

# Pragmatic Meanings of Possession in Paliyan Shamanism

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Abstract. - Shamanistic beliefs and practices of Paliyans, an enclaved foraging people of south India, are described then analyzed on the basis of observational and interview data from eight bands, and limited comparison is undertaken with shamanism of other south Indian foragers. Interaction with the gods is shown to have mansided significance to Paliyans. Five practical meanings of the gods and their visits are examined closely. Although visiting gods figure in Paliyan decision making, shamans are found to be prevented from attaining social prominence. [*South India, Paliyans, shamanism, pragmatics of religion, tropical foragers, anthropology of knowledge*]

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## 1. Introduction

There are many senses in which an anthropologist might use the word "meanings" and a number of those are intended by the title of this paper. Following a four-part, descriptive review of the shamanic possession of *Paliyan*<sup>1</sup> foragers in south India, we will examine five very different kinds of meaning of the material, using variously combined semeiotic, functional, and adaptational approaches. The descriptive account will open with a look at the helpful spirits or deities toward whom much Paliyan ritual is directed. Then, a number of pages will be devoted to accounts of three diverse shamanic events. Third, examples of shamans' prayers will be given. Finally, four mock rituals will be described, representative of frequently occurring rituals which stand in playful emulation of the customary ones.

The Paliyan materials are useful in more than one way. For one thing, they are sufficiently detailed for us to undertake the promised study of

several quite different facets of their meaning. This aspect of the paper will be introduced in due course.

A second way in which they prove useful is that they help fill a gap in the literature. With the exception of a single paper on structural and functional implications of Mala Pandaram (*Mala Pandāram*) shamanism (Morris 1981), a paragraph on a brief episode of Irula (*Irula*) possession (Zvelebil 1988: 146), and a five sentence report on the "nervous attacks" of two participants in an annual Kadar (*Kādar*) ritual of offering (Ehrenfels 1952: 159 f.), the major ethnographic studies of south Indian foragers (e.g., Furer-Haimendorf 1943; Ehrenfels 1952; Morris 1976, 1977, 1981, 1982; Zvelebil 1988) have yielded no apparent observational data on shamanism. Morris' exceptional 1981 report and the body of Paliyan data to be presented here, each of which is derived from a combination of repeated observation and interviews, give us our first real detail on the functioning institutions.<sup>2</sup> Parallels between these two accounts are numerous, but there are some informative differences. And the Paliyan data will be found to contradict at least one recent generalization about tropical (as against circumpolar) shamanism of Old World foragers.

1 Hereafter, their name will be rendered without diacritics, as Paliyan; *Paliyan* is a singular or adjectival form and its plural (properly *Paliyar* or *Paliyarhal*) will be indicated by addition of English "s". The names of the state (*Tamir Nādu*) and its language (*Tamir*) will appear here only in familiar anglicized versions. Because the Paliyan dialect of Tamil is purely colloquial, Paliyan words will be written as spoken, rather than in accordance with Tamil literary convention. As regards the terms "shaman" and "shamanism," types and boundaries are not a concern, so I find Wolf's recent, inclusive approach (1990: 429) preeminently suitable.

2 Morris witnessed three cases of possession (1981: 234); the present report is based on observation of 10 cases. The Paliyan data have, previously, only been summarized briefly in print (Gardner 1972).

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Because general and specialized sketches of Paliyan culture are readily available (Gardner 1972, 1982, 1985, 1988), only a few essential background facts need be offered here. Paliyans, when studied in 1962-64 and 1978, were found to live an elusive existence in the lower hill slopes of southwestern Tamil Nadu, on the north and south faces of the Parani hills and on the dry, eastern side of the ranges which extend down into the very tip of India (8°30' to 10°30' N.lat). Most of their settlements are near the margin of the forest. Groups or individuals oscillate between (1) combining part-time contract labor for their Tamil neighbors with foraging for *Dioscorea* yams not far from the forest's edge and (2) engaging in more aloof, nomadic, subsistence foraging. This double life is thought to represent an ancient adaptation (Gardner 1985). Paliyans speak a dialect of Tamil intelligible to their cultivating neighbors, yet exhibit similarities with other Indian foragers, such as the adjacent Mala Pandaram and Kadar of Kerala, the Irula, Kurumba, and Naiken of the Nilgiris, and the more distant Chenchu of Hyderabad. A few comparative observations will be provided.

## 2. Kinds of Sami

Some deities and ancestral spirits play central roles in day-to-day Paliyan life. The main term Paliyans use for them, *sāmi* (plural, *sāmihal*), is a broad term which refers to other deities and to the ascetics Paliyans encounter in the forest as well. But, the spirits and deities which respond to Paliyan needs are those to whom it makes primary reference. On rare occasions one also hears them called *vanadēvādaihal*, a more specific and appropriate term meaning "forest deities." In accordance with their functions, two quite different kinds are recognized. If Paliyans chose to label them by their distinctive features they might call them "protecting samis" and "gamekeeping samis."

Those which protect are more immediate. They are approached several times a month with direct requests for help and a day seldom passes without their being at least mentioned. Besides being called *sami* or *samihal*, they are referred to by kin terms and by their individual names. The kin terms most often used for them are *tātā* and *pāttan*, both of which, in Paliyan usage, mean grandfather, grandparent, or ancestor. This underlines the fact that spirits of particular, long-deceased Paliyans usually head the somewhat open set of protectors (which is likely also to include one or more spirits or deities of mountains and one or more locally

relevant Hindu deities having shrines in or near the forest).<sup>3</sup> In any given band, one finds consensual recognition of about two to five such samis, with some individuals being able to name two or three others. Commonly one hears it said of the protecting samis that they are seven in number, a formalism repeated in other realms, e.g., the seven once-existent hills on which seven groups of Paliyans lived, or the seven portions of an offering in a ceremony (cf. Eliade's comparative findings on number seven in Asian shamanism, 1951: 121 f., 239, 248-260). But it is not an empty formalism; during one observed possession ceremony, at a time of crisis, participants deemed it important to ascertain that all seven samis had visited.

Gamekeeping samis are specialized in maintaining and providing certain distinctly Paliyan forest resources. Because they are generally mentioned only in prayer, their existence is rarely even known to the outsiders who employ Paliyans. They differ from the protecting samis in another way also — they constitute a tidily structured, closed set.

Characteristics of the two sets can be made clearer with the help of examples from three regions. From north to south these are the north slope of the Parani hills (i.e., Palni hills in colloquial English), southwestern Madurai district, and western Ramanadapuram. In all three areas the set of protecting samis is headed up by ancestral spirits. For one group in the Parani hills the protecting samis include:

- 1) *Valangeyappan / Valangan Appan / Valayāngāran*, an especially powerful ancestral spirit who can be enlisted to help call the others (compare *-āngāran* with Tamil *ānkāram* "conception of individuality, arrogance, haughtiness; kindness, love," Emeneau and Burrow 1962: entry 1) — he has a small shrine in the forest,
- 2) *Mandu Māvili Sāmi/Kalunjittu Pāre Dēvam*, a female ancestral spirit, resident at a small shrine in the forest at Kalunjittu Rock,
- 3) *Vandi(mā)kālī(ammā)* "great goddess of the cart" (a Paliyan puranic tale about the slaying of this ogress echoes a chapter of the Hindu epic, the "Mahabharata"; Paliyans have their own tiny shrine for her under a bush 1 kilometer outside the edge of the forest, and Tamils have erected

<sup>3</sup> These sound virtually identical with the three classes of spirit or deity reported for Mala Pandarams (Morris 1981), but the precise cultural definitions and significance of the three classes are quite dissimilar from one culture to the other. For one thing, Mala Pandarams treat the spirits of each class very differently.

a substantial shrine for her 80 kilometers to the east),

4) *Periya Pāttan* "senior ancestor,"

5) *Cinna Pāttan* "junior ancestor,"

6) *Vasōppan*, a male, hill top sami residing at a rock in the forest.

A version of the first of these names, *Valangappan*, was included in Annahamu's long list of samis of Paliyans at a higher elevation in the same range (1961: 30).

