

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

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Abstract

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

Guide to pronunciation for Tamil names and words

Kuravanci	kooravuhn’ji
Kurralam	kutrah’luhm

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

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

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

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

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

portion of the play is devoted to the voices and activities of the Kuṛatti and Ciṅkaṅ.

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

### Eighteenth-century Tamil Literary Genres

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Kuṛavañci Fortune-teller From the Hills

The *Kuṛṛālakkuṛavañci* ("The Kuṛavañci drama of Kuṛṛālam") is the best known work of the Śaiva Vēḷāḷar poet Tirikūṭarācappa Kavirāyar (henceforth Rācappar), who

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

with an account of the marriage customs of the Kuṛavar tribe and a reference to their association with the hill-god Murukaṇ, who is married to the Kuṛavar girl Valli.

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

The Kuṛatti shows Vacantavalli the beautiful necklace that Ciṅṇaṇaṅcāttēvaṇ, Rācappār's patron, gave her "in the illustrious Kollam (era) year 887 (A.D. 1712) ", when "he covered with copper the tile roof of the *cittiracapai* hall (Sanskrit Citrasabhā, "hall of many colors or paintings") of the Kuṛṛālam temple". Already in A.D. 1272 (Kollam 444) her ancestors had predicted success for Ceṅpaka Pandiyan in constructing the temple at Teṅkāci (an old Pandiyan capital near Tirunelveli town), and in ancient time, Madurai city's Goddess Mīṇāṅci herself had approached the Kuṛatti's forebears for a divination regarding her marriage with Śiva! <sup>x</sup> Kuṛavañci poets play delightful variations

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

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

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

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

### The Identity of the Kuravañci Fortune-teller

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

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

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

poems and Murukaṅ myths: hill-Kuṛavar hunt, gather honey, clear forests, and grow millet, and Kuṛavar women chase birds away from fields of ripening millet.<sup>xiii</sup>

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

There remain, however, a number of elements in the description of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Kuṛavañci drama's Kuṛatti, which cannot be traced back to any earlier source.

The typical Kuṛatti fortune-teller of the Kuṛavañci plays carries a basket and wears bead

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

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

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

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

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

#### The Birdcatcher in the Paddy Fields

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

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

here comes Ciṅkaṅ, the famed Kuluvaṅ birdcatcher,  
 Ciṅkaṅ, the Kuṛavaṅ of Kuṛṛālam's Tirikūṭam hill! (KK 81)

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

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

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

In the *mēlvāram paṛṛu* fields of fertile Ceṅkuḷam,  
 In the Kāṭuvetṭi field, and the field of the long *cunṭai* grove,  
 In the fine field of Kāṅkēyaṅ of Pēṭṭaikkūlam,  
 In Srikrishnan *mēṭu* land, Muṅikkurukaṅ *pēri*,....  
 the birds are landing, sir! (KK 91. 1, 3.)<sup>xviii</sup>

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

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

In Taṭṭāṅkuḷam field, in Camphor Strip I field,  
 watered by Lower New Pond in Kāṅāṅkuḷam ,  
 in all the *tiruttu* fields of generous Piccaip Piḷḷai  
 who wrote an Antāti poem for Kuṛṛālam,  
 younger brother of Cēṅaic Cavarip Perumāḷ,  
 Śaiva devotee, father of Kuṛṛālanātaṅ,  
 and of wealthy Vaittiyappaṅ of Marutūr,  
 commander of troops,  
 the birds are feeding, sir! KK 93. 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In his litany of the fields, Ciṅkaṅ praises not only Ciṅṅaṅaṅcāttēvaṅ, the poet's Pālaiyakkārar patron, but the landowners of Kuṛṛālam as well. While the Pālaiyakkārar chief belongs to the Maṛavar caste, the names of the other men show their affiliation mainly with the high-ranking Vēḷāḷar "peasant" caste subgroups, and some high-ranking non-peasant castes as well. In addition to managing Ciṅṅaṅaṅcēntiraṅ's interests in nearby Vaṭakarai and Teṅkāci (an old center of Pandyan rule), bearing the offices of "minister, accountant, and manager", Piccaip piḷḷai, a Śaiva Vēḷāḷaṅ, also wrote an Antāti poem on Kuṛṛālam. The same Piccaip piḷḷai is the father of the wealthy Vaittiyanātaṅ, who bestowed several endowments and charities on the Kuṛṛālam temple. Ōmalūrki Kuruṅṅaṅ is the "king of merchants", Rāmanāyakaṅ of Karuvai might hail from a Telugu caste-group, and Caṭaitampirāṅ is a Śaiva Vēḷāḷar mendicant. Other landowners, also mainly from Vēḷāḷar castes, are praised in other verses throughout this section.

