákkut and patai, general terms for "create," with no specification in the song as to what is being created or how) represents the singer's own substance. The food will be wasted, rather than being eaten and so undergoing its proper transformation.

Several stanzas depart from this relentless food sequence that the singer feels herself going through, but these only express in different ways the sense of waste and loss and longing pervading the entire song. For instance, Kamala sings in stanza VI that she goes with her husband to see her mother, but when she reaches her old home, there is no mother there. The mother's absence means a fruitless end to the daughter's own married journey.

The next song concentrates upon a theme that was only an undercurrent, briefly surfacing, in the previous song—the theme of the lonely married journey, coming to an empty end. It is sung, not from the perspective of what might have been, but from the perspective of what once was. To a certain extent, then, it reflects the singer's own state, for she is an old woman, just as faint references to childlessness mirror some aspects of Kamala, the previous singer. The sense of relentlessness is present in this third song also, as it was in the previous one, but here it is even stronger.

Third Song

I. A. 1. I was born in a conch shell,
   2. O mother who bore me, and I ruled the ocean.
   3. He took my conch shell, mother, that merciless criminal,
   4. And made me a beggar.

   B. 1. Today I was born in milk,
   2. O God, and in this place I ruled the city.
   3. He took my milk, mother, that scheming sinner,
   4. And made me a beggar.

II. A. 1. For me, four hundred cars would come,
   2. O mother who raised me; in the middle of them all would come our car.
   3. For me, they would set out a four-legged chair,
   4. O mother who bore me; for me, the troubled younger sister, four tassels would be tied.
   5. For me, settled in the chair,
   6. O mother who bore me, for me, the younger sister, did you bother to oil me for my wedding?

   B. 1. Three hundred cars would come for me,
   2. O mother who bore me; for me, the troubled younger sister, ahead of them all would come our car.
3. For me, they would set out a three-legged stool,
4. For this wasted mother, O God, but today only
three tassels, poor sinner, would be tied.
5. As I sat on our three-legged stool, O mother,
6. O wasted younger sister, O mother that I raised, for
me, did you not find an auspicious wedding day?

III. A. 1. For us, five o'clock strikes,
2. O mother who raised me; the five o'clock bus
comes and stands by me.
3. If I, who am a lily, told my troubles,
4. For me, the five o'clock bus would have to wait five
days before going.

B. 1. For me, ten o'clock strikes,
2. O mother who raised me; the ten o'clock bus comes
and stands by me.
3. If I, who am a poor sinner, told my troubles,
4. My lord, in the distant land that you have gone to,
for me, the ten o'clock bus would have to wait ten
days before going.

IV. A. 1. I am red gram, mother, O mother that I bore;
2. I am the troubled younger sister; I am unbending,
mother, I am gold.
3. He bent me and took me away;
4. That cruel man, O younger sister, took the flesh of
my shoulders.

B. 1. I am white gram, mother,
2. The prey born in your belly, I am unmelting gold.
3. He crushed me and took me away,
4. In this town of cruel people, he took the flesh of my
legs.

V. A. 1. I took a banyan leaf bud,
2. O foolish mother who bore me as a girl. At this age I
will fetch water from a new well.
3. I am a ruined widow who gave a golden coconut,
4. For me, to the Pillaiyar temple.
5. At this age, I am a widow. If I boil food and go,
6. If I boil food and come outside,
7. They will call me a sinner without a daughter, a
sinner without a son;
8. In this town without justice, even a female crow
will not touch what I cook.

B. 1. For me, I took a banyan leaf bud,
2. At this age, I am a widow who has seen evil magic,
and I will take water from the well-depths.
3. I am a widow whose vagina is ruined;
4. If I cook for the Hanuman temple,
5. If I cook and come outside,
6. I am a widow with no one, and even a male crow
will not touch what I cook.

VI. A. 1. For me, I made feed for the elephant,
2. O sinners who raised me, and the elephant-keeper
struck me with a stone.
3. Mine is the sorrow of the elephant.
4. My husband, since the day you went, I, who am a
lily, have been hurt.

B. 1. For me, I made feed for the horse,
2. O mother who raised me, and the horseman threw
stones.
3. Mine is the sorrow of the horse.
4. O mother who raised me, since the day you went, I,
who am a child, have been hurt.

VII. A. 1. For me, cattle grazed, climbing the hills;
2. O mother who raised me, in this town I was Gopal’s
younger sister.
3. Not knowing the place to which he gave me, this
cruel older brother,
4. In this place where justice is lost, has pushed me into
a tank.
5. For me to swim out of the tank,
6. For me, a sinner whose husband is gone, for me, the
day will reach noon.

B. 1. For me, cattle grazed, climbing the hills;
2. O sinners who raised me, I was Gopal’s younger
sister.
3. Not knowing the place to which he gave me,
4. This cruel older brother pushed me into a tank.
5. For me to swim out of the tank.
6. In this town of cruel people, for me there is only a
little day left.

VIII. A. 1. For me, golden millet,
2. O sinners who raised me, for me, a tamarind flower
took.
3. For me, for this woman, send a person.
4. For me, at this age, older brother, for me, someone
to hold, older brother, is scarce.

B. 1. For me, golden millet,
2. Older brother; for me, a tamarind-flower road.
3. For me, for this younger sister, send a person,
4. In this little remaining day. Older brother, for me,
the day grows short.

This song was sung to me by Nilamma, who is about sixty-
five years old. Her husband is alive, they are both healthy and
continue to labor in the fields, but they have no living children.
Nilamma said that this song would be sung by a daughter
when she goes to her mother’s house, lamenting that her
marriage is no good (valkkai cariyillai).