In southwestern Madurai district, members of five Paliyan communities agree about the importance of one ancestral sami. In four of those communities there is comparable agreement about a second sami and some acknowledgement of a third. And, some members of the easternmost groups within this region are aware of two additional Paliyan samis just to the south. These are, respectively:

1) *Paliciammā*, literally, Paliyan woman (cf. Tamil *palicci*)<sup>4</sup> + mother or female honorific,

2) *Karuppusāmi/Karuppaiyā/Karuppan*, black sami, black lord, black male,<sup>5</sup>

3) *Karatammā*, a female sami,

4) *Vēlappara(sāmi)*, a male sami,

5) *Vāsumalaiyom*, spirit of Vasu mountain (it is possible that the length of the initial vowel was misrecorded in the name of *Vasōppan* in the range to the north).

Finally, in the southernmost of the three regions, in Ramanadapuram, the protecting samis of one community include two female ancestors, spirits of three mountains, Karuppusami, and eight others. Observational and interview data on this community are adequate to show that ancestral, mountain, and other samis are all called upon for help. Several are treated as if they have individual specialties, but samis of all three types possess Paliyans and do so in a fairly uniform manner (Mala Pandarams have the same three classes but relate to them differently; Morris 1981). In approximate order of importance, the samis are:

4 Others have reported the centrality of Paliciamma both to Paliyans of this area (Faulkes 1933: 195; Baliga 1960: 130) and to Paliyans in adjacent parts of Kerala (Luiz 1962: 214). Note also the peak named *Pallicci* in Trivandrum district of southern Kerala.

5 We must keep in mind the importance of Karuppusami to neighboring plainspeople immediately to the east (Dumont 1957), to Mala Pandaram, who closely resemble Paliyans, immediately to the west and south (Krishna Iyer 1937: 111; Luiz 1962: 145; Morris 1981: 204, 226), and to Paliyans further south (see the list of protecting samis for the southernmost region and see also D'Penha 1902).

1) (*Manjana*) *Pēci(ammā)/Vana Pēci*, powerful spirit of a Paliyan woman who fell from a tree while collecting honey,

2) (*Pēymalai*) *Rākkāci*, powerful spirit of a Paliyan woman (when Paliyans of the seven mountains assembled in ancient times for honey collecting on Pey mountain, Rakkaci's descent vine was severed and she fell to her death after boasting that others were afraid to go down the cliff),

3) *Kōttemalaian*, male spirit of Kottai mountain,<sup>6</sup> he is said to be important and "original,"

4) *Pattāni/Mungānūttan*, a male sami,

5) *Sandanamāri*, goddess of the sandalwood tree,

6) *Karuppusāmi/Karuppaiyā* (as in region two, see also mention by D'Penha 1902), he visits at the time of the annual first fruit ceremony for yams,

7) *Pēymalai*, the spirit of a present mountain, it being a taller manifestation of one of the seven once-existent mountains,

8) *Kalladi*, a female sami,

9) *Karumanāci*, a female sami,

10) *Karumalaian*, spirit of a peak and brother of *Kōttemalaian*,

11) *Karuppāyi*, a female sami,

three others mentioned occasionally by one person each.

A complete set of the gamekeeping samis was elicited in the southernmost group. The set consists of three female/male pairs<sup>7</sup> generally ordered as follows. First there are two samis who send the bees for Paliyans. Although Paliyans pray to them directly, they do not usually come to help Paliyans unless *Manjana Peci*, the protecting sami, goes to bring them. Their names derive from the fact that they used to live in the honeycombs.

6 Compare this with (a) Mala Pandaram worship of precipices (Morris 1981: 204) and "crests of hills" such as "Kotamala" (Krishna Iyer 1937: 111), (b) Kadar focus upon deities who emerged from a twin-peaked mountain, and (c) Kadar speaking of mountains as having fought in ancient times (Ehrenfels 1952: 161-179).

7 Female is mentioned first here for two reasons: The female samis are always listed first and, in all abbreviated versions of the list which were elicited, it is male samis which get left out, the females never are. Although we are not dealing in this paper with linguistic analyses or with Paliyan concepts of creative beings, attention needs to be drawn to comparative findings on markedness (Furbee n. d.) and on gender symbolism in origin stories (Callaghan 1979; Sanday 1981). The paired Paliyan, gamekeeping samis are reminiscent of both *Malavay* and *Malankuratti*, the male and female deities of the Kadar (70-100 km west of region one), the daughter of whom, *Attuvacceri Amma*, lives in banyan trees (Ehrenfels 1952: 161), and some bisexual deities to be described below.

- 1) a) *Kūdāratammā*, tent (i.e., figurative for honey comb) + mother or female honorific,  
 b) *Kūdāratāndavan*, tent + master, lord.

Then there are two pairs of game keeping samis who either assist other samis (such as Peciamma, Kottemalaian, and Karuppayi) in sending game for Paliyan hunts, or, themselves, infuriate the *villinari* and *sarudani* (these are special, polite terms of address for *sen nāy*, the wild red dog, and *kaduvā*, the giant tiger) which "cut down meat for us" or "chase animals and bring them our way." These two pairs are:

- 2) a) *Ālattiammā*, banyan tree + mother or female honorific,  
 b) *Ālavīraccam/Ālavīrasam*, banyan tree + great one,  
 3) a) *Cakkalammā*, [fig tree?] + mother or female honorific (*Sakkammā* and *Sakkadēvi* appear to be alternative forms of the name, but this may be due either to an investigative error or to conflation by Paliyans of their gamekeeper with *Sakkammā*, to whom the Tamil people pray for rain; indeed, it was said by two Paliyans that *Sakkammā* or *Sakkadēvi* gives the rain which is crucial for digging yams),  
 b) *Muttatanakka*, elder or first + [whirling nut tree?], a male sami.

### 3. When Sami Comes to Help

The protecting samis commonly respond with a visit when called upon for help. They can be persuaded during these visits to provide information or protection; they may also make general pronouncements as to what is proper and moral behavior for Paliyans. In forest Paliyan groups, about 28 % of the adults experience at least occasional visits from the samis, this figure being the same for both sexes. In some instances, a sami will "come on" a person spontaneously at a time of special need. More often, invocational prayers are sung, the spirit (or spirits) being asked to come running (*vā, vā, sīgiram vā; ōḍiyā sīgiram* "come, come, come quickly; come running quickly") and descend on the petitioner to help with a particular problem. People who experience possession (*arul*)<sup>8</sup> may have a familiar sami (there is a very slight tendency for them to be of opposite sex to those

on whom they descend); this does not preclude their being visited by others, though. Sometimes a person will have a one-or-two-hour unbroken series of visits, with each of several samis, in turn, suddenly displacing its predecessor; a case was witnessed of several people simultaneously possessed by one and the same spirit; and another case was seen of two samis being present at the same time. Indeed, variation was such and modes were so small that it is not possible to present a typical case. Examples have been picked which are informative and which give at least some idea of the range.

#### 3.1 Case One: The Tiger Attack

Shortly after dark one evening, there were sudden, loud sounds of consternation in the settlement. A teenage Paliyan youth who had been sitting by my tent ran toward the nearby agitated group then doubled back for my bowie knife. Reluctant to relinquish it without knowing the reason, I accompanied him directly to the scene of the disturbance. We found that a 22 year old woman had been struck by a sharp, 5 by 8 cm piece of granite which had come hurtling out of the darkness. All present were angry; the atmosphere was tense. At a bystander's request I provided antiseptic and a dressing to put on the wound.

When another stone came in from a different direction, people began to exchange ideas about who the attacker or attackers might be: Weren't two people momentarily visible to the west? asked Kritnan. Another man agreed that outsiders might be implicated; had not two Malayalam speakers (from the west coast) hung around inexplicably earlier in the day? Cadayan reminded others of a crank woman whom he had found muttering to herself that day in the settlement. Sappani rejected that idea. The previous day he and his daughter's former father-in-law, Ponnann, had seen a kaduva<sup>9</sup> roaming about and hiding behind a hedgerow immediately to the south. The giant tiger helps the samis to provide game for Paliyans, as noted above, but it has its troubling characteristics, too; it is subject to manipulation by sorcerers, one can change irreversibly into such a tiger by eating a particular shrub, and the spirit of a dead person

<sup>8</sup> Compare with Tamil *arul* ("to be gracious to, favour, speak graciously, command, grant, bestow; *n.* grace, mercy, favour, benevolence, good deeds, order, command"; Burrow and Emeneau 1961: entry 190) and with Kota *arl* ("voice of god spoken through diviner"; *ibid.*).