In praising the landowners, in addition to their wealth or learning, the birdcatcher speaks of the donations, endowments and other charitable services they have provided for the Kuṛrālam temple and to nearby temples as well. Ciṅṅaṅāñcētiraṅ, who covered with copper the tiled roof constructed by an earlier Pandiyan king, gets the highest praise.

Nevertheless, the Vēlāḷars who serve under the Pāḷaiyakkārar have also given much to the temple, including portions of the crop (*vāram*) as *kaṭṭalai* (endowment), and have undertaken the construction and maintenance of the temple and the institutions under its auspices. A number of the fields Ciṅkaṅ names are *kaṭṭalai* fields (*parru, cey*) part of whose yield is donated to the temple, in exchange for temple honors that confer status.

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

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

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

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

Ciṅkaṇ's livelihood is a symbiotic affair. Though he is a man of wilderness, a hunter, *not* a cultivator, the birdcatcher earns part of his living on agricultural land. The *naṅcey* fields and tanks of Kuṛṛālam and surrounding wet-zone towns are the ideal habitat of the waterfowl he is expert in catching, and for whom he has developed so many specialized snares and techniques. Is the birdcatcher merely poaching, or is he indulged by the peasants because he helps them rid their rich crops of the birds who eat them, even as he bags the water-birds who feed mainly on fish? The poet portrays the cultivators of Kuṛṛālam as benefitting from Ciṅkaṇ's activities, just as they benefit from the Kuṛatti's soothsaying. Why, by placing the praise of the temple, the god, and the landowners in the capacity of "patrons", does Rācappar make the Kuṛavaṇ a part of the 18th-century socio-economic-cultural complex? Before investigating the Kuṛavañci drama's motives

in this particular construction of the Kuṛavaṇ, we need to complete our enquiry into the identities of Ciṅkaṇ and the Kuṛatti in this genre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in their own languages is amply supported by the ethnography of Yerukala and Vagri women fortune-tellers.<sup>xxv</sup>

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

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

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

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

What does the particular slant of the Kuṛavañci's portrait of "Kuṛavar" tell us about the relations between wilderness and settled landscapes and identities in 18th century Tamilnadu?

#### In praise of Wildness: Nomads, Birdcatchers, and Kings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>iii</sup> Genuine folk genres, including "epics" and ballads such as *Maturai vīraṅ katai* and the popular theater of the Terukkūttu ("Street theater"), took shape contemporaneously with the literary *pirapantam* genres.

<sup>iv</sup> Matappuli, the Kaḷḷar hero of the *Tiruccentūr nonṭināṭakam*, travels from Tirupati on the northern edge of Tamilnadu to Tiruchchundur on the southern coast of Tirunelveli,

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

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

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

<sup>vii</sup> The *daru* is an important song form in the Kuṛavañci and several other 18<sup>th</sup>-century musical dramatic genres in Tamil and Telugu. See Peterson 1998.

<sup>viii</sup> No translations of Kuṛavañci dramas have been published. All translations from the Kuṛavañci and other *pirapantam* genres in this paper are mine.

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

<sup>x</sup> Tenkāci is 5 km. east of Kuṛṛālam. The Malayalam Kollam era (Kollam 1= 825 A.D.), prevalent in Kerala, was also used in adjacent Tirunelveli.

<sup>xi</sup> On these associations, see Kailasapathy 1968, pp. 110-112 and Muilwijk 1996.

<sup>xii</sup> See the *Mīṇāṭciyammai Kuṛam* of the 17th century poet Kumarakuruparar. On the differences among Kuṛavañci, Kuṛam, the Kalampakam vignettes and a lost genre called Kuṛattippāṭṭu, see Mōkaṅ 1985, and Muilwijk 1996.

<sup>xiii</sup> Examples include *Akanānūru* 308, *Aiṅkuṛunūru* 251-260 and 281-90, and *Kuṛuntokai* 82. The trope of Kuṛavar women guarding millet fields is deployed as a pivotal device in the Murukaṅ-Valli myth.

<sup>xiv</sup> The Akavaṅmakaḷ's staff is called the "*piṛappuṅarttuṅ kōl*", "the staff that reveals birth".

<sup>xv</sup> E.g., Nakkīrar's *Tirumurukāṛruppaṭai* 5 and 6 (Ramanujan 1985, pp. 226 -228 and 215 -217).

<sup>xvi</sup> E.g., *Kuṛuntokai* 23, *Akanānūru* 98. See Hart 1979, p. 118, and 44-45. The Vaiṣṇava poet-saint Tirumankai Ālvār (8th-9th c.) describes a female diviner (Kaṭṭuvicci) in action (*Cīriya Tirumaṭal* 19-22). The Vēlaṅ, the shaman-priest of Murukaṅ, also practices divination using *kaḷaṅku* (molucca beans): e.g., *Aiṅkuṛunūru* 243 and 244.