The uniting theme of this song, the basis for semantic parallelism among the stanzas, is the property of waning, of there
once having been much and now being very little. The singer
laments her loss of wealth, of bodily substance, of time, and of
relations. Her wealth was her city and ocean, the riches of her
wedding, the cattle of her brother. Her substance is the flesh of
her body and the food she cooks, which is now not even good
enough for a crow, and which is kept from the horse and
elephant. She shares the sorrow of the horse and the elephant,
for their deprivation is similar to hers.

She has lost time and relations, for she perceives herself as
aged, rejected, and alone. In the end, she sings of things that
fall to her—golden millet (ready for harvest?), a tamarind-
flower road (the entire tamarind tree is sour; people believe that
even to sit under its shade will cause one to lose both weight
and intelligence). Finally, even a person to hold (pitiyal, avail-
able person, person grabbed off the street) is hard to find (pan-
cam, “famine, scarcity”).

Frequently in this song, the idea of decline is signaled not
only by individual images but by sequences of contrasting im-
ages. In stanza I, “ruled the city in this place” describes a power
not quite as expansive as “ruled the ocean.” In stanza II, the
image of “four hundred cars” and “four tassels,” diminishes to
“three hundred cars” and “only three tassels.” In stanza III, the
movement from five o’clock to ten o’clock, and in stanza VII,
the contrast between “noon” and “only a little time left,” ren-
force the sense of time loss. Similarly, the contrasts between
“shoulder flesh” and “leg flesh,” between “new well” and
“well-depths,” between “elephant” and “horse,” suggest a
transition from higher to lower, greater to lesser.

The singer calls herself a widow repeatedly: “a ruined
widow,” “a widow who has seen evil magic,” “a widow
whose vagina is ruined,” “a widow without children,” “a
widow with no one.” The state of widowhood is of course its-
self a state of decline. It should also be remembered, however,
that the singer is in fact not a widow, nor does she say that this
is a song a widow would sing. She is saying that she is like a
widow, thus indirectly cursing her husband.

Often in these songs, the singer refers to herself as a water
lily (allil). The term is used among lower castes to refer to a
clever woman. In a local version of the Mahabharata, according
to villagers, Alli was the name of a queen of Andhra who would
not be conquered by any man. With Kripa’s help, Ar-
juna drugged her and, while she slept, tied a tahli around her
neck, thus marrying her. When she awoke, she was angry, but
she accepted the marriage as valid because the tahli had been tied.

At one point, the singer calls herself “wasted mother” and
her mother “wasted younger sister.” This is not a slip, since
Nilamma informs me that in certain circumstances one’s
mother can be called younger sister—the term signifies more
than a particular genealogical relationship.

The specification of case, like the specification of tense, in
these songs is often vague. For instance, the nominative case
sometimes appears where literary Tamil would dictate the
accusative or dative. The apparent switches which arise as a re-
result of this usage, however, are not random. In this song, they
demonstrate an identity, or even role-reversal, of mother and
dughter, as do the reversed epithets for self and mother used
in the first stanza of the song. In stanza II, the mother is ad-
dressed “O mother that I raised” (nay valatta tayi), rather than
“O mother who raised me” (enme valatta tayi), as is usual. In
stanza IV, she is called “O mother-girl that I bore” (nay petta
anumatai), rather than “O mother who bore me” (enme petta
hayi), which has the epithet the other singer uses. This conceptual merger
of mother and daughter is expressed in various ways in different
songs, (e.g., Fourth Song, stanza V, First Song, stanzas I and II).
Perhaps, the merger becomes a reversal here because Nilamma,
who is much older than the other singers, thinks of herself
more as mother and protector than as daughter and pro-
tected.

The fourth song, sung by Pushpan, differs from the first
three in that the mother is not the person addressed, though the
themes of mother-daughter continuity, and of severance, are
still present. Instead of mother, another failed protector is
addressed, the older brother, and in him are merged the aban-
doning mother and the cruel husband of previous songs.

Fourth Song

I.  A. 1. I wore a silk sari,
2. O mother who bore me, O father, and I went to see
the town where I was born.
3. Today the wife of my first older brother, thinking
that I come for my share,
4. Has set a screen in my way, and has put out two
Pariah dogs for protection.
5. I didn't come for my share, mother;
6. I, poor sinner, came to see the town where I was
born, and cry.

B. 1. I wore a printed sari,
2. And I, the younger sister, came to see the foreign
land where I was born.
3. Today the wife of my second older brother
4. Has set a wall in my way and has put out two red
dogs for protection.
5. I didn't come for riches, mother.
6. I, poor sinner, came to see the foreign land where I
was born, and cry.

II.  A. 1. A letter has not come for me, older brother;
2. A letter, a letter has not come for me.
3. I bought (paper) and wrote lines to my older
brother, to the forest.
4. A letter, brother, did not come for me.

B. 1. I bought (paper) and wrote lines to the forest where
my brother is.
2. If I, the younger sister, send it,
3. Will you take it, older brother, and read it?
4. Brother, will you heal my sorrow?
5. For me, older brother, a letter is a hood.

2. If I, the younger sister born with you, if I write to
the fort where you are, older brother,
3. Will you put it together and read it?
4. Will you listen to the pains that I, your younger
sister, suffer?

III.  A. 1. I have a golden nosepin, older brother.
2. I, the wasted younger sister, have half a bag of
beans.
3. Today she says that the water vessel is not hers,
older brother.
4. If we two hies come there, she says the river water
is far away.

B. 1. I have a nosepin of straw, older brother;
2. I have a partial bag of beans.
3. If we are seated, older brother, and ask for water,
4. That cruel sister-in-law will say the pot is not hers.
5. She will say the tank water, mother, is far away.

IV.  A. 1. In the south, older brother, rain would fall for me.
2. O shameful older brother, shameful older brother
on the south wall rain clouds would come for me,
for your younger sister.
3. A fruit is sold that is made there.
4. You didn't seek it for your younger sister, or tie it in
the fold of her sari.