<sup>9</sup> Its name is interpreted by one interviewee to mean "terrible mouth." Cf. Tamil *katu* "poison; severe, cruel" and *vāy* "mouth." Indeed, some Paliyans say *kaduvāy*. But see also *katuvan* "male monkey, tom-cat" in standard Tamil (Burrow and Emeneau 1961: entries 952, 956, 4385).

can possess one as well. Finally, I recalled, but kept it to myself, that two hours previously forestry officers placed 11 headloads of precious sandalwood in a Paliyan house for overnight safekeeping. Its worth would be equivalent to more than a years' earnings for any laborers who could put the community to flight.

Ponnan urged that we examine the hedgerow to the south. After much hesitation and discussion, a dozen men, from 18 to about 40 years old, set out with long, heavy sticks and a lantern, seeking whatever evidence might be there. We searched without success. On our return we were told of more stones being found, variously identified as river bottom and cliff face stones. Every stone in the open part of the settlement was being inspected, only some of which had been heard to land (one, at least, of these landings was openly faked by a boy, causing general laughter). When a dog barked to the north of the settlement, the men began clearing bushes on that side, examining the ground there for kaduva prints. Then someone said he saw 2 people on the large rock to the east. We set out in that direction and found toe prints of a running man. It was thought to be a kaduva paw mark until a similar but more complete print was found nearby, the footprint of a person much larger than a Paliyan. We marched back to the settlement in a more confident spirit. A long, disorganized conference followed during which some drew figures on the ground for amusement — a line drawing of a human face, an elephant, and a deer with one leg skillfully shown as being behind another. One man's wife tried calling him home several times. After 10 p.m. a few members of the group did drift off, one by one. It was suggested that some stay up to keep watch. Three young men (ages about 19, 20, and 35) and I got a mat, sat by a tamarind tree, and told jokes from 11 p.m. onwards. Latsmi walked over to her uncle's house at 11, asking "What is there to fear?" One of the young men with me asked her, simply, "Where do the stones come from?"

After midnight three meri, Sappani (age 50), Ponnan (age 38), and Perumal (age 70), reclined before their houses, praying in song or chant for the samis to come on them to provide help (two examples of such prayers are given below). Extremely long utterances were sung, during each of which there were no pauses for breath. Phrases were sung alternately in a high pitch then a low pitch voice, about an octave apart. Although conventional terms and stylized phrases were employed, the overall messages were improvised. Besides asking for assistance in dealing with the evening's pro-

jectiles, one petitioner asked for rain: "The forest is catching fire owing to excessive heat. Why don't you give us rain?" One of the singers kept up a simple but loud beat on a single-headed, tambourine shaped drum (20 cm across by 10 cm deep). By 12:45 a.m. the young men on watch predicted sami would come to Sappani, who was singing in a strained way, broken by great gasps and sobs. Moments later there were two loud thumps, Sappani got up, walked a pace or two, squatted briefly, then leapt up and ran 100 m or more along a path toward the forest. The distance and the dark soon put him beyond our sight. His singing resumed and suddenly stopped, there were piercing screams and other strange sounds, as if from a fight, then silence. In the meanwhile, Ponnan was getting steadily more excited. His singing was broken by sobs. At 12:50 he jumped up, took a running leap with both hands on the top of his head, his elbows out to the sides. He ran a few steps leaning forward. Then, leaning back, abruptly, he stopped. Repeating this leaning run several times, he made his way across the settlement, then he dashed out along the path Sappani had taken. We heard singing, silence, screams, then silence. Both men resumed singing, with further long silences.

There was discussion in the community as to whether we should go out to the two men. Some said they would return. Kanniamma, wife of Ponnan, walked about talking loudly. At about 1:03 and 1:05, respectively, Ponnan and Sappani returned on different paths, singing in strained voices. Ponnan, staggering as before, ran to a spot 8 m from his own home and stood there singing. Sappani ran to spot 3 m from where he had begun (and about 10 m from where Ponnan now stood). He was trembling more than Ponnan, his voice was more strained, and his gasps were more frequent. A boy clapped sticks in time to his song.

Three or four people came and sat near each of the possessed. The sami who had come on Sappani identified herself as Rakkaci, the one who had come on Ponnan told us she was Peciamma. They informed us that two kaduvas had been sent over the mountains from the western, Malayalam side to devour people. These tigers had thrown the stones, but they had now been driven back across the mountain range by the samis. Two cloths were fetched by Kanniamma's 26 year old son, Ponnusami. They were men's lower cloths (*vētti*) of the everyday kind but very clean, a white one for Rakkaci and a red one for Peciamma. Ponnusami went off again to get two more cloths which he folded twice sideways then tied diagonally across the chests of the possessed, Rakkaci's over the left

shoulder and Peciamma's over the right. These special cloths, collectively known as *parivettam*, were kept by Talaimalai for such occasions. (Their use is a contact phenomenon; cf. Tamil *parivattam* ". . . cloth; robe. . . robes pertaining to an office"; Lifco 1968.) The two samis sang, or chanted, in the same manner which had been used by their seekers during the initial prayers of petition.

During the next hour and a quarter the personal needs of nine people were dealt with. Although most of their concerns were serious, others engaged in a good bit of joking and light talk. For instance, three times, Velan (the 19 year old who had been on watch) placed a 1.5 m stick on the ground straight out in front of the crotch of squatting Ponnusami. All seeing it laughed, including Ponnusami's wife. The victim expressed slight annoyance and pushed it away each time.

At 1:10, three of the people who sought help approached Rakkaci (who had come upon Sappani). Latsmi sat before her, holding her year-and-a-half old son, Tangarasa, and Raman lay face down on the ground with his head by sami's feet. In response to Raman's salutation, sami took him by the hair, urging him thus to rise. He rose to a kneeling stance, with lowered head (Fig. 1). Sami sang briefly, saying "Wait for some time. I shall first see to a young plantain tree [baby], then I will come to you." Raman lay down again as if asleep and remained there until about 2:00, when he went home. Rakkaci spent the next 35 minutes with Latsmi and her son. Latsmi saluted with palms together and said she was unwell. "Don't fear. I will remove all the ailments from your body,



Fig. 1

the *kāccil* [cf. Malayalam *kāccal* "heat"; Burrow and Emeneau 1961: entry 1219] and other harmful things," sami replied. It was explained that Latsmi had been bathing at the cistern of a forest temple 8 or 9 days previously. Hearing a white lizard (*kevali*) screeching, she had become frightened and at once felt feverish. Sami's whole body was trembling rapidly, especially her arms and legs. As she sang, there were great gasps periodically, for 5 to 15 seconds each time. She usually leaned forward quite sharply from the waist with her hands on Latsmi; occasionally, she stood leaning slightly back with her hands folded in her lap. At first, Rakkaci put her hands only on Latsmi's head. Later she placed them on her shoulders then her chest, then she ran them down Latsmi's legs to the ankles. Latsmi asked about her son who had dysentery and fever. Rakkaci promised a cure. She put her hands first on the child then back on Latsmi's shoulders and head. Finally, Latsmi prayed for her husband, who had fever in addition to pain in his feet, ankles, and forearms. Reassurances were offered.

Velan asked his wife, who happens to be Sappani's daughter, to take her child (by a previous union) to Rakkaci. So Muttamma brought her daughter forward, requesting sami's protection. The two year old cried as trembling Rakkaci leaned over and placed her hands on its head, saying "I will watch over you and protect you. Don't fear." By now it was 1:53.

The 20 year old who had been on watch (another Ponnann), mentioning his injured ankle to Velan, went forward a step. Rakkaci came to the two of them, placed one hand on the head of each, lowered her head, and held it sideways against her right arm. Addressing each of them as *tambi* (younger brother), she offered them her protection. Then she stepped back and extended her left arm from the waist, calling for *tinnīr* (ashes; cf. Tamil *tiru nīrru*, "sacred ashes"; Emeneau and Burrow 1962: entry 211; Burrow and Emeneau 1961: entry 3060) in her cupped hand. They said yes. Ponnann fetched it from the nearest fireplace.

Rakkaci approached the ethnographer, so I greeted her verbally and with a salutation of the hands. She placed a thumb mark of ash on my forehead. She then sang that my wife would have a child; I was asked to watch over all the people in the community, seeing that no one troubled or beat them. Her hands shook as she held her fingers in my hair.

