

Households in Akkaraipattu: Dowry and Domestic Organisation Among the Matrilineal Tamils and Moors of Sri Lanka

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I Introduction

MY GOAL in this paper is to describe and analyse the pattern of descent, marriage and household organisation shared today by both Hindus ('Tamils') and Muslims ('Moors') in the town of Akkaraipattu in the matrilineal belt of Sri Lanka, the Tamil-speaking, eastern coastal region. Despite their formal religious differences, the Hindu Tamils and the Muslim Moors share many common values and practices in the marriage and household domain. What I hope to show is that the Tamil/Moorish household is a nexus of some familiar South Asian institutions—dowry, marriage, worship, ritual pollution, and matrilineal descent, to name a few—but that these familiar institutions are configured and enacted in some distinctive ways which serve to broaden our understanding of the field of 'ethnographic possibility' in South Asia. A Tamil or Moorish household consists of the people who live together within a 'house and compound,' *vitu valavu*, but houses and agricultural land are transferred as a wife's dowry and the matrilineal residence rule results in a clustering of daughters' dwellings. This household system thus offers an opportunity to explore some of the factors which seem to generate a relatively greater level of female autonomy and influence in comparison with the more widespread patrilineal/patrilocal household patterns in other parts of South Asia.

II The Tamil/Moorish Household System in Outline

Geography, Settlement and Economy

The eastern coastal region of Sri Lanka, centred upon the district town of Batticaloa but extending approximately 100 miles from Valaichchenai in the north to Pottuvil in the south, is inhabited in roughly equal proportions by Tamil-speaking Sunni Muslims ('Moors') and Tamil-speaking Shaivite Hindus ('Tamils') whose system of matrilineal descent and uxorilocal marriage is distinctive in an island already well-known for the diversity of its kinship and marriage patterns (Banks 1957; Leach 1961; S.J. Tambiah 1958; Yalman 1967).¹ The economy of this region is based primarily upon irrigated rice cultivation, although some communities are also significantly reliant upon coastal and lagoon fishing, plantation crops (coconut, cashew nut), handloom textile production, and mercantile trade. Two types of settlement patterns can be seen: the majority of the population is concentrated in densely-packed towns and villages close to the seashore, while farther to the west, particularly on the inland shores of the major semi-saline lagoons, one finds a pattern of small nucleated villages and hamlets. The coastal settlements in some places have merged to form a continuous strip of habitation shaded by dense stands of coconut palms, but in fact a strict ethnic segregation of the Moorish neighbourhoods from those of the Tamils is maintained, despite the apparent visual continuity. The great majority of the Moors live along the coast, while the Tamils are found both in coastal towns as well as in inland villages.

Despite the dense, semi-urban habitation pattern along stretches of the coastal road, almost everyone is engaged in farming, or at least owns a bit of agricultural land, prompting one sociologist to classify these settlements as 'peasant towns' (Ryan 1950: 10). Men perform most of the rice cultivation tasks except for weeding, which is done by brigades of destitute women, and it is common for those engaged in agricultural work to commute daily perhaps 5–10 miles by bicycle, bullock cart, or bus from their homes to their fields. During critical periods in the agricultural cycle, however, cultivators and 'watchers' will sleep overnight in elevated wooden shelters erected in the fields.

Among the Tamils, the two dominant landowning castes are the Mukkuvars²

¹ Starting in the 1950s, a large number of Sinhalese Buddhist peasants have been settled by the government on land colonisation schemes in the Dry Zone areas adjacent to the eastern coastal districts where the Tamils and Moors reside (Farmer 1957). These new Sinhalese-speaking settlers form a community geographically and ethnically distinct from the Tamil-speakers, and their household system is unrelated to that of the Tamils and Moors.

and the Vellalars, who jointly share the highest rank in the caste hierarchy with non-Brahman Viracaiva Kurukkal priests (McGilvray 1981). These highly-ranked castes are followed in descending order by Karaiyar Fishermen, Cantar Climbers, Tattar Smiths, Navitar Barbers, Vannar Washermen, and Paraiyar Drummers. The Mukkuvars held the old political chiefships (*vannimai*) in most parts of the region during the precolonial and early colonial periods (McGilvray 1982a), apparently a legacy of their role as mercenary warriors in the invading army of the Kalinga prince Magha who conquered the northern half of the island in 1215 AD. Somehow Magha, and possibly other Indian invaders of the medieval period, recruited the Mukkuvar soldiers from the Kerala coast of south India, where some of their descendents remain as Hindu fishermen (and Muslim Mappillas) even today. Thus, the matrilineal and matrilineal elements of social organisation in eastern Sri Lanka have historical roots in Kerala, but these practices are now shared by all the Tamil castes in the region, as well as by the Moors, who apparently acquired the same matrilineal system through intermarriage with local (matrilineal) Tamil women.²

The household data presented here were gathered primarily in the Tamil and Moorish wards of the coastal town of Akkaraipattu (population 30,000 in 1971) located in Amparai district, which served as my principal fieldwork site on three occasions (1969–71, 1975, 1978). However, some data on rural Tamil Hindu households were also collected on short visits to villages near Kokkaticcolai, in Manmunai Pattu, Batticaloa district. The households about which I have detailed information are predominantly high caste Tamil (Mukkuvar, Vellalar) households and Moorish households at the middle income level. Judging from the strong correspondences I have observed in the cultural domains of religion, ritual, and caste ideology, I have no reason to think that low caste and poor households differ fundamentally from higher caste and wealthier households in terms of the ideal cultural models of kinship, matrilineal descent, and domestic role structure. However, poverty and political subordination are certainly likely to deflect actual household behaviour patterns away from the cultural ideal in some situations. This is a process which I have documented in the domain of Untouchable religion (McGilvray 1983) but which I currently lack the data to examine in the household domain.

² Apart from a few Sinhalese outsiders (traders and bureaucrats; some Buddhist, some Catholic), the only groups lacking the matrilineal complex are relatively recent arrivals such as Kataiyar Limeburners or semi-tribal Telugu-speaking Kuravar gypsies (McGilvray 1974), as well as the Creole-speaking Roman Catholic Portuguese Burghers (McGilvray 1982c). The Moors and Tamils tell different versions of a basic legend explaining how Muslim traders once lent assistance to the Mukkuvars in their victorious war against the Timilars, a rival caste, and as their reward were given Mukkuvar brides, whose matrilineal clan membership and matrilineal property came to be enjoyed by their descendants in the manner seen today.

Wards, Compounds, and Houses

In a large coastal settlement such as Akkaraipattu, the residential ward (Tamil *kuricci*, locally rendered in English as 'division') boundaries which demarcate the jurisdictions of the lowest-level government headmen tend also to coincide with the discrete Hindu caste neighbourhoods of the Tamils. The residential divisions of the Moors, who lack caste distinctions, are more socially uniform.³

The local materials for house construction vary from wattle-and-daub to cement and fired brick, from plaited coconut frond thatching to terracotta roof tiles. In the innermost neighbourhoods, and more commonly among the Moors than among the Tamils, some large multi-storied houses are found, but most people live in ground-level houses built upon raised cement foundations. All houses are built on the model of a nuclear family dwelling, although it is expected that there will be a married daughter and a matrilineal son-in-law temporarily sharing the house at one stage of the family's developmental cycle. Every house (*vitu*) is situated within an enclosed yard or compound (*valavu*), usually walled with masonry or galvanised metal, or barricaded with barbed wire, thatch, and sharpened stakes, to discourage stray animals, thieves and intruders. The groundwater table tends to be quite high in this coastal region, so practically every house has its own well and bathing area within the compound.⁴ Sheltering the compound will be stands of coconut, banana, mango, and arecanut, as well as ornamental plantings of hibiscus and temple flower, all of which contribute to a sense of leafy privacy and refuge. On a day-to-day basis, the gateway from the street into the compound is really the most important 'front door' to the house, the sandy shaded ground between the gateway and the house itself often serving as an open-air 'living room' to entertain visitors informally during the day. However, for serious activities such as eating, which could be threatened by lurking spirits or by an inadvertent glance of the evil-eye, as well as for many activities after dark, a time identified with ghosts and with dangerous

³ The Tamil ancestors of the Moors, insofar as they can be inferred from shared matrilineal names and customs, are principally the Mukkuvars. There are some vestiges of possible caste-related hierarchy among Moorish matrilineals, but today the Moors are proud of their egalitarian religion and of their common bond as Muslims. There is, however, a small elite of Maulanas who claim patrilineal descent from the Prophet and a small, endogamous, stigmatised group of Osta barber-circumcisers who resemble a low caste. A small number of Bawas, or Sufi mystics, are set apart by their ecstatic religious practices, but they have marriage connections with ordinary Moorish families.

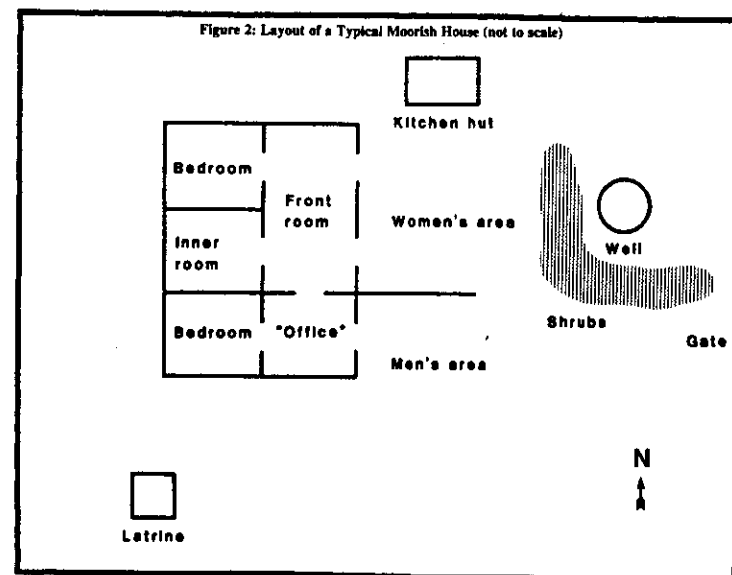
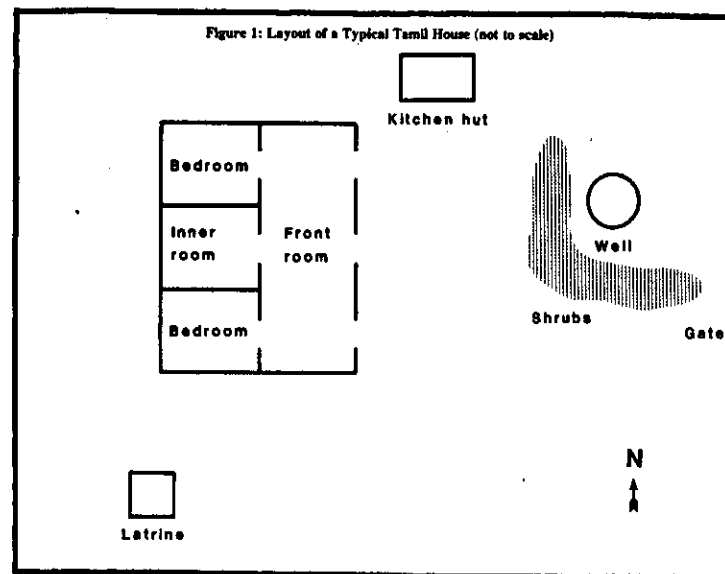
⁴ The impact upon community interaction patterns of private household wells, as opposed to shared public wells, is noticeable in the largely Moorish town of Sammanturai. There, because of unusually dry and rocky terrain, wells are deep and extremely expensive to dig, so women must carry water daily from public wells. As a consequence, one observes a degree of daily public interaction by groups of Moorish women which would be considered immodest in the better-watered settlements.

'coolness', members of the house will move indoors and even close the shutters.