<sup>xvii</sup> On the Viṛali dancer see Kersenboom-Story 1981 and Kailasapathy 1968, p. 105 ff.. The Caṅkam genre called "guide poem (for bards and artists seeking patrons) " (Āṛruppaṭai) focuses on the life and image of the travelling artist.

<sup>xviii</sup> "*Mēlvāram*" is the "superior (*mēl*) portion of the crop, claimed by the landlord or by government, in contrast to the cultivator's share, *kuṭivāram*." (Ludden 1985, Glossary, p.264.)

<sup>xix</sup> Tirunelveli also abounds in great *anaikkattu* dams used for diverting the Tamraparni's water for cultivation (Ludden 1985, Maps 8 and 18).

<sup>xx</sup> On the effects of the British East India Company's interventions, especially with the introduction of Thomas Munro's *ryotwari* system, see Ludden 1985, chapters 4 and 6.

<sup>xxi</sup> Thurston 1909 and Childers 1975. The Lambadi came to the South in several groups as commissaries to the Mughal and British armies, supplying salt and other necessities. Their numbers increased dramatically, and many settled in various parts of South India, primarily in Andhra and Mysore. Among the traditional commodities supplied to local populations by subgroups of the Lambadi Kuravas are salt and curry leaves. these Kuravas were named after what they sold: "Salt (*uppu*) Kuṛavar" and "curry leaf Kuṛavar" (*kaṛivēppilaik kuṛavar*). During the later part of the British period the Banjara were displaced from their various trades, and had to find new occupations, including ironmongering and working in mines.

<sup>xxii</sup> The Vagris speak Vagriboli, an Indo-Aryan language with a strong Western Indian (Gujarati/Rajasthani) cast to it (Srinivasa Varma 1970). A fourth group, of uncertain regional origin, the Korava, called "Yerukala" in Telugu, are found mainly in the Telugu linguistic area (in what is now Andhra Pradesh), and speak a mixture of Telugu, Kannada and Tamil, all Dravidian languages.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See "Korava", Thurston 1909, volume 3; and "Banjara" and "Kuruvikaran", Ibid., volume 4.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The migrant groups in Andhra and Mysore appear to be related to those in Tamilnadu, but no clear picture of their relationship has emerged from studying their similarities and differences.

<sup>xxv</sup> Thurston 1909, vol.3, 464-65. The Banjara, Korava/Yerukala, Vagri and Badhanyo offer blood sacrifice to particular goddesses, whose images they carry with them. Malten (1989) and Werth (1996) report that Vagri men practise divination in odd and even numbers when they worship the Goddess. "Narik kuṛatti" women usually dress in the western Indian gathered skirt and short blouse, and carry their infants in a sling across their breasts. Some also wear the more common Tamil sari. The skirt costume is attested for the 18th century in Tanjore paintings of "Kuṛavar" couples. In the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>- century temple sculptures and in the Kuṛavañci dramas the Kuṛatti wears a sari. The

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

<sup>xxvi</sup> The Banjara have traditionally been pack-bullock transporters of goods, and the Badhanyo or Dombari have always been acrobats.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For descriptions, sketches and photographs, see Jagor 1894, Hatch 1928, Malten 1989, and Werth 1996.

<sup>xxviii</sup> The identification of Kuṛavar groups as criminal tribes is the main thrust of the essays on these groups by Hatch (1928) and Williams (1912-13).

<sup>xxix</sup> We are also reminded of the famed hill-shrines of Murukan.

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

<sup>xxxi</sup> On the Kaikāḍiñ fortune-teller in Marathi literature, and the connection between Kaikāḍiñs and Kuṛattis, see Dhere and Bhavalkar 1975. In Serfoji's Marathi Kuṛavañci *Devendra Korvanji* (see below) the Kuṛatti and Kuravañ are called Buruḍ and Burḍiñ.

<sup>xxxii</sup> The Marathi Kuṛavañcis include: *Śrī Korvanjhi* and *Pratāpa Rāma Korvañji* sponsored by Pratapasimha, and *Devendra Korvanji*, attributed to Serfoji II (1798 -1832) himself. King Shahji II (1698 -1715) patronized the multilingual *Mohini vilāsa Kuravañji*. Shahji and Serfoji were the patrons of two of the best known Tamil Kuṛavañci dramas, the *Tiyākēcar Kuṛavañci* and the *Carapēntira Pūpāla Kuṛavañci*.

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