She staggered back again, then went over to Kanniamma, who told me afterwards that her husband had woken her, saying sami had come on "brother," and asked her to go to sami and

pray. Placing her hands on Kanniamma's head, Rakkaci called her *akkā mahal* (literally, older sister's daughter). She cautioned Kanniamma not to wander in the forest, but promised to watch over her. Kanniamma asked for help with her fever and with the itch and pain of an illness of the skin. This session lasted from 1:59 to 2:17. At 2:13 Rakkaci gave a single sharp hand clap. Finally, at the very end, she leaned over and sucked hard on the top of Kanniamma's head.

Rakkaci staggered off a few meters and sang until 2:25. Good rain was promised and something unclear was said about a marital dispute between two elderly people, Periya Ponnann and Naci. Ponnann (age 20) said *sari, pōdum* (fine, enough); Ponnusami and another person repeated that message, adding *pōnga* (go). By now most had returned home for sleep. Sappani half walked and half ran back toward the forest. He returned to his home at 2:27 a.m.

In the meanwhile, Peciamma had ministered to Periya (i.e., "senior") Ponnann, then left. Periya Ponnann (age about 60) had come and sat before her. He told the sami he was troubled by evil spirits and requested her protection. Sami explained that, at the time when Periya Ponnann had been going to collect honey for a teacher, a spirit got hold of him. Peciamma leaned slightly from the waist (not as sharply as Rakkaci did) and placed her hands on his head. Then the petitioner prostrated himself before her, asking for protection. This whole episode lasted from 1:10 to 1:38 a.m. Near the end, Peciamma twice gave a single, loud clap of the hands, about 5 minutes apart. At 1:38, Ponnann (38) returned to normal. He stood silently with arms crossed in front of him for 8 minutes, Periya Ponnann lying as if asleep near his feet. Then Ponnann talked with Periya Ponnann in his ordinary voice and both went home.

Several things were explained afterwards. Touching the head of an ill person and rubbing the body are done to remove the pain; one can also touch the head and command an intrusive spirit to leave. Sucking was done in Kanniamma's case to draw out fever, headache, and other pain. Three explanations were given for the hand claps. They are "to catch and cut" an intrusive spirit, to send it out, or (with rubbing of the hands) to allow one to see the cause of an incident — whether it is caused by humans or has other sources will be made visible. Finally, when Ponnann stood silently at the end, it was done because the sami had to be seen to climb the mountain, back up to the forest where she stays, Peymalai Nahari Kadu.

### 3.2 Case Two: A Celebration of Menarche

The morning after Periya Cellamma reached menarche, the sami Peci came upon Nallamma (age 25) abruptly, without the elaborate invocational chant used on the night of the tiger attack. Nallamma was making her way toward Cellamma's isolation hut; she explained afterwards that she was silently asking the samis of the mountain to protect the young woman. Peci suddenly descended on her. She turned and approached a group of us at a slow walk. Her face was perspiring profusely. She looked as if she was on the verge of tears. Her eyes stared blankly and jerked about. She spoke mechanically, in a voice which trembled, almost breaking, telling people individually that their children would be all right and their families would have no trouble. Someone ran to fetch her ash from a fireplace. Her arm came up rigidly as she pressed a finger tip of ash on each forehead, then it snapped down to her side again. Moments later Peci was gone; Nallamma merged back in with a group of working women, the entire episode having lasted about 4 minutes.

### 3.3 Case Three: Political Innovation

For the sake of comparison a brief study was undertaken of Paliyans settled in agricultural labor, just outside the margin of the forest. A domestic assistant was brought in to enable my concentrating on the research. Three weeks after we began that arrangement, I left for two days to deal with a family medical matter. My employee announced forthwith that he was the son of an official (an untruth) and he used my absence to persuade members of the community to modernize their political structure. He conducted an election on the spot, writing peoples' choices on their ballots for them, then tallying the results. Not surprisingly, two of his newly made friends in the community found themselves among the four people elected. I was completely unaware of all this when I returned in the evening, a day after it took place. Next morning, at 5:45, I woke to the sounds of two drums, two flutes, and the incoherent, initial outbursts of sami speaking through Mutteyan. He was but the first of seven people to be visited by sami that morning, five of them simultaneously at one point and five of them for over an hour (see table). Only three people became violent enough to need restraint or calming and only two, Mutteyan and Porusan, became mouthpieces for sami. The two main performances had

many similarities. 1) There was an initial 10 to 20 minute period of sobbing and trembling with head bowed. 2) Someone loosened the possessed person's hair and there ensued, immediately, wild dancing and violent shaking of the head; one remained standing through this, the other spent part of the time on hands and knees, head shaking in circles then up and down (Fig.2). It was ascertained that the visitor was Vandikaliamma. Two or three people restrained sami (i.e., her host) from behind, stroked her, and, repeatedly, with much



Fig.2

effort, brought her tense, upraised arms down by her sides; 10 the parivettam was tied on tightly; she stroked her own thighs at times, particularly the left thigh, with her palms (seen also during the initial period); she periodically lashed three or four times at her left calf with a tough, sharp edged strand of *marulu* (bow-string hemp, *Sansevieria zeylanica*) (Fig. 3); and, at intervals, *sāmbirāni* (fragrant benzoin gum) was burned in a censor before sami's face. 3) Dancing eventually became more controlled and there was alternation between several-minutes-long periods of divination (or questions and answers) and dance. Divination consisted mainly of tossing a small handful of rice grains up with the right hand, posing a question, and looking for a positive reply, in the form of two grains landing together on the right forearm. After four or more such throws, she often concluded

Persons Possessed when Sami was called to Rule on a Change in Leadership

Person	Sex	Age	Time
Mutteyan	m.	ca 50	5:45-7:30 a.m.
Goindan	m.	45	7:19-7:29
Porusan	m.	32	7:19-11:15
Karupayi	f.	28	8:35-8:40, 8:55-9:55
Kamaci	f.	40	8:35-10:00
Pappa	f.	45	8:55-10:30
name unknown	f.	60	9:45-9:50

10 The forcible bending and lowering of a possessed person's upraised arms is not seen amongst the Paliyans' neighbors, during their god and spirit possession.



Fig.3

by dancing backwards, grinning, and holding a forefinger vertically before the nose and mouth. Then several minutes of dance would follow. This entailed a hopping step to music, keeping elbows held sharply back, lolling the tongue, smiling or grimacing, and tipping the head to the left. 4) Sami ignored four children who were brought forward by three elderly women. The children were lain in a row on their faces at 7:15, in time for the end of sami's first visit and the beginning of her second one. For 30 minutes the women attempted to gain sami's attention, even by shouting angrily. The children were finally asked to get up when sami began tripping over them.

Not seen in other Paliyan communities were: (a) parivettam being tied as a sash about the waist; (b) vigorous, self-administered whipping of the lower legs early in the possession with *marulu*; (c) singing in well metered, often rhyming couplets; (d) shrill ululating by one possessed person; (e) use of regular dance steps by adults when possessed and dance to melodic as well as rhythmic accompaniment; (f) all diagnosable instances of possession being said to involve the same sami (Vandikaliamma); and (g) extensive mechanical divining by the samis (continued in Mutteyan's case for 3 and three quarter hours after sami's departure).

The ritual was sufficiently complicated that a thorough record of it could not be written down at the time. Other things hampered the recording,

as well. Except for one person, who led me to a central place from which I could get a good view, people acted as if they were too focused or too disconcerted to be able to aid me much during the proceedings. This was uncharacteristic of them. Worse still, there was inexplicable evasion on the part of many when I sought to clarify details of the ritual through subsequent interviews. I eventually learned that the political tinkerer, when proposing the changes, told people falsely that he had my encouragement and support. They viewed me as part of the problem. Although sami did endorse the election, within about three weeks all mention of these events ended and the previous order returned.

#### 4. The Prayers

Two examples of the chanted prayers follow. One must appreciate the fact that they are always improvised and singers (such as the person from whom these were elicited) insist afterwards that they can neither remember nor reconstruct what they have sung. In addition, the translations were made difficult by liberal employment in the prayers of rare, figurative usages.

Oh, samis, who give good health to our limbs, give us in plenty honey, meat, and roots, give us the *tanga mudi paccale* [gold peak + a plant genus, meant figuratively; while the figurative meaning of *paccale* could not be clarified, we should note that both *tī pullu paccale*, i.e., *Cheilanthes mysorensis*, and *vettu* or *kāya paccale* are used for healing cuts], *Vēyyilam kal mudi kili paccale* [plant, species unknown, of Veyyilam kal peak], *tanga aruhom pul* [gold harialli grass], *tūtom* [holy water; cf., Tamil *tīrttam*, "holy water"].