The most traditional and uniform house design is still found among the Tamils, while the Moorish houses show a greater degree of variation upon the basic pattern. According to local experts, the building site should be diagrammed to ensure that a new house is located away from dangerous lines of force (especially the NE-SW diagonal) and away from peripheral zones on the south and west ceded to malevolent supernaturals: *pey*, *picacu*, and *djin*. Middle income houses, especially in the towns, often have an enclosed squatting-style latrine and septic tank near the periphery of the compound, defecation being the only important activity appropriate for this demonic sector.

The prototypic east coast Sri Lankan Tamil house, whether it is constructed of mud and thatch or of brick and tile, is oriented toward the east (Figure 1). This orientation cannot always be achieved when houses must be built on urban lots which do not front the east side of a street, so compromises are made, often by constructing a formal and aesthetically appropriate doorway to the north, south or west which is seldom used in daily life. I have seen mud houses which consisted of only two rooms, but the ideal Tamil house should really have four: a secure, windowless 'inner room' (*ullutu*, lit. *ul vitu*) for storing grain and valuables and for worshipping Hindu deities; two sleeping rooms flanking the 'inner room' to the north and south; and a public reception room onto which the other three rooms open (an open thatched verandah may substitute for the reception room in poorer houses). If there is only one room used for sleeping, it will be the northern one (the '*mancutu*', from *mancam*, bed), which is, for the Tamils, the connubial chamber par excellence. Southern and western rooms are unpopular for sleeping because of their directional associations with death and decline: Yaman, the messenger of death, arrives from the south, and the western sunset has strong symbolic connotations of entropy and decline (Beck 1976). Judging from the households I know best, the family member most likely to occupy a southern bedroom is an older boy or an unmarried son. Senior members of the family will often prefer to sleep in the public reception hall rather than in a southern bedroom thus sometimes leaving this room available to rent to an indiscriminating anthropologist and his family.

Some of the recent 'modern' houses incorporate a kitchen and built-in chimney/hearth, the cooking in most Tamil houses is still done in a temporary wood and thatch shelter north or east of the main house. Unmarried children will eat their meals in or near the kitchen with their mother, while food may be eaten in a separate room by the father or in the bedroom by a newly-wed daughter and her matrilocal husband. The concrete-lined well, with its counterbalanced wellsweep and paved bathing apron, tends to be



located east or northeast of the house, usually behind some ornamental bushes or in a partial enclosure constructed of plaited palm fronds.

Moorish houses seem to exhibit more diversity of design, but the orientation is usually toward the east, the basic layout (Figure 2) typically a variation on that of a Tamil house. There will be a secure, windowless 'inner room', as in a Tamil house, but instead of housing sacks of rice and shrines for Hindu gods, it will be used—as the northern bedroom is used by the Tamils—as the bedchamber of the sexually active married couple in the household. Because daily Muslim prayers require no specially consecrated space, the Moors choose to situate the young married couple at the very centre of the house, in the darkest and most private room. As among the Tamils, I noted a tendency for young unmarried Moorish men to occupy the southernmost bedroom, while females tend to sleep in northern bedrooms, which are usually also nearer the kitchen and the well. The other major architectural difference between Tamil and Moorish houses is that the latter houses must have some provision for female seclusion when male visitors are present. One of the simplest arrangements is to build an external free-standing wall outward from the side of the house toward the gate of the compound, behind which the women can go about their domestic tasks within earshot, but out of sight, of the male visitors who congregate in front of the doorstep. Inside the house, some sort of barrier, often a cloth curtain, will be available to block off the northern area of the house from male view. Sometimes the southern portion of the house, the area most often associated with formal dealings and male hospitality, will be made into an 'office' or reception room separated from the rest of the house by a curtain or by a masonry wall and doorway. Moorish women are expected to pull the end of their *saris* over their heads and across part of their faces (a veiling gesture called *mukkattu*) in the presence of strange men, a gesture which some women perform more fastidiously than others. In different ways, and to different degrees, the architecture of Moorish houses serves the same purpose.

Kinship, Affinity and Descent

Tamil and Moorish kinship categories reflect the same overall structure, and there are only a few lexical differences in actual kin terminology. East coast kinship conforms perfectly to the bilateral 'general structure' of Dravidian categories described by Yalman (1967) for the Kandyan Sinhalese and also fits the symmetrical paradigm of proto-Dravidian kinship categories reconstructed by Trautmann (1981: 229–37). The basic features include a terminologically coded preference for bilateral cross-cousin marriage (MB child and FZ child equally preferred), and the labelling of parallel cousins as classificatory siblings. Same sex cross-cousins exhibit an informal joking

relationship which stands in striking contrast to the more formal, hierarchical behaviour toward other relatives, including an explicit avoidance relationship between son-in-law and mother-in-law. I found the incidence of marriage between biological first cross-cousins to be 17–20 per cent of sampled marriages among Moors and high caste Tamils (for data on marriage choice in other castes see McGilvray 1974). Of course, the logic of the kinship categories also defines a much larger field of classificatory cross-cousins who are eligible marriage partners, and even total strangers become reclassified as cross-cousins after they become one's spouse, or one's brother-in-law, or one's sister-in-law. The point to keep in mind here is that, unlike the Indo-Aryan marriage patterns of north India, the eastern Sri Lankan pattern of marriage conforms to the characteristically Sinhala/Dravidian preference for close marriage, frequently to a cross-cousin from either the maternal or paternal side.⁵ However, the genealogical closeness of cross-cousins who marry does not imply that the bride and groom will have enjoyed an informal face-to-face relationship prior to their marriage. In early childhood this may have been true, but in late childhood and adolescence cross-cousins of the opposite sex are carefully segregated and chaperoned, so that their wedding may be the first occasion in many years for them to speak or even gaze directly at one another. Marriage between closely related cousins tends to have the effect of reducing dowry expectations (corroborated by Miller 1981: 156), while upwardly mobile families seeking alliances with strangers of high status must be prepared to offer substantially larger dowries.

Sets of dispersed exogamous matrilineal clans (called *kuti*, literally 'house, hut'),⁶ linked by isogamous marriage alliance,⁷ are found among both the Tamils and the Moors. Matriclan membership serves to assign a number of

⁵ There is no consciously stated preference between MBD and FZD marriages, although a sample of marriages did turn up a slightly greater number of MBD marriages (McGilvray 1974).

⁶ I have loosely identified the *kuti* as a 'matriclan' because the term is convenient and familiar, and because there seems to be no other anthropological label which would fit the ethnographic facts better. These named matrilineal descent units are dispersed throughout the region, rather than highly localised, so they might be called 'matri-sibs' (i.e., the organised memberships of these sibs in specific village clusters and urban neighbourhoods, the highest level of functional organisation and joint activity); they do have major corporate roles in the management of temple and mosque affairs, reinforced by a consistent rule of matri-uxorilocal residence, features which would seem to classify them in Murdock's scheme as 'matri-clans' (Murdock 1949: 47, 66–70). However, one crucial feature of the true Murdockian matriclan is lacking: the in-marrying matri-uxorilocal husband is *not* assimilated as a member of his wife's matrilineal descent group. According to Murdock, when the residential group is not coterminous with the descent group, the essential features of the matriclan as a 'compromise kin group' are not attained. However, until an important theoretical issue can be shown to hinge upon these taxonomic distinctions, I prefer to utilise the more generic term 'clan' and give it a distinctive Tamil/Moorish inflection.

⁷ Fieldwork by Hani (1973) and McGilvray (1974) has found no empirical evidence of the pattern of hypergamous marriage between matriclans postulated by Yalman (1967: 325–31).

ritual privileges (*varicai*) related to kingly honours and status distinctions which are traditionally displayed at domestic life-crisis observances as well as temple and mosque festivals (Dirks 1987; McGilvray 1982a). Male matriclan elders constitute the boards of trustees which manage the Hindu temples and Muslim mosques in the Batticaloa region, and in the precolonial polity—only vestiges of which remain today—succession to local Tamil chiefships was passed matrilineally within particular matriclans. Members of the most prestigious local matriclans often favour the perpetuation of existing marriage alliances with other prestigious matriclans, while members of smaller, more obscure, or lower ranked clans are less concerned about such matters. For everyone, however, the matriclan system is a significant constraint upon marriage choice: kuti affiliation is one of the first questions a family will ask when a marriage is proposed, and I found violations of kuti exogamy to be extremely rare.⁸

It is interesting to note that neither the Tamil nor the Moorish wedding ceremonies show any trace of transubstantiation or ritual assimilation of the bride or the groom to their respective spouse's lineage or descent group. Furthermore, a bride remains susceptible to her parents' and siblings' death pollution after she is married. This reflects the independent non-Brahman/non-Sanskritic matrilineal tradition of the east coast region which has no concept that a bride could be assimilated (bodily, legally, or otherwise) into the husband's matrilineal bloodline, lineage, or *gotra*⁹. However, the more orthodox Brahmanical/Sanskritic/patrilineal pattern of bride transfer and 'the gift of a virgin' has been noted in Jaffna (David 1973) and is widely attested in Indian wedding rituals (Barnett 1970; 1976; Fruzzetti 1982; Fruzzetti and Ostor 1976; Inden and Nicholas 1977; Madan 1962). It is perfectly normal for a husband to hold office (e.g., as mosque trustee) in his own matriclan quite independently from the clan activities of his wife's

⁸ The rule of kuti exogamy 'overlaps' and reinforces the Dravidian kinship rule against marrying a matrilineal parallel cousin (MZS or MZD). The Dravidian classification is actually more inclusive and exhaustive, since it also prohibits marriage with patrilineal cross-cousins, who might or might not belong to Ego's matriclan. Even so, informants indicated that matriclan membership would be the first thing marriage-minded families would investigate, before the cousin relationship. Although violations of kuti exogamy may occur, very few such cases were revealed to me. I noted only one case of a 'public' violation of the clan exogamy/Dravidian cousin rule—a Moorish schoolteacher who was determined to marry his very close classificatory sister (his MZD), also a teacher. Her family experienced classic pangs of incest horror, and her brother tried to block the marriage, but the couple went ahead and legally 'registered' their marriage. After the furor subsided, they quietly started living together, and at last report they had three or four children.

⁹ The term *gotra* (*kottiram*) is used by members of one caste, the Viracai Kurukkals, as a synonym for matriclan (kutti). Gotras as mythically-chartered exogamous patrilineal descent units (Mandelbaum 1972: v. I, 145–48) are not found in eastern Sri Lanka, except presumably among a few immigrant Brahman temple priests.

family. Among the Moors, a man's formal membership in one of the several local mosque congregations is simply a matrilineal continuation of his mother's, or actually his mother's brother's, mosque affiliation—since women themselves do not attend mosque.

Marriage, Residence and Dowry

Everyone—Hindu and Muslim, high caste and low—follows the same basic pattern of marriage and residence: the daughters stay put, the sons marry out, and the parents and unmarried children periodically shift domicile. In preparation for marriage, Tamil families inaugurate their daughters into womanhood and 'eligibility' through a female puberty rite which commences with the onset of a girl's first menstrual period. Initially polluted and 'hot' because of the blood flowing from her body, the girl is gradually purified and dietarily 'cooled' during a period of seclusion. On the last day, in a highly publicised celebration conducted entirely by women, she is given a ritual bath, dressed in a red wedding sari and jewelry, and is honoured as a mock-bride as she ritually re-enters the natal house which will eventually become her matrilocal married home. Moorish families in Akkaraipattu have now discontinued what had been simpler, but basically analogous, puberty rituals for Moorish girls. (For more on female puberty rites see McGilvray 1982b).

From the standpoint of the parents, and also from the standpoint of sons and brothers, the fundamental kinship obligation is to arrange respectable and secure marriages for their daughters and sisters. Typically, the woman's side takes the initiative in marriage negotiations, while the man's side is content to entertain proposals from several quarters. While the social status, educational level, and personal qualities of the partners are important factors in any proposal of marriage, the ultimate issue to be decided is the size of the dowry (*citanam*) which the bride will bring to the marriage. Here in the matrilocal/matrilineal zone of Sri Lanka, virtually all the family wealth goes to the daughters as dowry, which thus functions as the main channel of premortem matrilineal inheritance (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Harrell and Dickey 1985). Sons inherit little or nothing from their parents; instead, they enjoy, cultivate, and eventually strive to augment their wives' dowry assets. The essential core of a woman's dowry is land and a house, while cash, jewelry, clothing, and utensils—the main constituents of dowry for women elsewhere in South Asia—are treated as enticing fringe benefits which may help to sweeten a marriage proposal. The absolute minimum dowry a woman must have is a house; without it, or without at least a firm pledge that it will be built, a marriage is usually impossible.