B. 1. In the north, older brother, rain would fall for me.
2. Your wife says that I, the cruel younger sister, am
coming.
3. Were you not born to stand in the doorway for us,
4. And to send us on our way?

V.  A. 1. Do not forget, older brother, my birth.
2. In my pomegranate garden.
3. You have listened, older brother, to the speech of
Matavi.
4. And have you forgotten, older brother, my birth?

B. 1. Today have you listened to a whore's talk,
2. O older brother who was born with us, and have
you forgotten us, your mother and younger sisters?

VI.  A. 1. If I watched, older brother, a bicycle would come
for me.
1. O brother, brother, for my sister and me a nice car
would come with a matter.
3. Since the day you left, since the day you left,
4. When we look, older brother, no bicycle comes, no
our comes, older brother with a matter.
B. 1. If we waited, older brother, a bicycle would come for us;
   2. For us two younger sisters, a car would come for sleep.
   3. Since the day you left, for me, the younger sister,
   4. If I stand there, a bicycle does not come.

VII. A. 1. We are bush-jasmine, mother, we are vine-jasmine.
   2. Mother, we are jasmine that has fruited on your vine.
   3. We are only two younger sisters, only two younger sisters.
   4. What wrong have we poor sinners done?
   5. Has it surrounded us poor sinners?

VIII. A. 1. Sinner father, did you beat a Brahmin?
   2. O father who got me, did you kill a milk cow?
   3. Today, father, does the sin of a milk cow
   4. Surround us children, us two Sitas?
   B. 1. Did you kill, father, did you beat,
   2. O father who got us, did you kill a pregnant cow?
   3. Today does the sin of a pregnant cow
   4. Meet us two younger sisters and surround us?

The first six stanzas of this song are about the relation between a man’s wife and his sister, as seen from the sister’s point of view. More generally, they are about being locked out of a place once was in, about the severance of a primordial tie.

The wife and the sister are not mutually complementary with respect to the man between them; they are rivals. The sister sees the wife as a usurper and a thief of her mother’s and brother’s home because she, the sister, was there first. In stanza V, “my pomegranate garden” is the birthplace of both sister and brother, the vagina of the mother, which the sister sees as hers. The brother has forgotten the pomegranate garden, has forgotten both mother and sister. The wife of the brother is called “a whore” and “Mātavi,” the name of an epic concubine (see the Cilappatikāram, or Kōvalan Katai in folk variants) who temporarily enticed a husband away from his virtuous and suffering wife, and took also the husband and wife’s wealth. The implication then is that a man’s wife is to his sister as a whore is to a wife.

Stanzas I through IV all contain images of the singer’s being locked out of her own place, or treated as a stranger in it. That place, the place where brother and wife now are, is called a fortress, a foreign land. Walls and dogs are set in the singer’s way. The only link she has with her home (“hook” to pull her brother to her) is a letter, and the brother will not read hers or write an answer. When she goes there, “water is far away”—nothing is given her to incorporate her into the household again. And when she leaves, the brother does not place in the fold of her sari “a fruit that is made there” to keep a part of her home with her and within her when she is gone.

The last two stanzas of this song are only loosely connected with the first six, asking what sin was committed in the past that the singer should suffer now. As in the earlier part of the song, the singer identifies with her mother and her sisters (“mother, we are jasmine that has fruited on your vine”), and she does not blame herself for her suffering, but blames the prior sins of her father. She feels herself surrounded and trapped by the sins of her father, as she feels herself locked out by the sins of her brother. The next song, also sung by Pushpam, links up with the previous one.

Fifth Song

I. A. 1. For me clumps and clumps of eggplants, clumps and clumps of eggplant.
   2. O older sister born to me, though they fruit for me on the plant,
   3. With no one to join and embrace us, no one to join and embrace us,
   4. We sinners rot with the plant.

B. 1. Today clumps and clumps of eggplants, clumps and clumps of eggplants,
   2. O sinners, though they fruit on the vine,
   3. With no one to hold and embrace us, no one to hold and embrace us,
   4. We rot with the vine, O mother.

II. A. 1. For me water comes into the tank, water comes into the tank.
   2. O cruel sister, older brother, it circles for us round our pot
   3. Turn your wife’s younger sister’s water, it says, wife’s younger sister’s water, it says.
III. A. 1. For us, if a heron took form, if a heron took form,
2. For us, if a heron took form, and it fruit in the forest—
3. Today, would the heron pluck, would the heron pluck?
4. O mother who bore me, for us, would the heron's hunger end?
B. 1. For you, if a crane took form, if a crane took form.
2. O older brother born with me, and it fruit for us in the tank—
3. Today, would the stork pluck, would the stork pluck?
4. O brother born with me, would the stork's hunger end?

IV. A. 1. For me, combing the golden threshing ground, combing the golden threshing ground,
2. O mother who bore me, for us, beating and stacking the stalks,
3. For us, beating and stacking the stalks, beating and stacking the stalks—
4. O sinners who bore me, sinners who bore me,
5. For us, if the tax collector comes and asks, if the tax collector comes and asks,
6. O mother who bore me, to answer him humbly. O sinners who have you kept?
B. 1. For me, combing the golden threshing ground, combing the golden threshing ground,
2. O sinners who bore me, beating and stacking the stalks,
3. Today, if a policeman comes and asks, if a policeman comes and asks,
4. In this foreign land of Pukakattum, to be responsible, who have you kept?

V. A. 1. For me a burnt neem tree, a burnt neem tree,
2. Before I, who am poor, told all my troubles, who am poor, told all my troubles,
3. Today the burnt neem tree would send out shoots in front.
B. 1. Today an injured neem tree, an injured neem tree.
2. O mother who bore me, mother who bore me.
3. Today before I told all my troubles,
4. The injured neem tree would send out shoots on the side.