Sprinkle milk on us; sprinkle *paccale*; and you must "wake up the sleeping man" [meant figuratively as "heal the ill man"], drive away cold and cough, and send us plenty of rain.

Oh, deity of the sun, you must not spread your wings too much on us; you must fold them and make it less hot. Oh, *Samutara Raiyare* [ocean king] of western seas and eastern seas,<sup>11</sup> send up the clouds and open them and pour rain on us. From the *pāl nīr* [milky water] *tirai* [roll/curtain/screen] may water come down.

*Kottu pēr* [great drumbeat, figurative for thunder] *malaiki* [having pounded], pour down a container of water.

*Kūdāratammē* [Oh, comb mother], *Kūdāratāndavanē* [Oh, comb lord], *vādile* [in this slope] send the bees. *Ālattiammē*, *Ālavīraccamē*, *Cakkalammē Tāyē* [oh, Cakkalamma, oh mother], *Muttatanakkē*, by *villinari* [polite term for *sen nāy*, the wild red dog] and *sarudani* [polite term for *kaduvā*, giant tiger], cut down *kīre* [greens or potherbs, meant here figuratively as "meat"] for us.

The second prayer might be used to ask for help where a person has been frightened by a malevolent spirit (*pēy pisāsu*) and has a fever:

Oh, *Manjana Pēci* [female sami name], oh, *Pattāni* [male sami name], .. X.. (the patient) *tangu ūsi kondu* [with a golden needle] *kutti* [has been pierced] *ilutu* [and drawn through] *mudinj iruku* [and it has been knotted]. *Tatti kalatti aikini* [Fire having leaped and appeared], *vālale vetta vā* [come to strike/sever (it) with a blade].

Sami's answer was then anticipated, within the prayer, as:

*Tunda tunda vetti* [Having cut it into small pieces] *vengale ōtle varattu* [and fried them in a bright vessel], *sundu villāle tiriccacci* [I have shot them away with a bow].

#### 5. Mock Rituals

Adults and children occasionally emulate the visits of samis and rituals of offering in a playful fashion, as if for public enjoyment. Four examples will illustrate this.

1) A group of women and girls were singing and joking one gray morning, when overcast and drizzle suggested that work might have to be put off. Kulli (aged about 60) began to dance and references were made to sami. Eight women of diverse ages and several children comprised the main audience; others came and went. For 45 minutes she clowned and danced and, when Mukki (22) sang excitedly, Kulli danced more quickly. Mutti (20) told her to move her arms properly. She raised them stiffly, up and to the sides, as one often sees in that community during the initial, incoherent phase of possession, before the sami has been identified. Moleamma (one of the people in the group to whom sami occasionally comes) then took her by the arms from behind, restraining and soothing her in the customary manner. All laughed. Cadayan came on the scene. He borrowed a 45 cm long strand of marulu (bow-string hemp) from a child, lashed twice at his left leg, told Kulli to do the same, then chased her with the whip. It is said that only a person upon whom sami truly has descended can stand the pain of this whip. Its use compares closely with the self-inflicted tests or demonstrations of god possession seen in the adjacent Tamil plain (e.g., Dumont 1957: 349). Again, everyone laughed, but this time Kulli herself joined in. With the atmosphere of pretense disrupted, the group broke up.

2) At the request of an outsider, three young Paliyans: Ponnaia, Cinna Velan, and Tangavelu (aged 8, 9, and 10), danced at 10:55 one hot morning. Other youngsters contributed parapher-

<sup>11</sup> The seas which really do flank the Indian peninsula are not visible from the slopes which Paliyans inhabit.

nalía, such as garlands of flowers which they had just made for their own games. Attention soon focused on the best dancer, the 10 year old, who performed holding a small water pot on his head. When water splashed on him and when his 12 year old half-brother beat a rhythm for him on a container, he danced harder. He tossed down his head cloth, stamped on it, flung it away, and said something in a strained voice about a snake. After a few minutes, he burst out with "rain comes." Then he made a circuit of three houses whose occupants were not at work. Ponnusami, at the first house, told him he looked like a donkey. Nevertheless, Ponnusami got out his drum and beat an accompaniment for him. By the time the circuit was complete, Tangavelu was breathing very rapidly and letting out cries. An adult came and asked him about rain. He said "Rain comes tomorrow. Do not fear." There were interruptions: He writhed rhythmically but stood cooperatively once, as 10 year old Muttamma regarlanded him, and he dashed off at another point to refill his water pot. The half-brother who had been drumming earlier suddenly showed up wearing parivettam, a red lower cloth, and two cloths crossed over his chest. Tangavelu was given the chest cloths, then both young men danced to the drumming of yet another adult. Several young children, men of 20, 25, and 26, and women of 22 and 24, watched part or all of the 10 minute performance with amused smiles.

3) Late the next afternoon, on request once more, Tangavelu put on another, rather similar performance. There was one new element. After the initial drumming, but before sami began speaking, Tangavelu lay down panting, his eyelashes quivering; then, during his dancing, his stomach muscles began trembling. Several adults watched. Nallamma, who herself has visits from sami, watched the longest; toward the end she smiled in amusement and bounced her infant daughter to the accompanying drum beat. One adult asked "I have been ill two weeks. Where have you been?" No response was tendered. Tangavelu told one man that he would soon be married and have a child. He joked with another. This time, it seemed likely from their changing responses that some people were unsure they were watching mere play. Except perhaps for the joking, which would be uncharacteristic behavior for a Paliyan sami, Tangavelu did not break from the role and his quivering muscles suggested that controls were not voluntary.<sup>12</sup>

4) The fourth and last example of a mock ritual is rather different — it was a playful offering to pretend deities. At about 9:00 one damp morning,

I looked up from an interview to find that Velan (age 19) was performing a ritual of offering to Kotte (age 28), Subbiya (30), and Ponnán (20). The three recipients were standing in a row, with head covering and adornment in crude imitation of Tamil temple images. Kotte wore a turban, Subbiya had a mango picking net (as used in his work in one of the nearby plantations) on his head and a staff in his hand, Ponnán had a similar mango net headdress and a garland of leafy vines. Everyone then present in the community watched. Most stood near their own houses; Kotte's father and two other senior men stood right by the service. Velan offered flowers, ash, and water with his right hand and continuously rang a small hand bell with his left, as is done by Tamils in their places of worship (places which, in some cases, Paliyans share). None of the participants could hold back a smile, nor could anyone in the crowd of onlookers. There was very open delight for the 3 or 4 minute duration of the event.

## 6. Pragmatic Meanings

We may safely presume that there is a degree of contextual and interpersonal variation in the meanings of most cultural phenomena, but an event of such cultural importance as a visit from the samis might, like a key symbol, be expected to hold multifold meanings for a given person at a particular time. Use of more than one ethnographic perspective allows us to see that shamanism does indeed have diverse meanings for Paliyans. Because the ethnographic materials permit several kinds of analysis, five possible pragmatic meanings can be examined here. Samis, when speaking through shamans, can be viewed as: (1) indulgent, (2) demanding, (3) selective and authoritative — a combination to be explained below, (4) belonging to a formal realm, and (5) wise. The last of these, however, is distinctly an outside analyst's view of "meaning," that is, the meaningfulness has to

<sup>12</sup> Yet another such performance by a young person was ignored by its only potential Paliyan adult onlooker. On that occasion, the 8 year old performer called out three times to a nearby elderly man, saying *tātā, pēyādu* [grandfather, a malevolent spirit dances]. The old man, who was the community's main source of cathartic jokes during tense phases of rituals for the samis and at funerals, may well have been registering an objection to something other than the mock possession *per se*; it is possible, for instance, that he objected to the child labelling the spirit negatively, as *pēy*.

do with the fact that adaptive consequences may follow.