In the typical pattern, it is the mother's dowry house which becomes the

eldest daughter's dowry house. Daughters are expected to marry in strict order of age, so the eldest daughters in each generation will tend to occupy the same ancestral house, while new houses must be built for each of the younger daughters. Nowadays, however, the first son-in-law may insist upon having a newer 'modern-style' house, so the more charming old ancestral home might be given to a younger daughter. One of my research assistants, a sought-after university graduate from an isolated Tamil village in the Batticaloa region, was able to demand a major decision making role from his future parents-in-law, including specification of the design and ritual inauguration of his fiancée's dowry house. Needless to say, this sort of thing becomes a major financial burden to a family with many daughters, although the scale and sumptuousness of these houses will vary significantly with the socio-economic status of the family.

In families with higher levels of social status to maintain (or achieve), the task of ensuring an adequate dowry for the daughters becomes a focal concern of both the parents and unmarried sons. In families devoted primarily to agriculture, sons will be expected to defer solicitations of marriage in order to work the family lands on behalf of their sisters, while in mercantile and professional families, sons will postpone marriage in order to divert their cash earnings into their sisters' dowry fund. Families with the necessary funds in hand, and looking for a hedge against inflation, may construct new dowry houses while their daughters are still young children and rent them to middle class bureaucrats, salesmen, or teachers. I have had the honour of being the first tenant in two such houses, the first of which had been built as a dowry for the daughter of my landlord, a Moorish shopkeeper, when she was only 3-years old.

There is no doubt that dowry is a focal concern in this society, especially among the young unmarried men who sit in the tea shops and saunter along the main road every evening. When I tried to ascertain who actually makes the crucial decisions about marriage and dowry, it became evident that kin of both sexes—husbands and wives, uncles and aunts—can have an equally significant impact upon the outcome of the negotiations. This was reflected in a widely divergent set of responses to my questions concerning who took the lead in marriage negotiations. The bride and groom also have veto power—at least technically—and senior men always do the 'official' talking at the final stages. Women frequently take the lead in planning and sending out the first informal 'feelers' which may evolve into formal negotiations, and in the course of the customary food exchanges they also carry covert messages and information between the two negotiating kin groups. Most people stress the collective 'team' aspect of marriage and dowry decision making, and it is obvious that women as well as men are deeply involved at several levels.

Because it is only through their wives' dowry that men gain access to the wealth of the previous generation, a man who fails to drive a hard bargain is considered a fool. I knew of one Tamil bridegroom who, to the absolute consternation of his mother's brother who was trying to negotiate a good dowry for him, ended up capitulating to the bride's family on every crucial issue. They first offered only a house and compound, and the groom's side responded with a demand for an additional Rs. 1,000 cash payment. This was refused, as also a modified request for Rs. 500. At that point the groom's MB advised him to look for another proposal, but the groom, evidently lusting for the bride (despite the fact that he did not know her name until two days before the wedding!), said he would settle for the original offer. Later it was learned that the bride's family had not deeded the house to their daughter as promised, claiming they could not afford the Rs. 30 stamp duty and the notary's fees. At this point, the groom's uncle stated flatly that he could not condone the marriage and that neither he nor any of the groom's kin would play any further role in the matter. Consequently, none of the customary boxes of sweets were exchanged between the families, and no one from the groom's family went to the wedding.

I attended, however, just out of curiosity, and what I saw was apparently the minimal Tamil wedding, short of elopement or clandestine nuptials.¹⁰ The groom actually had to borrow some money from his wife's family to buy the wedding sari, and there was no *tali* (wedding necklace) at all, although the groom said he would buy one later. It even seemed that the groom, a carpenter, might end up having to build his own house on his wife's property. With the collapse of formal dowry negotiations between two kin groups, this marriage had become merely an eccentric private transaction between the groom and his wife's nuclear family. The groom's kinsmen remained on good personal terms with him, but they told me privately that they had never seen a marriage as crazy as his. I knew at least one other set of parents who were privately worried that their older sons, known for their impetuous behaviour, might similarly forfeit their best chance for wealth, status, and security by seeming too eager to marry and thus undermine their negotiating position for a good dowry. The opposite problem, excessive obstinacy or suspicion on both sides, also occurs sometimes. Despite the best efforts, negotiations can go sour, sometimes repeatedly, forcing both families to pick up the pieces each time and seek a new match.

¹⁰ I am told that the absolute minimal acts which will make a man and woman, husband and wife are their privately feeding food to each other (*kalattil potukiratu*, putting [food] on the brass dish) or the man blockading himself inside the house with the woman (the expression is *viitukkul pukuntar*, 'he penetrated into the house'). One may note that eating food from a common plate in an inner room of the bride's house is an essential part of the standard Tamil and Moorish wedding rituals and is echoed in the direct commensal symbolism of poorer Kandyan Sinhalese marriages (Yalman 1967: 108).

Every marriage begins matrilocally, but it becomes an independent uxori-local union over time.¹¹ The Moors do conduct a preliminary Islamic marriage rite (*nikah*) in the home of the groom, but both the Moors and the Tamils escort the groom in similarly noisy processional fashion to the home of the bride for what is the ritual core of the nuptial event, the tying of her wedding necklace (*tali*) and the eating of food from a common plate. Both the Tamil and the Moorish wedding rituals are marked by symbolic gestures which express the idea that the groom is being incorporated as a new high status member of his wife's household. For example, the bride's younger brother worshipfully washes the groom's feet (or, in more Westernised families, polishes his shoes) at the threshold of the bride's house, then leads him by the hand inside for the *tali*-tying ceremony. With the exception of a brief 'homecoming' visit by the couple to the groom's natal home approximately a week after the wedding, the bride and groom remain for a period of six months to two years as co-residents of the bride's parents' house. They are allotted one of the scarce private rooms, and in the early stages of the marriage they are treated as honoured guests: special foods are prepared for them, and the domestic workload is reduced to encourage sexual intimacy leading to an early pregnancy (McGilvray 1982b). This is a period during which the daughter is given her final training in cooking and the domestic arts, while the son-in-law demonstrates his skill in cultivating his wife's dowry lands or his reliability as a salaried employee.

When the bride and groom seem well-established and self-reliant, or when there is another nubile daughter who must be wed, the bride's parents, together with some or all of the bride's unmarried brothers and sisters, move out of the dowry house, leaving the married couple in charge of their own independent nuclear household. In effect, the married daughter 'stays put' while everyone else shifts into a newly constructed dwelling nearby which will become the dowry house for the next daughter in line for marriage. This process by which every matrilocal wedding house eventually becomes a uxori-local dowry house is repeated until all the daughters are married and settled in their own dwellings. If the size of the original maternal compound permits, it will be subdivided and the new dowry houses for the younger daughters will be sequentially constructed adjacent to the original maternal house. If vacant lots are available and affordable, building sites may be acquired nearby to expand this clustering of sisters' houses around the maternal homestead; otherwise, cheaper land may have

¹¹ The residence pattern is matrilocal in the sense that the couple resides with the wife's parents. Given the cross-cousin marriage preference, however, it would also be quite possible to classify some of these marriages as avunculocal when the groom's father-in-law happens also to be his real or classificatory mother's brother. For a marvellous example of such multiple and overlapping residence classifications take a look at the Garo of Assam (Burling 1963: 93-97).

to be purchased for dowry house construction farther away from the mother's original dwelling. In fact, in areas with urban crowding and steep inflation in land prices, the ideal clustering of daughters' houses is becoming more and more difficult to attain.

Similar considerations govern the decision as to where the bride's parents will live after all their daughters have been married. In some instances, the father and mother may reside with the youngest daughter and her husband, but there is a strong underlying sentiment that elderly parents should really 'step aside' in a visible sort of way, perhaps retire to a small hut in a corner of one of their daughters' compounds, and allow the next generation to shoulder the burdens of life. This viewpoint seems to reflect an underlying concept of the ideal Tamil/Moorish life-cycle, one which assumes that the parents' active sexuality should cease when their daughters are ready for marriage and that houses are meant to accommodate only one procreating couple at a time.

In the ideal pattern of household growth and development, who then will take over the leadership role formerly played by the wife's father? Contrary to the more common South Asian pattern, it will not be his eldest son, for by this time he will have succumbed to the blandishments of an attractive marriage proposal, will have become a contributing member of his own wife's matri-uxori-local household, and will have begun to focus his energies and earnings toward his own family of procreation as well as toward the welfare of his wife's remaining unmarried sisters. The mother's brother, so often a figure of power and authority in other matrilineal systems (e.g., Nayar and Trobriand), is here an ally and advisor to the family—and of course an interested party to all marriage decisions, since he is a potential father-in-law to his sisters' children—but he has no official role to play in the running of his sisters' households. As the father gradually discharges his obligations to his daughters, or simply as he becomes elderly and less effectual, the male leadership role falls increasingly upon the senior son-in-law, the eldest daughter's husband, who was carefully recruited for this eventual responsibility in the first place.

It is understood by everyone that the first son-in-law will increasingly play a major economic and leadership role in his wife's family, and it is in order to obtain the most qualified candidate for this position that the largest dowry will tend to go to the eldest daughter. In all dowry decisions, but especially so in this case, there is the straightforward notion that a family should seek to get the best son-in-law that a dowry can buy. Parents may also overspend on their first daughter's dowry on the unrealistic assumption that future earnings will restore the dowry assets of their younger daughters. Dowry serves multiple purposes, but it is certainly correct to identify one of

its dimensions as 'bridegroom price' (Caplan 1984; S.J. Tambiah 1973). However, it is understood that the 'purchased' son-in-law will, in return, reorient his kinship loyalties away from his natal kin and toward his new wife and sisters. It is worth noting that the modern urban (Colombo and Jaffna) practice of a new husband appropriating his wife's dowry assets and transferring them into a dowry fund for his own unmarried sisters¹² is strongly condemned among the east coast Tamils and Moors, who retain the older South Asian sense of *citanam* (Sanskrit *stridhanam*, woman's property) as property intended for a daughter's conjugal estate, and later, as property for the daughter's daughters' conjugal estates (S.J. Tambiah 1973). Accordingly, land and houses are deeded solely to the daughter (or increasingly nowadays to the daughter and son-in-law jointly), but never to the son-in-law alone. Because dowry property is kept within the daughter's conjugal family, and because dowry consumes most of the parents' assets long before their death, the system functions as one of total premortem matrilineal inheritance, thus depriving postmortem inheritance of much practical significance.¹³

Weddings, Spouses and In-laws

The initiative which the bride's family must seize in the conduct of a marriage proposal, and the dowry which they must offer in order to obtain a suitable son-in-law, reflect their strategic inferiority *vis-à-vis* the groom's side. This is the same asymmetrical logic of social exchange which is expressed in the shastric ideal of the 'gift of a virgin' (*kanyadan*, Fruzzetti 1982; Trautmann 1981: 288-315). Although no one I spoke with seemed familiar with this particular Hindu scriptural term. In this region, the

¹² Jaffna-born residents of Akkaraipattu explained to me that dowry (*citanam*) in Jaffna is frequently accompanied by an additional payment to the groom, referred to as *inam* (historically, the Indo-Persian word for a royal land grant, but here meaning 'gift') or in English as 'donation.' The *inam* is a substantial cash payment from the bride's family which is intended explicitly as a contribution toward the groom's sisters' dowry fund.