VI. A. 1. For me, a well with golden steps, a well with golden steps,
2. O mother who bore me, a room to hold the rope.
3. Today if I see curd I feel no thirst, if I see curd I feel no thirst.
4. Today if I see my mother's face, for us sinners thirst will end.
B. 1. Today a well with golden steps, a well with golden steps,
2. O mother who bore me, a new well, a tank with a float.
3. If I, a girl, go and sink there, girl, go and sink there.
4. In this town without balls, to be responsible for us, who have you kept?

The property shared by all the image-clusters of this song is metaphorical containment, containment that offers no fulfillment, completion, or protection. The plant holding the eggplant that rots, the water circling but not entering the pot that is supposed to collect it, the forest and tank holding the hungry birds and unguarded fruit, the threshing ground holding the hay unsafe from the tax collector, the burnt neem tree parenting green shoots, the well that the singer feels she will drown in—all are images of wrong containment.

The sixth song, like the previous one, is addressed to the singer's brother, to tell him that he is not caring well enough for her.

Sixth Song:

I. A. 1. Today lightning in the south.
2. O father who bore me, for me a window on the south side.
3. Today on the south side street.
4. O father who bore me, for me, honey is sold.
5. If my father were here, today he would weigh the price of honey.
6. He would extend his southern hand.

B. 1. Today lightning in the north,
2. O father who bore me, for me a northern window.
3. If my mother were here, today she would weigh the price of armrings.
4. She would extend her northern hand.

II. A. 1. Today a rice scoop and serving plate,
2. O father who bore me, for me a hall without rice.
3. Today in the hall without rice.
4. O father who bore me, I, the lily, sob, father.

B. 1. Today a rice bowl and serving plate,
2. O mother who bore me, for me, a hall without beans.
3. Today in the hall without beans.
4. O mother who bore me, I, the girl, sob, mother.

III. A. 1. Today lime pounded to ash,
2. O mother who bore me, for me, a built and erected hall.
3. Today in the built and erected hall.
4. After you, for me to stand and cry there are no kin.

B. 1. Today lime pounded by stone,
2. O father who bore me, for me, a mixed and built hall.
3. Today in the mixed and built hall.
4. O mother who bore me, for me to bellow and weep there is no justice.

IV. A. 1. Today green asafoetida,
2. O mother who bore me, for me, if you stood a weight.
3. Today I am deficient of weight, mother.
4. I, the wasted younger sister, am made low by my husband's brothers.

B. 1. Today fresh asafoetida,
2. O mother who bore me, for me, if you stood a weight.
3. Today I am deficient of weight, mother.
4. I, the wasted younger sister, am made low by enemies.

V. A. 1. Today a stone fort encircled eight times.

2. O father who bore me, for me, a lodge that an ant will not enter.
3. Today if I rise, it obstructs.
4. For me, the wasted younger sister, when an eight-headed snake rises up there is fear.

B. 1. Today a stone fort encircled ten times,
2. O sinners who bore me, for me, a lodge that a snake will not enter.
3. Today if I look it obstructs, father.
4. For me, the wasted younger sister, a ten-headed snake hisses with its hood.

VI. A. 1. Today lightning in the north,
2. O father who bore me, for me, a plantain-flower window.
3. Today on the north side street.
4. O father who bore me, for me armrings are sold.
5. If my father were here.
6. He would weigh the price of armrings; he would extend his right hand.

B. 1. Today lightning in the south,
2. O sinners who bore me, for me, a palm-flower window.
3. Today on the south side street.
4. For me honey is sold.
5. If my father were here.
6. He would weigh the price of honey; he would extend his clear hand.

VII. A. 1. Today ten lakhs of green parrots.
2. O mother who bore me, for me, they will fly to the sea to the Paramasivam temple.
3. If this sinner told my troubles.
4. Today without taking food, they would fly away.

This was sung by Mutthamman, a young woman in her twenties, with one daughter. Mutthamman is the wife of Pushpam's older brother, Antony. Both of Mutthamman's parents are dead. She is said to have been very close to her father.

Two related types of image dominate Mutthamman's song: one of editudes and vessels holding hunger and loneliness, danger and entrapment, the other of light and windows bringing riches and the loving care of parents. This song shares with Pushpam's songs, then, a discontent with containment, but it has a different "message," for it seems to suggest, through the
associations it creates, that perfect containment is itself undesir- 
able, that the best thing is to let in a little light, friendship, and food.

Seventh Song

I.  A.  1. Today maṅkam campa paddy will grow, maṅkam campa paddy will grow.
2. O father who bore me, O mother, on the side of the mountain the tied bundles fall.
3. Today in this town without justice,
4. To glean rotten paddy is it my, this woman’s fate?

B.  1. Today cinya campa paddy will grow,
2. O father who bore me, O mother, for me by the side of the hedge the tied bundles fall.
3. Today to glean spilled paddy,
4. Is it my, Sītā’s fate?

II. A.  1. Today a crow calls,
2. O lord who bore me, O mother, like a black voice upon a stone mountain.
3. If I take a stone and toss it,
4. I at this age, O mother who bore me, I suffer this sight.

B.  1. Today a crow hisses,
2. O mother who bore me, O father, like a rich voice upon Gingee mountain.
3. If I drive it off hissing, drive it off hissing,
4. I, the wasted younger sister, O mother who bore me, why do I suffer this smallness?

III. A.  1. If I make a golden hook
2. And I, the wasted younger sister, go to break off flowers.
3. Today it is no crime to break off flowers,
4. In this town without justice, to enter and beat me, is it right?

B.  1. If I make a golden hook,
2. O father who bore me, O mother, and I go to break off the leaves,
3. Today it is no crime to break off leaves.
4. In this town, to rush upon me and beat me, is it right?