### 6.1 Indulgent Visitors

For Paliyans the relationship with the samis has an unusual character. The Paliyan behavioral code specifies that, except during their brief childhood or a period of extreme infirmity, individuals be independent in their decision making and self-reliant in caring for themselves. Certainly there is family cooperation in the food quest and in child care, but, to an unusual extent, it is thought proper that people manage their own lives. The slightest hint of overbearing or dependent behavior is deemed disrespectful. What is more, self-control and voluntary retreat (rather than retaliation or appeal to others) are prescribed when a person experiences an affront or injury from another. In sum, a person is expected to be autonomous as an individual and to avoid disrespect toward anyone else. The code applies to all adults and it applies so strictly that people avoid recourse to, or even recognition of, human experts and authorities, and they make no claims to expertise themselves (Gardner 1966, 1972). In interaction between Paliyans and samis, things are precisely the opposite. Although it is considered socially disruptive for one healthy, adult human to rely on another, it is the height of propriety to turn to samis for what look like parental care and authoritative knowledge. People bow before them, exaggerate any disabilities which are due to illness, or curl up at the samis' feet asking for help of several kinds, which they speak of collectively as "protection." Early in the century Dahmen summed up relations between Paliyans and their samis using this same term (1908: 29), and Morris has now done likewise for relations between Mala Pandarams and their spirits (1981: 207). The help requested from protecting samis includes: (a) providing resources directly, (b) conveying word to the gamekeeping samis that their help is needed too to provide Paliyans with resources, (c) warding off epidemics, (d) diagnosing and healing of illnesses which do occur, (e) asking other samis to come and heal Paliyans — as when Peciamma asks Sandanamari to protect Paliyans from smallpox or cure them of it, (f) explaining and helping people cope with unusual events, and (g) generally "watching over" their grandchildren, particularly when they walk in the forest. With visiting samis cast thus, in an indulgent guardian (or parental) role, Paliyans can escape momentarily, if they wish, the otherwise

constant burden of behaving responsibly as adults. They can enjoy the samis' nurturing care. When faced with circumstances such as the attempted political innovation, Paliyans find the availability of the samis' knowledge and judgement especially helpful, for theirs is a society lacking purely human superordinate controls and justice.

Leach's and Turner's theses concerning ritual status reversal suggest another phrasing. According to their theories, the starkly egalitarian social structure of Paliyans is a sufficient basis for predicting that they pursue ranked structure under ritual conditions (Leach 1961; Turner 1969: 191 f.). Broadening and refining these rather one dimensional expectations for structural reversal, we might say that, because the everyday structures impose responsible self-reliance (i.e., because there is inescapable, uniformly high office for everyone), the ritual quest ought to be for relief in the form of a subordinate role. Is this not precisely what we see when Paliyans curl up at the samis' feet and beg for help and protection?

Whichever phrasing is chosen, it is clear that individuals vary considerably in the frequency with which (and the extent to which) they admit to their need for a reversal and actually put aside their self-control and self-reliance. It is a personal matter as to whether a given event provides a diverting spectacle, an opportunity for obtaining valid information, or a deep catharsis.

### 6.2 What Samis Demand of People

There is a difficult side to sami-Paliyan relations, for the samis, too, have their expectations: The protecting samis may act as if they are unwilling to visit; when people do manage to discuss with them their needs, the samis may be stern or demanding; they also lay down certain rules for proper conduct.

Samis are most often called in late evening. This is a time at which those currently living in a settlement are back from work and outsiders are unlikely to be present, so, whether or not it is planned, visits of the samis are relatively private. The privacy may in fact be something which shamans consciously seek and it may be a matter of insuring that the samis respond to their petitioners. There was at least one clear attempt to get me to leave an imminent possession ceremony in the forest, on the pretext that it was not going to occur (I left as asked, accompanied by others, but we had walked no more than 60 m when the sounds of sami's arrival reached us and we all went

back to participate in the event). Paliyans need the samis' visits. I discussed with three people, on separate occasions, the difficulty they were often seen to experience in getting samis to come in answer to their requests. Although one aging person acknowledged that samis were hard to call, he denied that the problem was growing worse; a man and a woman who were particularly forthright with me expressed the view that the difficulty was becoming more extreme, they thought it was the samis' way of responding to the Paliyans' increased interaction with outsiders and the attendant adoption of alien or improper practices. Indeed, once, when it had taken an hour and 17 minutes of prayer, petition, and outright demands to entice his presence, the sami Valangeyappan gave the ethnographer's presence as one of his two reasons for being slow in coming: He protested the absence of some of his grandchildren and he asked how it could happen that they let me mingle with them. He referred to me as "Horse-eyes" and would not deal with anyone's problems until my place and the extent of my participation in the community had been clarified.<sup>13</sup> This was one of four occasions on which I found myself subjected to a fixed stare by one of the samis, something which I have also seen happen to a Tamil outsider. In the same bold, direct spirit in which Paliyans ask the samis to identify themselves on arrival, Valangeyappan had now requested this of the assembled petitioners. Testimonials regarding my behavior were provided by several people. Finally, claiming to be persuaded and classing me among his grandchildren, sami got on with the business at hand.

Paliyans' inattentiveness is of concern to samis in all Paliyan regions studied. It is common, for instance, for the samis to allege that Paliyans have made inadequate or insufficiently frequent offerings. Although they may make amends, the people can be extremely blunt if, in their view, the allegations are false. Just as the northernmost Paliyan men and women are at times particularly loud in their demands that a sami visit, they seem equally willing to raise their voices and dismiss

13 This took place among the northernmost Paliyans. In the southern ranges I observed that, when horses or donkeys appear, children under the age of about 4 are rushed away or their eyes are covered immediately by any nearby adult (or older child). Fear of the sight of horses was also described by Thurston and Rangachari (1909: 472). Note also that, if it is done in a sufficiently light and playful tone to someone with whom one has no conflict, a person may be likened, insultingly, to a donkey (see the second mock ritual, above).

their visitor abruptly if its requested offerings are excessive.

Finally, Paliyan adoption of improper practices is of concern to the samis. They prescribe proper behavior, monitor Paliyan compliance, and punish acts which offend them. For instance, one should refrain from sex the night before going into the forest (only one person mentioned this and context suggests that the trip might be for honey collecting) or before praying to the samis or making an offering to them. Members of a married couple should avoid so much as being in the proximity of one another during the woman's menses. One must also avoid, at all times, eating beef or wild bison, approaching a dead bison, wearing sandals of leather, or touching leather straps. All these prohibited acts are said by Paliyans to constitute offenses against the protecting samis — Peymalai, Vanapeci, Pattani, etc. The punishment for the offender might take the form of fever, boils, snakebite, loss of eyesight, or paralysis. Samis, when they visit (as near the end of the stone-throwing tiger case, above), also comment on such things as specific, recent family quarrels and they are said to punish violence and other kinds of disrespect. One young man's disabling boils on his legs were interpreted to be punishment for disruptions which followed from his making his mother pregnant. While the baby born of this union was welcomed, the act of incest offended the mother's current husband and it eventuated in a temporary, two or three month marital separation. The young man, believed to have been the one to initiate the incest, was also said later to have been punished for "ruining the earth."

### 6.3 Social Implications of Samis' Selectiveness and Authority

Given the strictures of their system, Paliyans must be experiencing a variety of other needs in addition to the need for nurturing guardians. There is indirect evidence of it. In dreams, for instance, a few Paliyans appeared to savor a reversal very different from the one just identified; they delighted in achieving direct action, control, and superiority over others. Some of them admitted dreaming of possessing special powers of flight and swooping down to taunt specific rivals. More than one had dreamt of a successful revenge affair, with a spouse's lover's spouse. This raises the possibility of there being means besides fantasy for gaining such direct satisfaction. And, because shamanism and spirit possession are found in many cultures to

be paths to power, prestige, and other social benefits (e.g., Rasmussen 1908; Wagley 1943; Opler 1958), we should be alert to evidence as to whether or not Paliyans attempt to use shamanism toward the same ends.

Not everyone experiences possession. Is it possible that Paliyans regard being the sami's mouthpiece as a potential source of prestige? Although shamans do become centers of attention, that attention is brief and it is really directed toward their visiting samis; they also appear on a relatively crowded stage because shamanism is distributed widely among the adults. Apart from being momentarily prominent, shamans might come to be recognized as astute on the basis of those instances in which their own previously expressed views are corroborated by the samis — as when Rakkaci and Peciamma, speaking through Sappani and Ponnai, supported their hosts' theory that tigers threw the stones. It is difficult to estimate how often this happens, but any such recognition would probably remain unmentioned and it would be awkward for the shaman, for reasons to be explained below.