¹³ The matrilineal inheritance law of the chiefly Mukkuvar caste (Britto 1876) governed all the Hindu castes of the Batticaloa region until 1876 when it was deprived of legal force by the Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance and the prevailing Roman-Dutch law was applied in its place (Nadaraja 1972; H.W. Tambiah 1954: 157). The Moors are legally governed by the Shafi law of Islamic inheritance. Today neither the Tamils nor the Moors show much concern for the technicalities of inheritance law, since very little inheritance actually takes place. Instead, when there is residual property, it is usually assigned to a specific heir by a written deed executed when death seems imminent. If there is a daughter still unmarried at the time of the parent's death, she is very likely to be the designated heir. If the married children do receive inheritance from a parent, there will be moral pressure for them to voluntarily hand over their shares to their unmarried sister. Despite strong litigious tendencies in other domains of social conflict, neither the Tamils nor the Moors seem to expend much time or money on legal disputes over inheritance.

inferiority of the bride's side is real, but it does not have the enduring and strongly marked quality of north Indian affinal hierarchies (Parry 1979). It is a temporary imbalance, destined to fade as the son-in-law is incorporated into his wife's family, and in the long run it is structurally incompatible with the bilateral pattern of marriage choice. Sons and daughters marry between families in both directions, occasionally even in the same generation (i.e., in *marrukkaliyanam*, an 'exchange marriage' of two pairs of brothers and sisters), so the superiority of the 'groom's side' in one marriage will be cancelled by their inferiority as 'bride's people' in the next. What endures, and grows, is the status and authority of the husband within his own nuclear household, rather than permanent corporate inequality between families or matriclans. Marriage negotiations begin in a symbolic matrix of inequality, but they evolve toward strong expressions of isogamy, as shown even in the wedding rituals themselves.

After the first surreptitious 'feelers' from the bride's side have shown promise of success, formal delegations are sent to the groom's house bearing gifts of customary sweets (especially *palakaram*, oilcakes). As negotiations proceed, however, the groom's side must reciprocate with even larger quantities of sweets, in order to indicate their interest and good faith. The final marriage negotiations (*peccuvarttai*) are conducted by men representing both families, but not necessarily directly by the fathers of the bride and groom themselves. Often the bride's side will be anxious to cement a deal, even when the groom, for reasons of incomplete education, or lack of local employment, or fraternal obligations to his unmarried sisters, is not yet prepared to consummate the marriage and reside matrilocally. In such circumstances, the bride's side may pledge the bride's dowry in advance, in return for the groom's willingness to 'register' the marriage as a legal fact with the appropriate government registrar. Although the couple are technically man and wife, the actual wedding from a cultural point of view, the tying of the tali, may be postponed for up to a year or more, while the groom discharges his prior obligations. During this period, the bride and groom may be allowed to talk to each other, but no intimacy will be permitted. This reflects the strong value placed upon female chastity and honour in eastern Sri Lanka, as in most of South Asia.

On the day of the wedding itself, the bride's side will sometimes send her brother (actual or classificatory) bearing soap and toiletries to assist in bathing the groom, certainly an expression of solicitousness if not subordination. When the groom's procession reaches the bride's gate bearing the boxed *kurai* (wedding sari) and gold tali (necklace) for the bride, there will sometimes be a brief mock contest between the sides, with the groom's party feigning reluctance to relinquish either the groom or the *kuraipetti* (wedding sari box, nowadays often a suitcase). In some wealthier Moorish

weddings, the groom's women may expect to receive a substantial cash gratuity (*kuraipetti maru kacu*, 'wedding sari box exchanging money') before they hand it over.¹⁴ However, once past the watershed gesture of handing over the *kuraipetti*, the ceremonies proceed to express the equality of both sides and the cementing of an alliance between them. Among the Tamils this is most strikingly shown when the mother of the bride faces the mother of the groom at the bride's gateway in the *cantippu* ('meeting') ritual. First the mother of the bride honours and adorns her counterpart by applying perfume, sandalwood paste, and other cosmetics to her face and hair and concludes by holding up a mirror to her face. Then the ritual is reversed, the mother of the groom honouring the mother of the bride by applying cosmetics from her own tray. Sometimes this theme of reciprocity is carried over in an exchange of umbrellas, so that the groom, having marched from home under his own cloth-covered umbrella, is ushered into the wedding house under an umbrella supplied by his bride's family.

Once inside his bride's house, the groom is treated as an honoured guest. In Tamil weddings, the groom (often assisted by his married older sister) ties the *tali* around the bride's neck as they both stand on a cloth-wrapped wooden plank just outside the threshold of the bride's house. Then a young brother or sister of the bride will wash his feet, and conduct him to the bedroom where the final stages of the wedding ritual take place. Sometimes, as a further gesture of appreciation, a specially packaged meal (*mappillaiccoru*, 'bridegroom rice') will be carried by the bride's parents to the groom's parents' house a few days after the wedding. The newly-weds themselves are also expected to make a 'homecoming' visit for several days to the groom's natal home (*kal mari pokutal*, 'going to switch locations'), usually within a week or two of the wedding.

After this, the focus of attention is on the son-in-law himself, as he is gradually given more and more responsibility in his wife's house. Although before the marriage they may have enjoyed an informal joking relationship with him, after the marriage the wife's brothers must show him respect and deference. They should address him as *maccan* (male cross-cousin, formal), while the new brother-in-law may address his wife's brothers as *maccinan* (male cross-cousin, informal). Nowadays, in pursuit of a reciprocal and less hierarchical idiom, some of the more Westernised young men in Akkaraipattu have created a new kin term, '*bil*', which is the English acronym for 'brother-in-law'. Over time, as the sister's husband feels more and more at home with his wife's close family members, he may permit a greater degree of informality from his wife's brothers, but he is always entitled to deference even if he does not insist upon it.

¹⁴ The amount of money reportedly handed over during the bridal sari exchange at one high status Moorish wedding in 1984 was Rs. 2,000.

What is the reason for this deference? It is not generated by any long-standing asymmetrical alliance relationship with the groom's family, nor does it appear to be the conscious enactment of scriptural ideals of *kanyadan* (with which, however, it coincides perfectly). Instead, informants assert it is a reflection of the fundamental responsibility which the son-in-law is expected to assume for the welfare of his wife, his wife's sisters, and ultimately his wife's parents. It also reflects the vulnerability of the wife's family to desertion by the son-in-law if he is unhappy with the state of affairs in his wife's house. The Tamils have a proverb about the unreliability of the groom until after he steps off the marriage plank,¹⁵ but in fact, the groom could abandon the marriage at any time later on simply by walking out. Virginity in a bride is highly prized both by the Tamils and by the Moors; it is not easy for a woman to find a second husband, although both Islamic and local Hindu norms do allow it.¹⁶ The bride and her family have a strong interest in making a marriage work, since it will be very difficult to attract a second husband the calibre of the first, at least with the same dowry. In a pinch, however, most of that original dowry would be available to use again, since the first husband could not have absconded with his wife's house or rice fields.

During the matrilocal period of adjustment following the wedding, the son-in-law enjoys extra deference from his wife's family, but he is also very politely on trial: if his conduct proves unacceptable, he can be asked to leave. Once the bride's parents have moved out, leaving the son-in-law as the head of his own nuclear household, it is more difficult to apply this kind of leverage against him. Still, he will always remain to some degree an 'outsider' residing in close proximity to his wife's parents and sisters, and this can greatly affect the tranquillity of his home. In the long-run, however, the major factor motivating a man to honour his marriage and to throw in his lot with his wife's people is that he usually has no real property of his own, his sisters having taken all the inheritance—and probably much of his own bachelor earnings—to build their dowries. Thus, there are strong incentives for stability on both sides of the marriage, and we will now see some examples of how they are manifested in household dynamics.

¹⁵ *Palakaiyil nirkira kaliyanankuta, kalaincittu pokavillaiya?* 'Even if [the groom] is standing on the wedding plank, might he not scatter away?'

¹⁶ Although polygyny is allowed under Muslim law, it is rare among Moors in the Batticaloa region. The matrilocal residence pattern virtually rules it out except in cases of sororal polygyny (e.g., two sisters married to one man in the same house). I found a few marriages of the latter sort among the Tamils as well as among the Moors. Leviratic and sororatic marriage is encouraged by both groups.

III Activities Within the Household

The Daily Routine

An overview of the major sequences of the household day would begin with the preparation of tea or coffee by the adult women of the household well before dawn. Men told me that a good wife should adhere to the ideal enshrined in the Tamil aphorism: *pin tunki mun eluval* ('she will retire after and arise before [her husband]'). As the tea is being brewed and the men are rousing, the wife rakes and cleans up the sandy yard in front of the house, which may have seen visitors the night before. Although men arise from bed later than the women, no one snoozes much past dawn, since these are among the coolest and most beautiful hours of the tropical day. After a cup of tea in the pre-dawn light, the men usually retire to the latrine,¹⁷ then go to the household well for a morning bath. If the adult men do not have to leave early for the fields or for other businesses, they will prefer to eat breakfast one or two hours later, at perhaps 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning, after what Americans might call a 'slow start'. During those seasons of the year when the men of the household are intensely engaged in rice cultivation, they will usually rise very early and depart for the fields before eating, trusting their wives or children to bring them breakfast later in the fields if the distance is not too great. Otherwise, they may grab a snack along the way and wait for the noon meal.

Men consider the morning the best time of day for hard labour in the fields, the afternoons being devoted, if possible, to eating, napping, and socialising. Men from poorer labouring families, however, spend the entire day in the fields, returning only in the late afternoon. In the poorest families the women, too, may work in the fields as members of all-female weeding brigades or as gleaners at the time of the threshing. However, such women are pitied for being forced to leave their homes—and to jeopardise their honour—to work in the fields, which are a domain of predominantly male activity. If possible, after the younger children have been set off to school, the wives and older unmarried daughters of a household will devote most of the morning to the preparation of the noon meal. If groceries or other household supplies are needed, they will be purchased by the men or children of the household, not by the women. The public food market,

¹⁷ It is usual nowadays for a house in the densely populated coastal settlements to have a private latrine in a corner of the compound with its own septic tank and water-seal floor fixture. Members of poorer households sometimes designate a specific corner of the yard or go to nearby open fields or to the beach to defecate.

located next to the central bus stand, is considered a very disreputable place for a woman, and in fact the only women one finds there are some impoverished old women selling small quantities of their own manually husked rice. Tamil women are somewhat more liberal with regard to appearances in public places than Moorish women, and so several Tamil women, or a woman with her husband or brother, might occasionally go on a joint shopping expedition for household goods and textiles to the main street shops. Moorish women generally rely upon the men and children of the household to do all the necessary public errands, including bringing home samples of fabrics from the textile shops for the women to examine before buying.

The mid-day meal of rice and coconut milk-based curry marks the culmination of the entire mornings' labour for everyone in the household: for the women who cooked it, as well as for the men and school-going children who—if at all possible—return home to eat it. It is strongly felt that boiled whole rice should be the major component of this meal, as opposed to foods made with rice flour or other grains which are believed to be less nutritious although more easily digested. Afterward, everyone sleeps or rests while the hottest hours of the day slowly pass. Women, however, also use this period of male slumber to take their turn bathing at the well and to have leisurely conversations among themselves.

Around 4 o'clock, the heat begins to abate and torpid bodies begin to stir. This marks the beginning of the visitation and socialisation hours, generally called *pin neram* (the afterward time). Older people enjoy visits at home from their female neighbours, friends, and relations, while younger men in particular change into their best clothes and throng onto the main road to stroll, gossip, and sip tea for most of the remaining daylight hours. Women are absent from this public scene, and the main streets during the *pin neram* hours are exclusively a male domain. Hospitality at home may continue after nightfall, which at this latitude in the tropics falls very abruptly around 6 pm, but guests are expected to depart by 8 or 9 pm. A late supper, consisting of food left over from the noon meal, is then eaten, and most people go immediately to bed, having bolted the gates, doors and shutters against thieves, ghosts, and nocturnal 'coolness'.

Gender Roles and Domains of Activity

One of my first impressions of daily life in Akkaraipattu was that men and women seemed to live in separate worlds. In this respect, the local rules about gender segregation are quite typical of most parts of South Asia, but perhaps the layout of densely packed houses and walled compounds

accentuates the impression of a strong separation between a female domain, the home, and a male domain, the public streets and fields. Within the residential compound and the house, there is also a tendency for the female activities, centred upon food preparation, to revolve around the northern and eastern areas, adjacent to the kitchen and well, while the male activities, especially visitation and conviviality, are located in southern and western rooms or in the yard in front of the doorstep leading from the gate of the compound. This pattern of male/female spatial segregation is more strictly enforced in Moorish homes, where additional walls, doors and curtains serve to block the glances (but not the overheard remarks) of visiting men.