IV. A.  1. Today making a road of the sky,
2. O mother who bore me, and leaving the mango garden behind,

3. In this town without justice,
4. To throw a stone in the mango garden, and trap and beat, is it right?

B.  1. For me making a road of the earth,
2. O mother who bore me, and leaving the flower garden behind,
3. In this town without justice, to throw a stone in the flower garden,
4. And enter and beat, is it right?

This song was sung by Kamala. Its topic is obstruction, the exclusion of the singer by others from actions and states which she feels are good and right. Rather than contrasting a present with a past state, as all the previous songs have done, this song, which in other respects follows the design of the others, contrasts the singer’s present undesirable condition with a more desirable possibility she sees before her. She sees bundles of good paddy fall on the mountainside, but she must glean rotten paddy; she must suffer the taunts and anger of the crow without expressing her anger to it—she feels smaller than the crow; she sees leaves and flowers, but if she plucks them, even with a golden hook, she is beaten.

The final stanza is ambiguous. She may be saying that she must leave the mango garden and the flower garden behind, respect them (“throw a stone” in them), and take a different road or others will “trap and beat” her. Or she may be saying that she is the garden, into which stones have been thrown, where others “enter and beat” her, and then rejecting her, take a different road. Perhaps both meanings are intended.

Eighth Song

I. A.  1. Today the green parrots of ten towns,
2. O mother who bore me, will fly to the sea by the Paramasivam temple.
3. If I, a sinner, told my troubles,
4. There they would not even feel hungry, mother; they would fly away without eating.

B.  1. For me the green parrots of eight towns,
2. O mother who bore me, O father, will descend to the sea by the temple of Yama the punisher
3. If I, who am poor, told my troubles.
4. There they would not even take food.
5. O mother who bore me; they would rise away without eating.

II. A. 1. Today in a hut on top of a mountain,
2. O father who bore me, O mother, they are selling jasmine flowers.
3. If I, a woman, ask for a flower,
4. In this town without justice, brother, today the tree has a guard.

B. 1. Today in a hut with plants at the edges,
2. O father who bore me, O mother, there they are selling red flowers.
3. If I, a lady, ask for a flower,
4. In this town without you, brother, today the bush has a guard.

III. A. 1. Today white gram, mother;
2. O mother who bore me, O father, I am an uncrushed body, mother.
3. They crush me and take me away.
4. In this town without you, they make me suffer harm.

B. 1. I am red gram, mother;
2. O father who bore me, O mother, I am gold with an unbending body, mother.
3. They bend me and take me away.
4. In this town without you, they make me suffer pain.

This was sung by Muttammāl, the singer of the sixth song. In stanza I, the temple of Paramasivam that the parrots fly from is called the temple of Yama (the god of death), the punisher and separator. Muttammāl might for good reason make this equation, since Paraiyars have traditionally been excluded from large Śiva temples. In stanza II, instead of being locked into buildings devoid of food and company, she is locked out of buildings where good things are sold. Like some previous songs, this song says that enclosures punish, fail to provide, and are to be rejected.

In stanza III, Muttammāl uses an image that Nilamba used—that of the singer’s being gram and gold that are crushed and bent and carried away. But instead of blaming her husband for the crushing, Muttammāl blames an unspecified “they.” If the third stanza is connected with the first two at all, it is likely that this “they” is the same “they” who own the Paramasivam temple by the sea, and who would exclude her from their huts and from the purchase of their flowers. For Muttammāl perhaps there is a similarity between crushing and bending and exclusion, or perhaps she has simply departed from the strict semantic parallelism that most of the songs follow.

I have tried to show that the stanzas in a Paraiyar crying song constitute, with some variations, a network of Peircian metaphors. The metaphorical relations among the stanzas alone give each song its internal coherence and its overall significance. Furthermore, a particular image within the context of a particular song may acquire a significance that previously was only a possibility for that image. Through parallelism with other images in the song, this significance is brought to consciousness and thus a new sign is created.

To take one important example, the image of enclosure as a sign of deprivation—a meaning-association established in several of these songs—is unusual and perhaps new in the context of conventional Tamil symbolism, where unbroken enclosures (such as bangles, pots, wedding halls, the tali or wedding pendant, the kōlam or doorstep design) are preeminent signs of auspiciousness, health, and plenty.

The reader may have observed that there is a metaphorical relation not only within songs but between songs. This tie between songs serves at least two communicative purposes. First, when the same message is repeated from song to song, the intensity of that message, and the likelihood that it will get through to others, is increased. All crying songs share the message that the singer has been hurt by someone in authority over her, correlative they say that to be junior, “younger sister,” is to be innocent, not morally inferior, and to have primordial rights which should not be alienated. The message that the singer has been alienated from others and from what is hers, other locked in or locked out, is present in many songs. Though more specific and individual grievances may be missed,

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6. The hierarchy within the family is not defined in terms of a single parameter, or a single place, which is said to be the place of the woman. 

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a hearer of even fragments of crying songs could hardly fail to catch these basic ideas.

The second communicative purpose is that when an image is repeated from song to song, but some detail is changed, one knows that the details which substitute for one another belong to the same semantic class—that is, that they also have some property in common. Since the contexts of substitution are so specific, the number of features shared by the variant details is likely to be much higher than the number of unshared features. We have seen that within a single segment of a song, the terms which substituted for one another are related in sometimes trivial, sometimes interesting ways. In the First Song, stanza III, kān̄al substitutes for veyyil. Both terms gloss as “heat of the sun”; this could be considered a trivial substitution. More interesting (from our point of view) are substitutions like kātu (“wasteland”) for veyyil (“heat of the sun”) in the same stanza; nilā (“moon”) for manūnta (“medicine”) in the First Song, stanza IV; and etirāli (“enemies”) for pāṅkāli (“husband’s brothers,” literally “sharers”) in the Sixth Song, stanza IV.