Mock possession is part of the culture. Many participate in it and we have seen that a skilled 10 year old can emulate even the bodily trembling in play. If it were thought by them that benefits could accrue, some Paliyans might simulate real shamanic possession toward obtaining those benefits. I talked about this with a quiet, elderly man who was usually candid with me. He claimed that sometimes, "in those days," people used to pretend, to make others think "since samis come they are important people." Taken at face value, the behavior of two supposedly legitimately possessed adults was, indeed, suspect. First, when sami validated the election (case 3), one person who danced erratically for over an hour gave fleeting but repeated signs of being self-conscious and modest about clothing, appeared to be calculated rather than ecstatic when bumping into others, and smiled in response to the various events occurring around her. Such indications of lucidity are unusual, except in the mock rituals. Nonetheless, people classed the performance in question along with the others, as a visit by sami. We are talking about an inveterate recreational dancer. She may on one level have been taking advantage of the music, performing for her own pleasure in a manner which, though stylistically suited to the occasion, was never meant to be of serious functional significance to others. Not only was she someone who generally appeared to be socially effective and self-confident, ways for her

to derive much prestige from the dancing were not obvious.

The second person whose behavior was suspicious was described thus in fieldnotes written during an ongoing and seemingly unquestioned instance of sami possession: "When he converses, it is usually he who puts the question and, as he gets answers, he looks about at the faces quickly, as if checking on other aspects of the group's response" (notebook 15: 119). The day after another event in which sami came upon him, the same shaman was coy and playful with me; again and again he exhibited exaggerated incredulity when I attempted to discuss what had occurred. Because he was generally an aloof, uncommunicative person, my initial reading of his playful words was that they were intended to fend off inquiry.

While the two people just described exhibited what was, for possessed Paliyans, an unusual level of perceptual alertness and while one was strangely coy afterwards, these by themselves are insufficient bases for concluding that faking occurred. This is especially so if we remember how others have characterized the complex, pattern finding mind and the intellectual functioning of shamans (Levi-Strauss 1949*a*, 1949*b*; Shweder 1972). Both shamans, incidentally, are from the north slope of the Parani hills, where Paliyans share with their Tamil neighbors what may be construed as tests of the legitimacy of possession. The dancer never reached the stage at which sami spoke, this being the point at which one would expect her to have whipped her legs. The second person actually left a tough marulu whip in tatters early during the performance in which I noted his watchfulness; he did not employ one at all on the other occasion.

Whether or not aberrant Paliyans imagine that they can derive special attention or respect from shamanism, we need to appreciate that theirs is a culture in which avoidance of prestige has been systematized. Of course some people do become conspicuous inadvertently. When this happens to Paliyans, if they wish to maintain good relations with others they must be self-effacing, or, perhaps, aver that such things are a matter of chance and it just happened to be their turn. Those shamans made conspicuous by the frequency of their possession or by being proven correct by the samis are no exception to this general rule. Any show by them of accepting or enjoying their prominence would be prime cause for social offence.

#### 6.4 The Samis' Association with Formality

To invoke the samis is to seek contact with a phenomenal realm as distinctive in its order as in its power. Paliyans are casual and individually inventive in dealing with formal order in their ordinary activities and manufactures. This is understandable: Given their emphasis on *ad hoc*, individual problem solving, standard forms are not generated; given the lack of human authorities and acknowledged specialists, forms are not customarily polished into enduring, refined, proper versions either. One does see evenness and symmetry in particular things such as houses, digging sticks, combs, adornment, and improvised poems — it approaches elegance at times. Yet, the very person who has been meticulous one day can be casual the next. Idiosyncratic, playful, but relatively unelaborated variations are found even in the forms of ritual and myth; this warrants separate treatment and it will be the subject of a forthcoming paper.

Certain bodies of material having to do with the samis are exceptional, though, and two of them will be dealt with here — the tidily structured set of game keeping samis and the prayers. While both are too brief for formal analysis of any depth, their formal qualities and the way they are handled oblige that we subject them to at least some further scrutiny. For instance, as one aspect of its overall structural regularity, the list of six gamekeeping samis appears to have a standard order. (This is phrased cautiously because the list was only heard a few times.) It is presented by informants as if it is a componential paradigm. In the research done so far, it stands off from ordinary cultural material as a crystal would from a soft matrix. Although the list can be abbreviated (see, again, note 7), when this occurs, deletions are done in a regular manner without compromise to the structure.

In addition to being performed with distinctive pitch, held breath, and run-on phrases, invocational prayers are replete with uniquely Paliyan figurative words, expressions, and phrases. The meanings of the latter are quite unknown to those speakers of standard Tamil whose interaction with Paliyans has, otherwise, allowed acquisition of a hearer's competence in the forest dialect. Like the list of gamekeeper samis' names, they represent private and somewhat cryptic Paliyan knowledge. Little is known yet about the semantic fields<sup>14</sup> from which the language of prayer is drawn or the processes by which special expressions and phrases are incorporated into the improvised prayers. Factual clarifications and exegeses were brief at best and usually evasive. It is concluded provisionally,

though, that the longer phrases are unitary cysts, stock elements which are includable in the prayers as simple units. Whatever the outcome of further study of this prayer, it is manifestly clear that we are confronted by a highly distinctive area of cultural performance in both content and form.

#### 6.5 Samis as Sources of Wise Prescriptions

Paliyans say that samis have forbidden them certain practices, especially dietary practices, and they speak of the prohibitions as if they were issued recently. The list of prohibited practices includes eating beef or bison, approaching a dead bison, and touching leather sandals or straps.

To the extent that the "samis' rules" were put into actual practice (or came to be viewed by the Paliyans' Hindu neighbors as rules which were followed), that should have helped ease relations between Paliyans and their neighbors. To Hindus, the forest dwellers' practices in question are those of a ritually relatively pure people; although another, very different Hindu model is involved, the manifestly humble, austere daily life of Paliyans does already lend them an appearance of purity sufficient for Hindus to incorporate them into their own ritual routines (Gardner 1982). An image of ritual propriety would round out the general picture. How precisely might this help ease intergroup relations? Physical abuse, murder, and even group murder of Paliyans have occurred within living memory in the Paliyan/Tamil frontier zone. Yet, south Indian myths warn that there is a risk in raising one's hand against the pure. If that idea has been taken seriously by at least some of those who encounter or employ Paliyans, it is conceivable that bands which have best given the appearance of following pure practices have, in the long run, met with more respect and less violence. This would have enhanced the chance of such groups avoiding distant flight, dispersal, and any attendant demographic and social disruption; by being able to continue and foster their practices as a group, they would have had an increased likelihood of retaining their "wise" rules. And, it would be immaterial whether Paliyans in general were blind to, or appreciated, these adaptive advantages. That

14 For example, the corpus which was elicited of special, polite terms for living creatures (this was first encountered in the prayers, but it is used in the forest for speaking about nearby game without offending it or making it so ashamed that it runs away) has proved unsusceptible so far to formal analysis *as a set*.

this kind of selective retention has occurred must, nonetheless, be considered an untested theory.

If they are indeed the source, samis cannot have provided these wise proscriptions in their recent visits. In the earliest accounts of any specificity Paliyans from north to south are reported as avoiding beef (Dahmen 1908: 23; Thurston and Rangachari 1909: 491; Faulkes 1933: 196). Thurston and Rangachari give more detail: In addition to avoiding beef, Paliyans abandon "for a long time" any stream near which the carcass of a cow or buffalo is found and they avoid touching anything of leather (1909: 491). What is more, foragers west and north of the Paliyan ranges react just the same way to flesh of wild bison, to flesh and milk of domestic buffaloes, and to flesh of cattle (Aiyappan 1948: 104; Ehrenfels 1952: 180 f.; Krishna Iyer 1937: 113; Zvelebil 1988: 78). Additionally, avoidance of beef (in the broadest sense) *versus* consumption of it has become a highly explicit and standardized boundary marker between Paliyans and Puleyans in the vicinity of the Parani hills. Given (a) the generality of this Paliyan set of practices, (b) its wide distribution among other south Indian foragers, and (c) its resemblance in one region to a stable ethnic boundary marker (Barth 1969), it is unlikely to be a recent innovation. Origin and spread of the prohibitions may still be shamanistic, but the validity of Paliyan beliefs on that subject cannot be put to a historical test.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusions

Two kinds of finding are to be reported — theoretical and ethnographic. Theoretically, it is significant that visits of the samis appear to have several kinds of practical importance to Paliyans, not the least of which may be guidance in dealing with culture contact. Ethnographically, Paliyan shamanic beliefs and practices are found to be both similar to and different from those of other south Indian foragers, the observational data, particularly, contributing to a rounding out of our knowledge of Old World tropical shamanism. A few things need to be said about each.