Individual women will leave their residential compounds for neighbourly visits and quick trips to some of the small corner boutiques selling basic commodities such as matches, packaged biscuits, or betel leaves, but for a Tamil woman to visit the central market or the larger textile shops on the main road it would be necessary to assemble a larger female party or obtain a male escort. Respectable Moorish women would not go even on those terms. Life-crisis ceremonies, such as female puberty rites, male circumcision celebrations, weddings and the like, as well as Hindu temple festivals and Muslim saints' commemorations, offer the best opportunities most Tamil and Moorish women have to venture outside their neighbourhood or settlement, and naturally they seek to take full advantage of them. What has been said here must be understood to apply most strictly to women between puberty and menopause: younger girls and post-menopausal women enjoy much greater freedom and mobility, because the culture implicitly defines them as pre- and post-sexual beings, respectively. Men, on the other hand, go everywhere, except into other households unannounced or uninvited: there are various discreet attention-seeking gestures which men perform at the gate in order to indicate their presence without being so rude as to actually call out the name of someone inside.

It would be an exaggeration—but perhaps a useful one to begin with—to say that husbands and wives cross paths primarily at mealtimes and in bed, and even then the interaction may seem, to a Western observer, somewhat reserved. Both Tamils and Moors accept the notion that public display of affection between men and women is embarrassing and improper, and the system of arranged marriage certainly reflects a non-romantic approach toward the typical domestic union. Actually, most marriages in eastern Sri Lanka seem stable and successful, with husbands and wives becoming increasingly friendly and inter-reliant over time. Each spouse tends to occupy quite separate activity spheres, but the matri-uxorilocal household has areas and tasks which will accommodate each of them. And as a couple grow older, their degree of informal conversation and collaboration in household activities seems to increase.

Symbols of Status and Honour

Among the Tamils, the status of any household is tied up with its caste rank, which is indexed in turn by the residential neighbourhood, or headman's division, in which it is located. A reference to an address in, for example, Division 8, will give local listeners reason to presume that the household in question is that of a family belonging to the Cantar Climber caste, since Cantars are concentrated in that Division. Cantars are today widely employed in non-traditional occupations, such as the building trades, while other castes, such as the Vannar Washermen, continue to practise their hereditary laundry trade at home in full view of passers-by. Since the highest ranking castes are farmers and landlords whose work takes place in distant rice fields, the absence of any visible occupational activity in the home or compound can sometimes be taken as a further sign of high caste status. It is also a traditional privilege of the high ranking castes to give patronage to, and to receive the services of, the three local domestic servant castes: Vannar Washermen, Navitar Barbers, and Paraiyar Drummers. The collective term for these hereditary service castes is *kutimai* ('household establishment') or *kuti makkal*, ('children of the house'), and the right to command their services on ritual occasions such as weddings and funerals is still a highly prized prerogative of the highest castes, a right which is still regulated in Akkaraipattu by the Uppotiyar, the district chieftain of the Mukkuvars.

The Moorish community, on the other hand, is relatively unstratified in terms of hereditary sub-groups. A few Moorish Maulana households, known to trace descent from the Prophet Mohammed, enjoy enhanced prestige and respect, while a very small number of hereditary Osta (*ustad*) Circumciser/Barbers suffer the stigma of markedly lower status. A third Moorish group, the Bawas (Sufi mystics), are regarded as religiously unorthodox, hence a bit marginal to the mainstream of Moorish life, although they are intermarried with ordinary Moorish families. The lower Tamil castes have also enjoyed long-standing relationships with Moorish households, although these have suffered in recent years because of Hindu/Muslim communal friction. Paraiyar Drummers are no longer employed as criers and musicians for mosque festivals, but Tamil Washermen still wash the laundry for many Moorish households.

Wealth and occupation are also fundamental components of household status, but they probably serve an even more predominant role among the Moors, who lack the intervening caste hierarchy of the Tamils. One highly visible measure of wealth is the scale and quality of the dwelling itself, with items such as terracotta tile roofs or an electrical connection highly prized as status symbols. The well-publicised dowry transactions which accompany all marriages in this region serve as primary occasions for the display of wealth, education and occupational status.

One further dimension of household rank and prestige throughout the Batticaloa region of eastern Sri Lanka is a historical residue of the pre-colonial political system, a cluster of regional sub-chiefdoms (conventionally conceptualised as seven in number) controlled by the Mukkuvars. It is difficult to know many details about the precolonial political history of the *Mukkuvar vannimai*, or 'chiefship of the Mukkuvars', except through those ritual institutions and practices which survive in attenuated form today. Some of my elderly informants could recall a time in their youth when, in some parts of the Batticaloa region, Moorish representatives still played a regular role in Tamil temple festivals and in the system of political honorifics enforced by the Mukkuvar chiefs; but everywhere today the Moors have severed these connections. The Hindu Tamils, particularly those in the more traditional settlements, still celebrate temple rituals which reflect and validate their vision of the Mukkuvar vannimai, rituals which dramatise the marks of honour (*varicai*) and participatory 'shares' (*panku*) of communal worship allotted to different castes and matriclans under the old Mukkuvar hegemony (McGilvray 1982a).

At the household level, these concepts of political honour survive in rights to domestic ritual service from the *kutimai* castes and in privileged displays of specified types of ceremonial lamps, specified numbers of cloths (*saris*, actually) draped besides doorways, and specified configurations of decorated brass pots (*vittu muti*, 'house-crowns') placed on the roof at life-crisis rituals. This is a ritual idiom in rapid decay, however, because the local caste-based Tamil political offices formerly controlled by the Mukkuvars and Vellalars can no longer marshal the sanctions necessary to enforce this system of unequal privileges. Still, many high caste Tamil families with a desire to display their hereditary marks of honour still do so, and it is not difficult to imagine with what pride and how punctiliously these matters would have been attended to only a generation or two ago. The term *varicai* refers to any of the various symbolic prerogatives and sumptuary privileges which, it is said, were bestowed by ancient political authority to recognise and elevate specific hereditary groups such as castes and matriclans. Regional texts and chronicles mention many such marks of honour which are nowadays extinct, but pots on the roof and cloths hung by the doorway are still in active use—each of the higher castes (or within them, each matriclan) claiming the exclusive right to display a particular number of pots and cloths. In so doing, the household is expressing its group affiliation, e.g., its matrilineal descent group membership, rather than any unique status of the household as an independent unit. It is also celebrating its 'share', or its participatory rights, in a system of rank based on a kingly or martial ideal: this is echoed in some of the matriclan names, which refer to positions of military leadership or skill (e.g., *Pataiyantakuti* 'leader of the army clan',

Racampillaikuti 'royal prince clan'). If asked upon what basis their matrilineally inherited honours were established, Tamils will usually cite the legitimate authority of the Mukkuvar polity and a system of matrilineal law or commandment which the Mukkuvars are believed to have enforced upon the inhabitants of the Batticaloa region after their arrival sometime in the 13th century AD.

Worship, Sorcery, and Souls of the Dead

Among the Tamils, the most conspicuous religious activity occurs at numerous local and regional Hindu temples and at island-wide pilgrimage centres such as Kataragama (Pfaffenberger 1979), and preparations for these annual festivals are a major preoccupation of Tamil households at certain times of the year. For most Moorish families, however, the Hadj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is too expensive to contemplate, and there are fewer opportunities for religious outings closer to home. The annual Muslim festival at the so-called 'seaside mosque' (*katarkarai palli*) near Kalmunai is a major event which Moorish women still traditionally attend, in addition to annual *kanturi* feasts held at local mosques and shrines to commemorate the death of local Muslim saints entombed there.

In addition to such public forms of religiosity, however, both Tamils and Moors conduct a number of ritual and devotional activities within the household itself, not to mention rites of passage such as birth, tonsure, puberty, and marriage (McGilvray 1982b). I will briefly discuss here three categories of ritual activity oriented toward the protection of the household: domestic forms of worship, measures against sorcery, and observances to appease souls of the dead.

Tamil Domestic Worship: Once every year, most Tamil households conduct a domestic *puja* for a tutelary Hindu goddess who protects the house and its occupants from illness and misfortune. This ceremony of worship and propitiation is termed colloquially '*Ammalukka ceyra*', or 'doing it for Ammal, an honorific form of the Tamil word for 'mother', and is a generic epithet for all local Hindu goddesses. Mariyamman, the Tamil goddess of smallpox, is probably the most popularly worshipped in this regard, although some families in Akkaraipattu (including my own Tamil landlord) worshipped Katanacciyamman instead. These local goddesses (and others) are popularly believed to cause 'heat', drought, and eruptive skin diseases unless propitiated. Katanacciyamman is a sea-goddess (*katal*, sea; *nacci*, lady), so some households perform her annual *puja* on the beach. The more common pattern, however, is to perform a mid-day domestic *puja* on the floor of the 'inner room' for the goddess, followed by a night-time *puja* outside in the

compound for the male guardian deity Vairavan, a fierce manifestation of Shiva who protects the perimeter of the residential compound from thieves and intrusive spirits.

I never saw a professional Hindu priest conduct these domestic rituals; the senior male in the household, or a religiously-minded neighbourhood man, usually assumes the role of officiant (*pucari*). The goddess is commonly invoked into a consecrated brass pot of water (*kumbam*) which may occasionally be accompanied by a portable metal face-image (*tirumukam*) and displayed with additional regalia (all of which are stored away in the 'inner room' during the year). She is then offered special piles of fruit and flowers (*matari*) and sometimes also heaps of warm sweetened milk-rice. There is a great deal of minor variation in the rituals, depending on the individual traditions of each family, but there is unanimous agreement that once a household has made an offering to a protective deity such as Mariyamman, a divine contract has been established. Every year thereafter, the goddess will expect a similar offering, and several of my Tamil friends told me tales about the dire consequences which ensued when households in their neighbourhood had been lax in the performance of their annual rituals 'for Ammal'. A household may also institute special vows and restrictions: for the past three generations my Tamil landlord's family has prohibited chickens and eggs from the residential compound for fear of angering the household goddess Katanacciyamman.

Moorish Domestic Worship: The religious life in Moorish households conforms to the orthodox demands of Islam, including daily prayers, annual Ramzan fasting, and (when possible) pilgrimage to Mecca. The amplified voice of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer can be heard even in the Hindu neighbourhoods of Akkaraipattu. For men, attendance at the mosque, especially for the Friday *jumma* prayers, is strongly urged and can be only discretely evaded. The mosques are all-male preserves; thus, although men have the option of praying individually and privately at home, women have no choice but to do so. The Moorish household becomes a focus of collective devotional activity principally on the occasion of religious holidays, when local Koranic experts are invited to sing a *maulud*, a chanting of the texts and stories associated with some scriptural event, e.g., the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. On such an occasion, neighbours and friends will be invited, and refreshments will be served afterward. Men of religion are also summoned to a Moorish home to recite prayers marking various rites of passage, such as infant tonsure on the 40th day after birth. The walls of Moorish dwellings are often hung with calendars depicting scenes of the black-shrouded Kaaba in Mecca, as well as with framed copper *accarams*, protective Muslim talismans inscribed with sacred words and numbers,

which, like the Hindu *accarams* inscribed by the Tamils, serve to ward off malevolent spirits (*pey*, *picacu*, and *djin*).

In some Moorish households there is an echo of the domestic Hindu goddess cult in a sporadic ritual practice called *Taymarukku ceyra*, ('doing it for the *Taymar*'), another form of propitiating supernatural 'mothers' (*lay*, mother). Sometimes the ceremonies take place at the seashore and sometimes at home, and their aim is often to counteract skin eruptions and fever symptoms caused by the 'heat' of an angry female supernatural. Because they are conducted more or less surreptitiously by groups of Moorish women, I was never invited to witness a *Taymar* ritual. They are reportedly performed in response to individual illnesses and household misfortunes, rather than on a regular annual basis.