Similar substitutions take place among images that are shared from song to song. When Muttammlāng sings in one song about ten lakhs of parrots flying to the sea, and in another song about ten towns’ worth of parrots flying to the sea, we know that for her the two quantities are comparable. This is for us a less interesting substitution. More interesting is the fact that lamentations of alienation, isolation, and separation are directed both against kinsmen—mother, husband, and brothers—and against upper castemen, for this suggests that the singers perceive a similarity between kinship and caste relations, and between violations in both spheres.7

Also interesting are the contrasts between desirable and undesirable states that are expressed in the song. In some songs

the contrast is between a past desirable state and a present undesirable one. In others the contrast is between two present states physically juxtaposed, one desirable and the other undesirable. Since the expression of tense is nonobligatory, the difference between a contrast of past and present and a contrast of contemporaneous states is usually subtle.

Compare, for instance, stanza I of the Fifth Song,

For me, clumps and clumps of eggplant . . .
With no one to hold and embrace us, we rot with the vine . . .
expressing a fall from fruitful past to rotten present, with stanza I of the Seventh Song,

Today, manikam campa paddy will grow . . .
On the side of the mountain the tied bundles fall . . .
Today . . . to glean rotten paddy . . . is it my fate?

expressing exclusion from a fruitful state and confinement to a rotten one. The parallelism between a fall from a higher to a lower state and exclusion from a higher or confinement to a lower state approaches identity in these songs.8

I have stated that those who are meant to hear a crying song include those against whom the grievances in the song are directed, but that the route by which a song reaches its target is not always direct. So the intended addressee, the real addressee, is not always the person apostrophized in the song. In the First Song, for instance, Pusham calls out to her mother, long dead, and vents her anger and pain that this mother died and abandoned her so young. But the song also makes the point that early marriage of the daughter entails a separation akin to that of the mother’s death—perhaps a warning to other parents not to marry their children so young—and is a general appeal to the world for sympathy and protection. Similarly, the second and third songs are addressed directly to the mother, but indirectly to husband and in-laws, and still more indirectly
to the real hearers of these songs, those surrounding the singer, the "society" responsible for maintaining the tradition which has caused her harm.

Crying songs are protest songs in a general sense—they protest not only the personal sufferings of the singer, but the rules of hierarchy themselves. Some of the challenges presented in those songs are gentle and subtle, as for instance the implicit analogy drawn between the neglectfulness of older brothers, who do not allow their sister to come back home, and the exclusivism of higher castes, who deny the singer entrance to their gardens. Other challenges are stronger and more clear.

One of the latter is the challenge to the concept of auspiciousness (mańkalam) held by members of higher castes in the village. This concept involves the idea that for the sake of the whole—family, village, or society—individual members should give up their personal interests. Even words of disunity should not be uttered, and an evil thing should be given a good name, as though if its evil is not socially recognized, it will not be. Auspiciousness dwells in the realm of appearances—a powerful realm. It is expressed most often on doorsteps and before others' eyes. Protection of auspiciousness is above all the duty of the women of the family. To sing a sad song dwelling upon an evil fate and an unhappy ending is not an auspicious act, though there are some appropriate contexts for it. For a married woman to call her husband a criminal and herself a widow, for her to give open expression to her sense of her own value independent of and in opposition to the acts and opinions of others is to deny or neglect her duty as guardian of auspiciousness.

High-caste women, as far as I could ascertain, never sang such songs about themselves; their sense of self-esteem often involved struggle and independent action, but it was based ultimately on their fulfillment of the role of nurturer and supporter. Their main aim in life was, ostensibly, to protect their husband's and their family's well-being. They believed that they should never wish their husband dead, and they did all they could to avoid the appearance of such a wish.

For the singers of crying songs, auspiciousness was clearly not so sacred. Their reasons we can only guess at. They may have felt, in the first place, that it was not to their advantage to maintain a hierarchical "whole" of which they were nowhere near the head. In the second place, they may have seen no purpose in making things appear fine when they were not in fact fine, and when they themselves had to suffer the evils that others felt it desirable to hide.

Shortly after Nilamma sang the Third Song to me, a woman of the landowning caste who had not been present at the singing or heard the recording came to the place where I was staying. She severely chastised, not Nilamma herself, but Kamala and Pushpam, for singing a song about the suffering of widowhood when in reality their husbands were still alive, though Kamala and Pushpam were at that point innocent of this offense.

The incident taught me a number of things about communication within the village: (1) that such songs, or reports of such songs, do reach the ears of high-caste people who are not present at the singing; (2) that the high-caste woman (who was about forty years of age) did not feel free to chastise Nilamma (who was about sixty) and therefore vented her anger on the younger women instead; (3) that the songs are taken seriously; and (4) that the particular message in this song was unfamiliar enough to the high-caste women, or opposed enough to what she accepted as true, for her to respond strongly to it.

A second challenge to high-caste values contained in these songs is the redefinition of karma (virāja) and wrong (pāvan) that they advance. I have pointed out that the term pāvan ("one associated with wrong [pāvan]") has two meanings in these songs, as in colloquial Tamil generally: (1) someone who suffers, who is in a pitiable condition; (2) a wrongdoer. Each of the two meanings implies the other to those who believe that all suffering is the result of the sufferer's own past evil actions.¹⁰

However, in crying songs the two meanings of pāvan are dissociated. The singer refers to herself as pāvan and to her torment-