What we have been able to ascertain about the several apparent practical meanings for Paliyans of visits of the samis should need no reiteration. Something must be said, nonetheless, about particular ones in relation to others and in relation to a wider ethnographic literature. For instance, the indulgent and demanding faces of the samis contrast with one another strikingly, but in their

very contrast they resemble (either from the viewpoint of Paliyans or from that of the samis) the set of rights and duties which come with membership in a social role dyad. This is, after all, consistent with the integral role of the samis in Paliyan decision making. Indeed, Paliyan-sami relations will be familiarly multiplex to students of social structure.

The samis' power to lay down rules (and punish) and their involvement with formality also make sense in terms of one another. These two characteristics of the samis are parallel in the way they elevate and separate them from living people. Given this two dimensional elevation, though, how may we interpret (a) ritual mocking of the samis and (b) blunt commands being put to them at the beginning and end of their visits? Both reverse the normal order. They may be explicable separately — one as the periodic catharsis which Gluckman refers to as a ritual of rebellion (1954), the other as the role reversal or masquerade which Leach finds characteristic of entry to, or exit from, ritual time. To anticipate one possible objection to this interpretation, namely, that rituals of rebellion almost always take place at set times and less often (e.g., annually or, in some cultures, at coronations) than the impromptu, frequent Paliyan ritual mocking of the samis, it should be noted that Paliyan ritual transvestism (which draws comparable smiles and laughter) is similarly *ad hoc* and frequent in occurrence. The very informality is a matter of cultural style.

As we have seen, elevation of samis above humans is altogether another matter from elevation of shamans above their fellows; Paliyans are quick to deny elevated status to the samis' mouthpieces. This is one manifestation of their general denial of prestige to anyone. The Paliyan safeguards against social stratification and their effectiveness have been outlined elsewhere (Gardner 1966, 1985). Rather than having means for extradomestic exchange which might confer social prominence on particular classes of individual, such as successful hunters or specialists (Friedl 1975), (a) Paliyans distribute the limelight widely, (b) individuals systematically disclaim their own right to special attention, and (c) they have routine ways of withholding limelight from those who are immodest. Given the importance of shamanism in the culture, it is a testimony to the adequacy of the general safeguards against prestige acquisition that shamans in a Paliyan community do not stand off from others socially. Even on an informal level, no prerogatives are accorded to Paliyan shamans, they have no *de facto* badges of office, and they are not socially distinct (indeed, their characteristic

personal behavior runs the full range, as does that of non-shamans, from quiet and peripheral to socially active and from surly or suspicious in tone to amicable and straightforward; Morris finds a corresponding lack of hierarchy between those Mala Pandarams who become possessed and others (1981: 227). Clearly, the Paliyan insistence on social levelling does much to shape the social and political side of their shamanism. It is worth noting that !Kung (Marshall 1961: 237 ff.; Lee 1969, 1972: 347f., 1979: 220ff., 247ff., 1984: 50; Draper 1978: 41, 44; Tanaka 1980: 95 f., 109; Wiessner 1982), Mbuti (Turnbull 1962: 103 f., 108, 1965a: 172,230, 1965b: 114, 158 ff., 330, 167, 180-184, 1978, 1981, 1983: 43 f., 47, 49, 53 ff., 124), eastern Hadza (Woodburn 1972: 199 f., 1982: 440-443), and Negritos of the Malay Peninsula (Schebesta 1927: 84, 103, 115; K. Endicott 1979: 21, 109 f.; K.L. Endicott 1986) *also* have institutionalized ways of avoiding prestige for themselves and ways of denying it to anyone who is indiscrete enough to pursue it. The implications of this for hologetic structural and functional studies of shamanism have yet to be explored.

Comparative examination of shamanism just of south Indian foragers reveals both shared characteristics and possible culture by culture differences as regards (a) the deities or spirits, (b) the shamans, and (c) the relationships between humans and the supernatural.

Spirits of mountain peaks and precipices, shades of particular ancestors, and deities cognate with those of the surrounding peoples are of widespread importance to foragers of the region. That is a misleading way to leave things, though. The classes of supernatural beings, their attributes, and terms for them all vary considerably. For instance, Paliyan and Irula samis of the mountains are in some instances related to one another by kinship, those of Mala Pandarams seem to not be (Zvelebil 1988: 137; Morris 1981: 225 ff.). Although Paliyan ancestral samis who died accidentally are usually deemed to be exceptionally powerful, they are like other samis in the antiquity of their origins and in their willingness to protect all. By contrast, ancestral spirits of the Mala Pandarams come in two named classes; members of one class are malevolent and members of the other are recently deceased and protective only of close kin (Morris 1981: 210f.).

No set of gamekeeping samis quite like that of southern Paliyans has been reported for other foragers in the region. There is more than a hint, nonetheless, that partial parallels exist among Chenchu, Kadar, and Irula. Garelamaisama, the

gamekeeping and game providing deity of the Chenchu, is said to be "like two deities" and is addressed both as "mother" and "father" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1943: 180-184, 279 f.). Malavay and Malankuratti, male and female, created the first Kadar and perhaps the first animals, but are not subsequently Kadar gamekeepers (Ehrenfels 1952: 161-166). Finally, perhaps least appropriately, Vettetoga or Biliyatoga is described by Zvelebil as being "neither male nor female, very old, in many ways most powerful" of the protective Irula deities (1988: 136). The Paliyan and Chenchu data, at least, should be of interest to those who associate gamekeepers only with circumpolar belief systems (e.g., Wallace 1966: 97). While there is considerable difference in style between the arctic and the tropical beliefs, it would be difficult to find a more appropriate label than "gamekeeping" for the set of Paliyan samis who care for and make available bees and game.

We know much more about the deities and spirits among south Indian foragers than we do about those who serve regularly as their mouthpieces. But, we know just enough to say that the latter also exhibit similarities and differences from culture to culture. Morris reports of Mala Pandaram that "there is no clear hierarchical relationship between the ritual specialist (the person who becomes possessed) and other members of the group" (1981: 227); this is an apparent parallel with the Paliyan case. Data vary, however, as to who becomes possessed and with what frequency. Morris estimates that "about one in eight" Mala Pandaram adults have divine visitors and the majority of those who do are men (1981: 205). If the communities he studied are representative for that culture, Paliyans are markedly different from Mala Pandarams in the high general frequency and the gender balance of possession.

Finally, we can say something about relationships between humans and the supernatural in the shamanism of the region. Paliyans are typical in the way they look to their samis for protection (Fürer-Haimendorf 1943: 183 f.; Morris 1981: 206 f.; Zvelebil 1988: 136) and discuss concerns with them almost as if they are humans (Morris 1981: 206). It is also the usual pattern in southern India for foragers to call the deities at night for the sake of privacy (Morris 1981: 205; Zvelebil 1988: 53). As the ethnographic record now reads, there is one notable kind of divergence in the Mala Pandaram case: These people interact with each class of deity and spirit in a different way.

Despite a growing body of material on these three aspects of shamanism among foragers in

south India, the intercultural differences have to be dealt with merely as "possible," for (1) there has been altogether too little observation, (2) data have been elicited with difficulty (e.g., Ehrenfels 1952: 155), and (3) no one claims to offer thorough, well verified accounts. Hopefully, the extent to which the apparent divergences turn out to be real ones and the extent to which we are looking, rather, at the results of complementary ethnographic collection of information on the cultures will eventually be ascertained. In the meanwhile, resemblances which have been documented allow us to talk at the very least about variations on regional themes and they offer appreciable corroboration of the interpretations which have been put forward.

Shamanism is practiced actively by Paliyan foragers in the hills of Tamil Nadu and in ways which are not totally novel for foragers in the region. Observational and interview data provide us with a rich sense of the place of the samis' visits in Paliyan culture. The general significance of these visits may well be signaled by certain kinds of formal elaboration, which are greater than usual for the culture. Most importantly, though, we find evidence that possession for Paliyans holds several pragmatic meanings. The samis are not only given an integral role in solving day to day problems of subsistence, health, cultural maintenance, and pressures for culture change, but their role is such that Paliyans are able to experience periodic relief from the demands of their difficult social code.

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