Measures Against Household Sorcery: There are of course rationalists and sceptics in the community, but most Moors and Tamils share an even greater commonality of beliefs about the immediate supernatural environment, a world of nocturnal ghosts and greedy spirits which can cause illness and misfortune for anyone in their path. Aside from adventitious encounters with pesky spirits, the threat of intentional sorcery (*cunivam*) is a concern to many people. For personal prophylaxis against both stray spirits and sorcery, Tamils and Moors sometimes wear protective inscribed *accarams* in cylindrical silver lockets tied around their neck, arm, or waist. However, it is an entire house and compound which is frequently the target of sorcery, a deliberate magical attack performed by a *mantiravati* (sorcerer, 'reciter of mantras') on behalf of an enemy or jealous party. In the face of inexplicable household misfortune, a typical suspicion would be that an evil copper *accaram*, together with a secretly obtained scrap of the victim's clothing or exuviae (hair, nail clippings, etc.) had been buried under the outer gate of the compound or in the ground in front of the doorway to the house. The technology of sorcery is believed to consist in the power to 'tie' or 'bind' (*kattu*) malevolent spirits through the magical formulae (*mantirams*) instilled in, and inscribed upon, the buried talisman and thereby force them to harm the victims as they repeatedly pass over the buried charm. The prescribed remedy is for a friendly *mantiravati* to 'cut' (*vettu*) the spells which bind the evil spirit to its task, and to use intermediary spirit possession to enable this spirit to point out the physical location of the buried charm, which is then unearthed and nullified.¹⁸

¹⁸ The sorcery remediation rituals which I witnessed were highly theatrical night-time events involving one or more friendly *mantiravatis* who entered a trance in order to communicate with and/or embody the opposing spirit. The culminating event was usually for the *mantiravati* to dig—while still in trance—for the hidden charm, which he eventually plucked from the bottom of a darkened (and sometimes water-filled) hole for everyone's inspection.

Assuaging Souls of the Dead: In their obligations to departed souls, both the Moors and the Tamils accept similar supernatural assumptions and are bound by similar ceremonial rules. The spirit or soul (*avi*) is believed to hover around its former household until the period of mourning and death pollution is over: the 31st day for Tamils and the 40th day for Moors. On the final day of this mourning period, food is cooked and offered to guests, to ritual experts, and to needy persons in the community. Among the Tamils this observance is called *amutu* (or less commonly, *cirattam*, Sanskrit *shraddha*), and it includes a number of food offerings which are explicitly directed at appeasing the soul and sending it off to the supernatural domain where its accrued karmic merit will be balanced and its eventual reincarnation determined. Among the Moors the corresponding observance is called *kattam*; although no special offerings are made by Moors explicitly to the dead soul, Muslim prayers are recited and a communal meal in the name of the deceased is offered to everyone in attendance. On subsequent anniversaries of the death, Hindu and Muslim households enact ritually similar observances (justified in different theological terms) which transfer religious merit to the deceased soul, until more recent deaths gradually displace earlier ones in the memory of the living. Premature neglect of a death anniversary, however, can cause an angry soul to cause household misfortune and suffering until the 'deficiency' (*kurai*) is rectified. Apart from these death commemoration events, neither the Tamils nor the Moors maintain any organised cults of household, lineage, or clan ancestors.

Pollution and Propinquity

One of the features commonly associated with patrilineal descent organisation in India is the shastric concept of *sapinda* (Manu V, 59 in Buhler 1969), or the community of shared exogamy and shared death pollution. Even the Nayar *taravad* is reported to follow a matrilineal version of this rule (Gough 1959, 1961: 323-24), which obviously serves as an important marker reinforcing the corporate identity of the unilineal descent unit. In eastern Sri Lanka, where matrilineal descent is maintained, a corporate control of lands or real property and where awareness of sub-lineage segmentation is not particularly well-developed, there is a corresponding lack of strong consensus concerning the spread of death pollution (*tutakku*) within any strictly defined 'unit' of kinship. I found that local theories to explain the path of death pollution were surprisingly varied and contradictory, but matrilineally-slanted interpretations tended to outnumber patrilineally-slanted theories 2: 1, despite a fairly large residual cluster of bilateral and idiosyncratic viewpoints (McGilvray 1982a: 56-57). What emerges from all this, however, is not a principle of death pollution which reflects strict matrilineal descent reckoning.

In addition to a matrilineal descent component, many local people in Akkaraipattu discussed death pollution as if it were something concomitant with the field of social relations which is centred on the matri-uxorilocal household cluster. Rather than using concepts such as *sapinda* (a Sanskrit word no one recognised) or emphasising a strict line of unilineal descent, they mentioned natural ties of love (*anpu*, *pacam*) between people who reside close by and with whom one has frequent social interactions. In most people's minds, this amounts to a functional description of the matri-uxorilocal kindred centred on a cluster of ancestral houses, an aspect of Tamil/Moorish matrilineal organisation which strongly resonates with revisionist views of the Nayar *taravad* as a 'house-and-land unit' rather than as an African-style unilineal descent group based upon ancestral blood (Moore 1985). There is widespread agreement that a man's wife, his parents, his brothers and sisters, and his children will be polluted by his death. Beyond these immediate relations, there is a tendency to trace death pollution matrilineally *both* from the dead man's sisters *and* from his daughters. Physical propinquity and social interaction are contributing factors in many minds, as is shown by the fact that a dead man's matri-uxorilocal son-in-law is also polluted, but not his daughter-in-law, who resides elsewhere.

Honour, Law and Matriliney

Enough has been said about the relative weakness of matrilineal lineage and sub-lineage segmentation, about the lack of economic resources at the disposal of matrilineal descent groups, and about the diffuseness of matrilineal death pollution concepts to pose questions about 'what' matriliney is and 'where' it resides in this society. At the same time, it must be noted that matrilineal reasoning extends even to the domain of Hindu caste affiliation, where the children of cross-caste marriages (sometimes fully sanctioned alliances between the two major Tamil landowning castes, Mukkuvar and Vellalar, see McGilvray 1982a: 84-86) are assigned to the caste and matrilineal descent group of their mother. The question of matrilineal ideology is further complicated by the discovery that there is no underlying concept of unique matrilineal blood, bodily substance, or reincarnated soul which is perpetuated by membership in the matrilineal descent group, such as, for example, Malinowski reported among the Trobriand Islanders (1922: 70-71; 1954: 215-37). Nor is there a recognised matrilineal ancestor or even an organised cult of a tutelary deity for the matrilineal descent group as a whole.

Corporate matrilineal interests do exist, but they are largely vested in traditional rights to display politico-religious marks of honour at household rituals, or to sponsor 'shares' of communal religious ritual at mosques and temples, or to hold certain leadership roles in the local caste system, in the

mosque, or in the temple. Matrilineal consciousness in this region of Sri Lanka is imbued with titles and symbols of hereditary rank and privilege bestowed by kings and conquerors of the past, displays of hierarchical group privilege which at one time were associated, no doubt, with real political power but which are nowadays perpetuated mainly in ritual performance. These marks of honour which are transmitted matrilineally to succeeding generations are conceptualised not as outer indices of some inner matrilineal bodily substance shared by members of the clan, but rather as legal rights inherited according to the matrilineal law or enactment (*cattam, erpatu*) of the Mukkuvar chiefs who acquired hegemony over the east coast in the 13th century. The local term which expresses the matrilineal idea is *tay vali* ('mother-way'), which is cognate with Malayalam *tavali*, recorded by Gough (1961: 334; also Mencher 1962) as the word for a segment within the larger Nayar taravad. Here, however, the expression is employed as if it were a principle of law historically associated with the Batticaloa region. All of this evidence seems to point to stronger affinities with south Indian concepts of royal honour and royal gift which have recently been discussed by Dirks (1987) as well as to more obvious parallels with the Malayo-Indonesian concept of *adat* as customary—in some places even matrilineal—village law (de Josselin de Jong 1960; Kato 1982; Swift 1965), than it does to connections with Hindu ethnosociological concepts of shared substance or biomoral codes for conduct (Daniel 1984; Marriott 1976).

IV

Case Studies of Household Dynamics

The Ideal Pattern—More or Less: Nilam and his Sisters

One of the very first persons I met when I began my fieldwork in Akkaraipattu in 1969 was Nilam, an unmarried Moorish teacher of English in the local Muslim high school who miraculously managed to find me a dry vacant house to rent in the aftermath of a monsoon flood. We have been close friends ever since, enabling me to trace each of his sisters' marriages and finally his own marriage and subsequent employment as a temporary English teacher in the Sultanate of Oman. Nilam's family, although not really wealthy, is highly respected in the community and thus has a good deal of social status to protect through strategic marriage transactions. His father, a retired civil servant, is the official Muslim Qazi or magistrate for matters of Islamic marriage, divorce, and inheritance. As the eldest son of a family in the town of Kalmunaikudy, 20 miles to the north, he had married the eldest daughter of an influential Akkaraipattu public works contractor, and

eventually, after retirement from a migratory civil service career in various parts of the island, settled back into his wife's natal house. By then he had a very large family of nine children, and what was worse from the standpoint of dowry, all but two of his children were daughters.

Just as his wife's parents had chosen him for his cleverness, his reliability, and his civil service pension, so he and his wife carefully recruited their own first son-in-law, Hussain, who was working as a statistician for the Central Bank in Colombo. Hussain also happened to be related to his bride, Fareena, as her FZ's stepson (a classificatory cross-cousin), thus adding the further ingredient of kinship solidarity to a union which had many other socio-economic virtues. He and Fareena were given a deed to the ancestral house in Akkaraipattu, along with some prime paddy land south of the town and some cash (I do now know the amount), but since Hussain's work and residence were in Colombo, they eventually agreed to swap the ancestral house for title to a vacant lot across the street. This meant that the ancestral house could be offered, along with 2.5 acres of paddy land and Rs. 5,000 cash, as a dowry for the second daughter, Zohora, when she married Jauffer, a local schoolteacher. By strict order of birth, Nilam would have been the third child to marry, but when I met him in 1969 he still had five unmarried sisters, a father on a meagre civil service pension, and a brother far too young to help earn money for the dowry fund. But by this time Hussain, Nilam's elder brother-in-law in Colombo, had begun to prove his worth: he agreed to take in one of his wife's younger unmarried sisters, Nilofa, on the understanding that he would eventually ensure that she found a respectable marriage. With this burden lifted, Nilam still had the major responsibility of building the dowry funds for three of his younger sisters. His very youngest sister (still unmarried) would have to be the eventual responsibility of his younger brother, he told me.

When I first knew Nilam in 1969–71, he occupied the southern bedroom in the ancestral house. His second 'bil', Jauffer the schoolteacher, lived matrilocally with Nilam's second eldest sister, Zohora, in the 'inner room' of the house, while Nilam's parents and unmarried siblings slept in the front rooms or in various other areas of the house. When I returned to Akkaraipattu for additional fieldwork four years later in 1975, I found that Nilam's parents had moved into a brand new dowry house they had just constructed on a segment of the original compound immediately next door to Jauffer and Zohora, who were now running their own uxorilocal nuclear household in the ancestral house, except for Nilam's continued occupation of the southern bedroom. The 'inner room' of the new house sheltered Nilam's younger sister Saleema and her new husband Farook, the northern room housed the other unmarried sisters, the southern bedroom was for Fairouz, Nilam's eldest sister's son, and the front reception area was where Nilam's

father, mother, and younger brother slept. On my next visit to Sri Lanka in 1978 I found that Nilam's parents had shifted domicile once again. They were now living in a rented house across the lane with their recently married daughter Zahira and her new husband Gafoor, who had agreed to the marriage after receiving a firm pledge that a new house would eventually be constructed for him on a lot already purchased (from his brother-in-law Jauffer, in fact) for that purpose.