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¹⁰ The belief is frequently expounded in the literature and in the lore of higher castes, and is certainly not absent from the thought of middle caste people. A mother angry with her child, for instance, will be overcome with the epithet mamman or paramai (he, and did not imply the child had or punishment for past wrongs. The same phrase occurs as a general explanation for present suffering.
tors as pāvi, but there is little indication that she feels she has done wrong in the past for which she is now being punished; on the contrary, she continually declares her innocence. The concept of vināi remains, but in a significantly modified form—it is not the sufferer, but the sufferer's senior kin whose evil actions now come back to haunt her. Nilamma asks her mother (Third Song), "Did you not find an auspicious day for my wedding?" and more pointedly Pushpar asks her father, "Did you kill a pregnant cow?" in search of an explanation for her sorrows.11

Inasmuch as the doctrine of karma is used to justify a system of rank by birth, the Pāññayar redefinition of karma attacks the underpinnings of that system itself. If, in this redefinition, grievances against senior kin become grievances against senior castes, as we have seen happen in crying songs, the consequences will be powerful.12

The last song I wish to consider here is a lullaby that was sung to me by Nilamma. It is difficult to decide whether it should be classified as a crying song or not, since it differs rather sharply from the others, none of which, for one thing, are lullabies. It is similar to crying songs, however, in that the singer weeps as she sings; therefore I include it here.

\[\text{ānārō ānārēō ānārēō.}\]

You little eye, sleep, boy.
My eye, O jewel of my eye,
Go to sleep.
Who was it here that hit you, my eye?
That did you wrong?

11. Michael Moffitt (personal communication), in interviews with Harjans living in the city of Madras, has found the same interpretation of karma expressed there: it is not one’s own past sin, but the sin of one's ancestors, that causes one’s present suffering. Kolenda (1964) also finds that Harjans reject the conventional definition of karma, the better to preserve their self-esteem. O’Flaherty (1986) points out that the association between personal karma and the deeds of one’s ancestors has ancient literary precedent. See also Keyes and Daniel 1983.

12. Powerful because close to the truth.

13. A refrain of euphonious sounds, especially used in lullabies.

Won’t you tell me who hit you as you weep?
My eye, Nākijinām, I’ll go away and come again.
For you, ānārō ānārēō.
My eye, whose baby could you be?
Did grandmother beat you,
My darling, with her ringed hand?
Did your father beat you, my little brother?
Red-footed cow-grazer,
For you, ānārō ānārēō.
Little eye, ānārō ānārēō.
When you go out to the forest,
My eye, bears and tigers will catch you.
For you, ānārō ānārēō.
My eye, whose baby could you be?
Once you said you were going far away.
My little brother, cheetahs and tigers will surround you.
For you, ānārō ānārēō.
My little brother, ānārō ānārēō.
If you buy a thread for Kāci,
Little brother, and you travel to Kāci and Ramēsvaram,
For you, ānārō ānārēō.
For you swans and parrots will fly,
My eye, for you they will bring fruit to eat.
On you the merchant’s son will bestow pearls;
My eye, on you the smith will place a crown.
For you, in the doorway of the smith,
My eye, O you son of a king,
If you stand there,
They will beat you; they will kill you,
My little brother; they will send a servant to watch you.
On you the merchant’s son will bestow money;
My eye, for you the smith will open his store.
For you, in the doorway of the smith,
My eye, O you son of a king, if you go stand there,
He will beat you; he will kill you,
My eye, he will send a servant to watch you.
For you, ānārō ānārēō.
You go worship the crescent moon of Maci,
My eye, for you to raise up your mother’s brother’s family.
For you, āanō ānārēō.
My eye, āanō ānārēō.
On you the son of the merchant will bestow pearls,
My little brother, on you the smith will place a crown.
For you, in the doorway of the smith;
My little brother, you son of a king, if you go stand there,
They will beat you; they will kill you,
My little brother; they will place a servant to watch you.
For you, arārō aārārō.
My darling, arārō aārārō.
Your conch shell sounds, boy,
My eye, in your temple of the lord.
Your drum sounds, boy,
My little brother, in your temple of the supreme.
For you, arārō aārārō.
My eye, arārō aārārō.
For you, lullabying and caressing,
My eye, (I) have laid you in your cradle.
For you the conch shell sounds, boy,
My little brother, in your temple of the lord.
Your drum sounds, boy,
My darling, in your temple of the supreme.
Arārō aārārō.
My little brother, precious parrot, arārō.

This song is similar to the other songs considered here, in many ways—weeping is only one of the properties they share. It is a song of injustice done to an innocent, and it is a song of contrasts. However, it rings some major changes on the basic pattern established by the other songs as a group, and for that reason it may be considered to belong to a different song type. These are some of the changes: (1) the stanzas have a very different formal design; (2) the actions described are attributed to the future rather than to the present or the past; (3) the person apostrophized is not a senior protector of the singer, but a junior protege.

However, the most important change is that in this song unakkku (“for you”) and ni (“you”) take the place occupied by enakkku (“for me”) and nān (“I”) in the other songs. The singer communicates to the baby an image of himself identical to that of the singer conveyed in other songs. “You are,” she sings to the baby (as “I am” in other songs), perfect and innocent through all changes, but the world is an ambiguous and shifting place. This world is comprised not only of tigers and parrots, but of smiths and merchants, who are equally treacherous and benevolent.

Why is this message that higher castes are the wrongdoers so much more powerfully stated in this song than in others? Here only, higher castes are mentioned by name, and here only, actual and serious wrongs of caste against caste are described: the Paraiyar boy may not stand in the doorway of the goldsmith, or he will be killed; the conch shell and the drums sounding in the temple are brought by the Paraiyar, thus they belong to him, and Nilamma sings to the baby, the temple is “yours.” But of course he may not enter.

To answer the question posed above, it may help again to consider the actual addressee of the song. It is only in part the baby, for a baby could only partly understand what is being sung here. Ultimately the smith and the merchant may also hear this song. If they do, they will recognize that the singer is weeping not for her own past but for the baby’s future. They may also recognize that the innocence of the baby, unlike the innocence of adults, is indisputable and that to treat him as guilty from birth is not right.¹⁴ The clarity of the accusation is in proportion to the clarity of the victim’s innocence. The song may be read as a strong appeal to the listeners not to treat the child in the future as the singer was treated in the past. The parallelism between baby and singer, future and past, that arises from a comparison of this song with the set of crying songs amounts to such a plea.