As the money gradually accumulated (from paddy harvests, pensions, and Nilam's salary as an English teacher) to complete Gafoor's house, Nilam's parents began to make plans for their last two daughters' dowries as well as for their own eventual retirement. With vacant building lots near the old ancestral house nowadays both high-priced and rare, they decided to purchase several spacious parcels of land in a former coconut plantation (*tottam*) on the northernmost edge of town, perhaps a mile away. With three daughters married and established in a group of houses clustered around the old maternal homestead, Nilam and his parents shifted their attention to a new enclave which would be constructed on the *tottam* property. In 1979 Nilam's parents granted him permission to marry a Colombo Muslim school-teacher, Shukri, whom he had first met at the Teacher Training College in Jaffna in 1971 and to whom he had considered himself informally betrothed for at least five years. It is considered unusual for an east coast man to marry a west coast woman, because west coast women do not typically bring with them the substantial real-property dowries which east coast men are accustomed to receiving in lieu of inheritance. However, this marriage was a 'love match' which had surmounted serious obstacles from both families: Nilam had to obtain dowries and husbands for several of his unmarried sisters, while Shukri had to wait until her older unmarried sister found (with Nilam's eager assistance) a man to her liking. Even so, Nilam's marriage to Shukri disappointed his mother's brother, who had hoped to arrange a cross-cousin marriage for his own daughter, who was 20 years younger than Nilam.

When both Nilam and Shukri were able to obtain employment as school-teachers in the Sultanate of Oman in 1981, any lingering doubts about the wisdom of their marriage were dispelled. When I inquired whether his parents now looked to him for the funds required to secure husbands for his remaining two unmarried sisters, Nilam wrote back jokingly: 'Yes, I am expected to send an oil well from here [Oman]!' In the conventional east coast household pattern, a man's premarital financial obligations to his own sisters would normally be replaced by post-marital obligations to his wife and her sisters. However, because his wife is a Colombo-born 'outsider' whose sisters are already married, and because his affluence as a school-

teacher in Oman is obvious to everyone, Nilam has been expected to continue assisting his unmarried sisters with their dowries. Around the same time, Nilam's eldest brother-in-law, Hussain, obtained employment in Iraq, so there were now two sources of overseas funding. As it turned out, Nilam and Shukri had to provide the largest share of the dowry for sister number five, Nilofa, who, it had been originally understood, would be the sole responsibility of senior brother-in-law Hussain. Hussain did, however, contribute significantly toward the wedding costs of sister number six, Fareena. The dowry houses for all three of Nilam's youngest sisters will be in the new 'tottam' enclave, thus effectively fissioning the sisters into two spatially distinct matrilocal clusters. Here, too, Nilam's parents plan to live out their days, possibly with the youngest daughter when she is finally married, or perhaps in a modest house of their own located in a corner of their daughters' property. The solution planned for Nilam and Shukri when they eventually return from Oman will be to maintain two houses, one of which they have already purchased in Akkaraipattu and one to be built on a lot they have acquired in Colombo. During the period while brother-in-law Hussain was in Iraq separated from his family, Nilam's eldest sister and her children were living in Nilam's Akkaraipattu house. Since 1984, this house served as the temporary sororolocal residence of sister number five (Nilofa) and her new husband, and of sister number seven (Nihara) and her husband, while their respective dowry houses were being erected with Nilam's financial assistance on the 'tottam' property.

While Nilam and his sisters offer an example of how the ideal matrilocal residence pattern is put into practice, it is also obvious that special circumstances and infusion of Persian Gulf earnings have played an important role. Without the foreign money which Nilam and Shukri have invested in the family, it is obvious that the younger sisters could never have been as well-dowered. Even then, Nilofa and Fareena were both over 25 years of age when they married, a reflection of the rising age of marriage throughout Sri Lanka. But even in the absence of money from the Gulf, this family would have sought to make the best possible matrilocal marriages for their daughters, and I think the outcome, although considerably delayed and certainly much less affluent, would have been more or less the same.

Pragmatism and Parental Power: Ratnam's Daughters

The large family of Ratnam, a retired Tamil postman with whom my family and I lived in 1975 and 1978, afforded an opportunity to record some pragmatic variations in the marriage and residence pattern. Ratnam has nine children, the three eldest of whom are daughters whose marriages occurred

close to the time of my fieldwork. Although Ratnam and his wife are of high caste and matriclan rank,¹⁹ they must get by financially on Ratnam's modest government pension, because the rainfed irrigation tank which formerly watered their paddy land is no longer maintained, and squatters now cultivate the tank bottom. Their major asset is a large, well-situated residential compound in Division 7, containing Mrs. Ratnam's maternal dowry house and one new dowry house which Ratnam had built in anticipation of future need. His eldest son is now beginning to earn money as an apothecary's assistant, and there are four other younger sons who will eventually be able to ensure the marriage of the youngest daughter. A bit earlier, however, when his sons were not yet old enough to contribute to the dowry fund, Ratnam had faced a major problem in securing husbands for his three older daughters. The marriage of each daughter was unorthodox in some way, showing how the ideal system must sometimes be forced to adapt to the real world.

Contrary to the cultural norm which stipulates that elder daughters should marry before younger, it was Mahesvari, Ratnam's third daughter, who married first. Normally, elder daughters will object to such violation of seniority, in part because it threatens to deplete the dowry assets available for their own marriages and in part because any irregularity in the order of marriages will appear suspicious in the eyes of potential affines. However, in this case, Ratnam was given an offer he could not refuse, a 'love match' proposal which would cost him relatively little, which would be correct according to the Dravidian kinship categories, and which would also conform, more or less, to the matri-uxorilocal ideal. His daughter's suitor, Sajipati, was the only child of one of Ratnam's classificatory sisters, a respected widow in the neighbourhood, so he was both a classificatory cross-cousin to Mahesvari and he already had a house (his mother's) in which to live. Ratnam ended up giving Mahesvari a cash dowry of Rs. 2,000, two water buffaloes, an empty residential lot, and three acres of land. Because Sajipati offered to marry Ratnam's daughter without the need for a dowry house, and because the virilocal couple would be living only five minutes' walk from the bride's maternal home, the arrangement appealed to Ratnam and his wife and was unopposed by the other daughters. While we lived with Ratnam, Mahesvari came to visit her parents regularly, bringing along her infant daughter and occasionally her husband as well.

¹⁹ Among the Tamils of Akkaraipattu, a pattern of cross-caste marriage alliance exists between two high-ranking matriclans, one of which is identified with the Vellalar caste and one of which is identified with the Mukkuvar caste, and children are assigned the caste affiliation of their mother. In this instance, Ratnam is a Vellalar (*Maluvaracan kuti*) and his wife is a Mukkuvar (*Panikkana kuti*). A political myth sanctions this cross-caste marriage alliance (McGilvray 1982a: 84-86).

All along, Ratnam's greatest concern had been to find a husband for his eldest daughter, Rajalakshmi, who had the highest level of education (secondary school certificate) and also the highest expectations for her future groom. Over the years, Ratnam had investigated several potential sons-in-law, but each had been flawed in some respect (too old, too uneducated, or not employed in a sufficiently prestigious occupation). A new dowry house had been constructed next to the ancestral home, but with no marriage on the horizon, Ratnam first rented it to a visiting postmaster and then to me. While the whole family was striving to find a groom for Rajalakshmi, a quite unforeseen series of events unfolded which resulted in the early marriage of Mani, the second daughter.

One day, it seems, a distant male cross-cousin of Mani's (her FMZDS), Seenitamby, arrived at the Ratnam house, indicating that he had quarrelled with his mother and that he needed a place to eat and sleep. Assuming this to be a temporary visit, Ratnam dutifully welcomed Seenitamby as befitted his classificatory sister's son and found him a place to sleep. However, when several months passed and Seenitamby showed no sign of moving out, the neighbours began to whisper about this unmarried cross-cousin living in the same house with Ratnam's two unwed daughters—and Ratnam saw that something had to be done. Ratnam broached the possibility of a marriage to Rajalakshmi, but she was not receptive, given Seenitamby's age (40 years) and lack of education. So Ratnam and his second daughter apparently realised that, given Rajalakshmi's legitimate prior claim on dowry resources, the alternative for Mani was likely to be an extended spinsterhood. Later it was learned that Seenitamby had intended all along to force a marriage with one of Ratnam's daughters. In terms of dowry, Seenitamby indicated that he would happily settle for a verbal promise of the old house and three acres of useless parched land. This would leave the new house for Rajalakshmi when she eventually found a husband, which she did about a year later.

Everyone knew that Seenitamby was a bit eccentric, but for the first nine months of his marriage to Mani everything went well. Then he began to behave autocratically and jealously, even demanding that Mani not visit her sister in the house next door without his permission. Ratnam eventually compiled a list of grievances against his matrilocal son-in-law which included stinginess, poor financial judgement, lack of trust, neglect of Mani's gynaecological problems, refusal to eat Mani's cooking (and thus disrupting her diet, since wives eat after husbands), irrational hostility to his wife's sister's husband, and highly suspicious behaviour which suggested to some people an interest in sorcery. At this point in the saga I, my wife, and my 18 month-old son entered the Mani/Seenitamby household to reside for three months in 1978. We were given the inauspicious, but vacant, southern bedroom. I quickly learned that Ratnam was watching his son-in-law very

carefully. He had originally intended to write a deed transferring to Mani and Seenitamby the ancestral house and the three acres of useless land, but now he was glad he had not done so, since it seemed possible that Seenitamby might even try to sell off the property and then abscond with—or perhaps abandon—his wife.

The final straw was Seenitamby's behaviour on the night that Mani's elder sister's baby died. The death was abrupt and totally unexpected, probably a case of sudden infant death syndrome, coming just after Rajalakshmi had brought her firstborn home from the hospital. It was not until the next morning that I learned that Seenitamby had forbidden Mani to go next door to console her bereaved sister whose baby had just died.

Ratnam and his wife told me that something had to be done, but they waited for Seenitamby's next transgression before acting. Several weeks later, when Seenitamby prevented Mani from visiting her younger sister Mahesvari, whose little girl was sick, Ratnam angrily confronted his son-in-law. With several witnesses present, including Seenitamby's elder brother, Ratnam publicly told him to leave the compound, stating that there was a point when one must stand up for one's daughters. Seenitamby threatened to take Mani away with him, but Ratnam said that he would allow it only if she were willing (which she was not). With no legal rights to any of the Ratnam family property, and with few allies even in his own maternal kin group, Seenitamby tried to maintain a foothold by leaving behind some belongings, but he was finally forced to vacate the house completely after a few days.

The price of this debacle for Mani was that she might well never find another husband, so she continued to wear the gold wedding tali around her neck indicating that this was an indefinite separation, but not a divorce. A month passed, and Seenitamby's family began to send female emissaries to test the climate for a reconciliation. Meanwhile, my wife and I took Mani to see a gynaecologist in Batticaloa, and the good news was that Mani might be pregnant. Finally, following two months of discreet domestic diplomacy with Seenitamby's kinsmen, Ratnam felt there was evidence of a change in Seenitamby's attitude and behaviour. I had been away for two weeks conducting fieldwork in another part of the district, so when I returned to the Ratnam compound I was surprised to learn that Ratnam had cast me in the role of the divorce court judge. Mani, her visibly chastened spouse Seenitamby, and an audience of invited witnesses were eventually summoned into my presence as I sat on a sack of paddy. In my most dignified and inflated Tamil, I asked first the husband and then the wife whether each was prepared for a reconciliation, and the answer was yes. My fieldwork ended a few days later, so I was unable to observe how the marriage went thereafter. However, a letter from Ratnam eight months later relayed the

good news that Mani had given birth to a healthy child and that Mani and Seenitamby were doing well.

Upstaged by her younger sisters, Rajalakshmi was the last of the three older daughters to marry. But her patience was rewarded when Ratnam finally located an unrelated but suitably high status groom for her. He was Sivagnanaselvam, the branch manager of a government cooperative store ('coupon *katai*'), who had already broken off marriage negotiations with four other families, mainly because they could not supply a satisfactory dowry house. A nice 'modern-style' house—not an old-fashioned ancestral dwelling—was apparently the most important of Sivagnanaselvam's dowry requirements, and fortunately that was the one thing that Ratnam could offer. When Ratnam heard that this highly desirable groom might be receptive to a proposal of marriage to Rajalakshmi, he acted fast. Knowing that the groom had already backed out of four marriages, Ratnam hired a car to take the wedding party directly to the district *kachcheri* in Amparai in order to avoid a two week delay in clinching the deal at the local marriage registrar's office. The actual wedding took place seven months later.

The groom (who was often referred to by his occupational title, 'Manager') had been raised by his mother's sister's husband, a Hindu priest. This meant that he was the only strict vegetarian in Ratnam's compound, definitely a burden for Mrs. Ratnam who therefore had to do twice as much cooking during the matrilocal adjustment period. Apparently he wanted to assert superior ritual status in his wife's household, as shown by his decision to sleep and eat alone in the inner shrine room alongside images of the Hindu gods whenever his wife was in a state of pollution. Whatever his foibles, however, Sivagnanaselvam was the dignified high status son-in-law whom Ratnam clearly needed as his eventual successor in the matricentric household cluster; as far as I was able to discern while I lived next door, Rajalakshmi's new husband received deference, or at least polite avoidance, from everyone in the compound. Soon after his eldest daughter's marriage, Ratnam began to discuss with me his plans to build a small thatched hut in a shady corner of the compound where he and his wife would 'retire' when they vacated their youngest daughter's dowry house.

The Enclave Solution: Ismail Stores

I have already remarked that real estate prices and a general shortage of vacant building lots in the older neighbourhoods of Akkaraipattu have forced many families, particularly those with numerous daughters, to acquire sites for constructing dowry houses in cheaper neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the town. However, with comfortable financial resources it is still possible to acquire a prime location on which to build a dowry house for

one's daughter, and if money is no object it is possible to establish a complete matrilineal enclave. I am aware of two Moorish brothers, owners of a large dry goods establishment ('Ismail Stores') and a local-style cigarette factory ('Ismail Beedi'), who have done this. In keeping with local parlance which freely assigns such metonymic nicknames, I will refer to these two brothers jointly as 'Ismail Stores'.

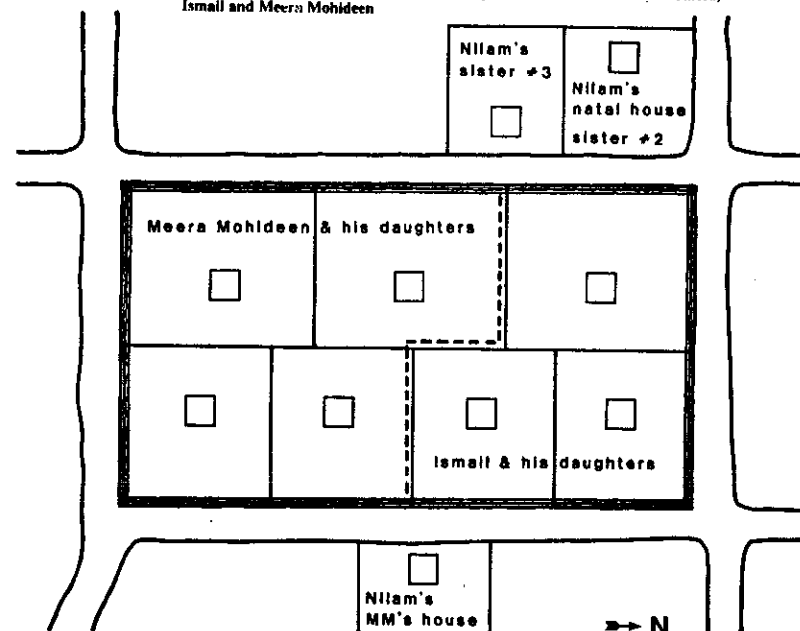
After their marriage, the two brothers found themselves residing in immediately adjacent houses which had been provided as dowry for their wives, who were themselves sisters. In view of the fact that the brothers were partners in a major enterprise, their marriage to two sisters probably served to reinforce their shared interests and may have lessened the likelihood of conflict between their wives. Such an arrangement has no particular advantages from a dowry point of view.²⁰ In any event, as their daughters began to attain womanhood, Ismail Stores gradually acquired ownership of the entire 'block' of residential land on which their houses sat, an extremely valuable parcel bounded on all four sides by lanes. In preparation for each daughter's marriage a new dowry house was erected, until the vacant lots were filled up, at which point a high masonry wall was constructed encircling the entire block (Figure 3). For a while, this cluster of new houses provided high quality rental accommodation for a number of professional workers temporarily posted to Akkaraipattu, but now that the daughters are beginning to marry, the houses are fulfilling their original purpose. There will not be much vacant space to build houses for the granddaughters in this dense matrilineal enclave, but at least the present generation can enjoy what most people would consider an expensive but perfect solution to the matrilineal housing problem.

A Husband Gradually Acquires Authority and Autonomy

A matrilineal son-in-law enters his wife's house as an honoured guest, but he is also under scrutiny. As his reliability and deportment gradually validate the dowry investment which his in-laws have made in him, as the members of his household demonstrate their domestic self-sufficiency, and especially as his wife begins to bear children, the son-in-law takes on greater authority and autonomy within his own nuclear family. Because of their propinquity and often shared social or economic interests, the wife's parents and siblings always retain some leverage over his actions, but the balance of domestic power shifts more toward the husband/son-in-law. I noted this in several specific instances when sons-in-law had ultimately quarrelled with their

²⁰ When a brother/sister pair are married to another brother/sister pair, the marriage is termed an exchange marriage (*marrukaliyanam*). It is recognised that this type of union can be advantageous from an economic point of view, because both families will have an interest in agreeing on a lower over-all level of dowry expenditure.

Figure 3: Walled Dowry-house Enclave Constructed by the Two 'Ismail Stores' Brothers, Ismail and Meera Mohideen



wives' parents and had subsequently exercised their right to order changes in the living arrangements.

But a Household also Needs Matrilateral 'Support'

Among both the Tamils and the Moors, the matri-uxorilocal residence pattern implies close physical propinquity between a wife, her sisters, her mother, and her mother's sisters. This is not regarded as merely an incidental by-product of the residence and dowry system, it is considered to be an essential ingredient for a successful marriage and a happy household. The point was made quite convincingly when I learned of a Moorish doctor who was having a difficult time finding a suitable groom for his sister. It seems that the doctor's parents had initially been married matrilocally in Sam-manturai, but later (for unspecified reasons) their father insisted that his wife and children return with him to his home town of Sainthamaruthu. The doctor and his sister were therefore raised in the absence of the close matrilateral kin (mother's sisters and their children) who would normally reside in a cluster of neighbouring houses. Both the parents are now deceased, and the Moorish doctor, who is himself married, faces the responsibility of finding a good match for his younger sister. Although in other respects she is an extremely eligible bride (wealthy brother, excellent dowry), her prospects have been dimmed by the fact that she lacks a matrilateral female kin group which would normally give her assistance and advice as a new bride. One promising young man with whom her brother broached a marriage proposal is reported to have declined the offer because he feared that he and his wife would not enjoy the 'support' (*his* English word) normally furnished to newly married couples. This makes sense when one remembers that a new son-in-law will normally expect some special treatment from his wife's family and that the wife's final 'on-the-job training' as a cook and housekeeper is normally given by her mother and married sisters *after* the wedding. Probably even more important in the long run is the valuable assistance which a woman normally receives from her mother, her maternal aunts, and her married sisters at childbirth and during the period of early infant care.

V

**Concluding Remarks: Female Autonomy
in South Asian Households**

If one had to epitomise rural South Asian domestic and marital relations in only a few words, one would doubtless emphasise patrilineal descent ideology,

joint patrilocal residence, and exclusive (or at least disproportional) inheritance of real property by husbands and sons rather than by wives and daughters. There are also numerous patriarchal and androcentric aspects of the textual South Asian religious and intellectual Great Traditions (Hindu, Islamic, and Buddhist) which tend to subordinate women in both domestic and ritual contexts. However, we must not overlook the important ethnic and regional exceptions and variations on these Indic themes, including matrilineal descent patterns in parts of Kerala and Assam, bilateral kinship institutions among the Kandyan Sinhalese, not to mention the hybrid Sri Lankan Tamil/Moorish system I have described in this chapter. Such examples invite us to consider, by way of comparison, some of the most significant factors which restrict or enhance female domestic autonomy in South Asian households. Despite the obvious difficulties of assessment, I would contend that both externally-generated holocultural comparisons as well as internal ethnographically-grounded analyses point to a relatively higher level of domestic autonomy for Tamil and Moorish women on the east coast of Sri Lanka than in many other parts of South Asia. Let me summarise the external cross-cultural evidence first.

Based upon a sample of 66 matrilineal societies drawn from Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967), Alice Schlegel (1972) has advanced the hypothesis that, in matrilineal societies where either a woman's husband or her brothers hold positions of strong unilateral authority in the household, such women enjoy *less* personal autonomy than they do in matrilineal societies where husbands and brothers jointly *share* authority over women. Schlegel argues that as male domestic authority divides, it also declines absolutely, giving women greater personal latitude and domestic influence. In view of the autonomy which is eventually accorded to a son-in-law as the head of his own nuclear household, I would have to classify the Sri Lankan Tamil/Moorish system as one of 'weak husband dominance' using Schlegel's own coding categories (1972: 145-47). However, it should be noted that very few of the features associated with this authority pattern are found in the Batticaloa region, while several characteristics strongly correlated with Schlegel's 'neither dominant' household type—in which domestic authority is divided between husbands and wives' brothers—are in fact prevalent here, including matrilocal residence, wives' sharing in the control of household property, absence of sororal polygyny (1972: 22, 64-68, 71, 86-87). Overall, Schlegel's study suggests a strong functional association between matriliney, matrilocal residence, women's participation in property control, weak or neither dominant male authority patterns, and relatively high female autonomy. Most of these ingredients are found in some form in the Tamil/Moorish household system of eastern Sri Lanka.

On a more detailed ethnographic level, the Tamil/Moorish household system invites comparison with female authority patterns in other parts of

Sri Lanka and South Asia generally. Admittedly, from the perspective of Western industrialised society, Tamil and Moorish women would not appear particularly independent or autonomous. Yet within the comparative universe of South Asian kinship and household patterns, let us note that the Tamil/Moorish wife is free from the burdens of:

- A domineering mother-in-law (e.g., Hobson 1978)
- An authoritarian elder brother such as the old-style Nayar *karanavan* (e.g., Fuller 1976: 58ff.).
- Patrilocal isolation from her mother, maternal aunts, and sisters (e.g., Lewis 1958).
- Sanskritic ritual severance from her descent group and transubstantiation to her husband's lineage as his metaphysical 'half-body' (e.g., Inden and Nicholas 1977: 39ff.).
- Widespread wife-beating and Brahmanical *pativrata* rules of wifely asceticism and subordination (e.g., Obeyesekere 1963; 1984: 430ff.).
- Exclusion from, or unequal rights to, inheritance and control of real property (Hindu *Mitakshara*, Muslim *Shari'at*).

In contrast to most regions of South Asia, these traits, together with other general features of the Tamil/Moorish matri-uxorilocal household pattern, suggest some of the reasons for a *relatively* greater level of female domestic autonomy and influence, not to mention lower female infant mortality (Miller 1981) and protection from homicidal 'bride-burnings' (Bordewich 1986), than in patrilineal/patrilocal regions of the subcontinent. This type of comparison can be useful, particularly if it helps to correct stereotypic text-based assumptions about South Asian marriage and household values, such as Obeyesekere's improbable theory that Hindu goddess cults in eastern Sri Lanka are generated by a severe 'Sanskritic' ideology of patriliney, wifely subordination, and female repression (McGilvray 1988; Obeyesekere 1984). The data I have presented here show rather conclusively that an awareness of textually-prescribed Great Tradition ideological factors must be combined with local ethnographic studies of actual kinship practices, domestic norms, property relations, and residence patterns in order to gain a truer understanding of South Asian households and their relationship to the larger society.

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