As its parallelism with other songs affects the meaning and impact of this one, so this song in turn affects them. The protection that the singer of the lullaby offers the baby substitutes for and contrasts with the lack of protection that the singers of other songs experience from parents, older brothers, husband, and the unspecified “they.” The substitution of baby, “younger brother,” for self, “younger sister,” strengthens the asso-

¹⁴ South Indian culture abounds with expressions of esteem for children. The much quoted Tirukkural contains adages such as “He who has never heard the voices of his children thinks the lute sounds sweet,” and “There is no greater joy than to have a child more learned than oneself.” Small children are exempt from many rules of pollution, and, more to the point, children are said to be like gods because both are innocent. They do or should not suffer the consequences of their actions. Many of the most beloved heroes of South Indian mythology are child heroes; the world is suited for them, and they do not suffer the consequences of their actions. The reason for this is, of course, that they are the children of gods. The Paraiyars, who are considered to be of lower castes, do not have the same status as these household gods. In many contexts the distinction between lower caste household gods and a pose or popular hero is a vital one, and in the household, none exist.
cation of innocence with self. Thus, through their parallelism, the songs build upon each other.

This essay has explored different modes and functions of internal iconicity, cases in which language mirrors itself, in a genre of folk song. I started by discussing iconicity within a song, both parallelism of lines within a stanza and parallelism of image-clusters among stanzas. I suggested that parallelism between stanzas of a single song amounted to a network of metaphors, in the Peircean sense, metaphors which might be a stage in the growth of symbols. I then considered parallelism between songs, and argued that, like repeated elements within song, the repeated elements between songs both served the functions of redundancy (to make the message stronger and more likely to be received) and provided a context in which nonrepeated elements, by substituting for one another, were put into relation with one another. Finally, I discussed parallelism between two song types (crying songs and the related hulabhary), and again showed how one variant of a theme may affect the import of other variants.

Since one of my aims has been to show that personal or "idiosyncratic" metaphors occurring in the songs may be sources of new symbols (conventional or socially legislated associations of particular signs with particular meanings), I discussed the question of who are the addressees of the songs, and stated that they included those against whom the grievances in the songs were charged, individuals in authority who have greater power than the singer herself to legislate social convention. I have discussed crying songs as vehicles for the individual singer's origination of new image-meaning associations and the propagation upward of these associations as potential new conventions.15

15. The idea that marginal members of a society are among the most creative is of course not new, especially in studies of religion. Somewhat more rare are assertions that this creativity on the margins ultimately transforms the mainstream, and more rarely still are people on the bottom edge of a society portrayed as sources of mainstream cultural transformations. One such rare portrayal is found in Gamal Shabir's "Medusa's Hair" (1981), where the author suggests that "personal symbols" developed by individuals in marginal situations may eventually become myths accepted by all. Shabir's subject, however, less as a social than in a psychological sense, they had undergone what he calls "dark night of the soul." In the present essay I am concerned with the creativity that emerges from an area of social darkness, though the experience of such an area may have psycho-social as well.

I have given some evidence that members of the Paraiyar caste question not only their status in the social hierarchy, but some of the assumptions upon which that hierarchy is based. Inasmuch as these songs oppose conventional definitions of order, the image-meaning associations through which they do so must necessarily be unconventional. Yet they must also be close enough to the familiar order to have meaning to the listeners. The images appearing in crying songs are ancient, but the significations they acquire through the metaphors of the songs are not the common ones. Enclosures and boundaries, as we have seen, in these songs signify separation and restriction, rather than purity and protection. The cast-off younger sister (a major figure in Tamil oral literature) becomes metaphorically linked with the Untouchable woman, wrongfully excluded from her primordial home. The divine and innocent child becomes representative of the sinlessness of the lower castes. Among higher castes, participation in struggles for "freedom" (cutantanram), the title of "original Dravidian" (aiittiravita) for hill tribes and Untouchable castes, and talk of the "innocence" (in English) of nonliterate laborers, suggest the kind of new conventions that crying-song metaphors, if received, enter into.

I have been most concerned to point out the type of creativity involved in crying songs: the singers are very close to the songs they sing. Though the songs borrow from each other, there is no object mentioned in any song that is not part of the singer's own experience and imagination. The principal reference of the songs is the self, and no other self than that of the singer. The symbols she builds out of the objects of her experience are personal sometimes to the point of seeming private, but they are not private, for they are directed outward. They aim to convince the world that the singer is as she describes herself, and not as the world describes her. For while dominant conventions support a strong self-image for the literate groups of the world (which are by and large a subset of high-caste groups), the unlettered Paraiyar woman, unsupported by convention, must create her own.

If we are looking, then, for the origins of culture, the sources of new ideas and new organizations, the processes by which meanings begin, we may be well advised to look where direct self-expression serves a vital function, among people such
as the Paraiyar singers, for whom a total acceptance of pre-established systems of meaning would mean a rejection of self.  

Bibliography


16. "He who speaks a private language understood by no one else does not speak at all. But he who speaks only a language in which conventionality has become total has lost the power of address." (Gadamer 1976:284–306)
A Select Bibliography of Indian Folklore

STUART H. BLACKBURN

This bibliography is intended as a guide to scholarship on Indian folklore, primarily in English (see Handoo, entry no. 6 for sources in Indian languages). The focus is on recent work, though some early studies and collections are included as well; readers are referred also to Kirkland's bibliography (entry no. 9). An index to the authors is provided at the end for reference to the entries, which are arranged as follows:

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