

The Tool Box Approach of the Tamil
to the Issues of Moral Responsibility
and Human Destiny

Sheryl B. Daniel

The question of whether a person is free to determine the ethical quality of his actions and to control his own destiny is one to which Hindu culture gives not one answer but many. Among the Tamils of Kalappūr, South India, these multiple responses occupy a range that spans the perspective of Free Will on the one hand and Determinism on the other. According to the former, man, although influenced by a preordained fate, can alter it and redirect his own destiny. According to the latter, fate is absolutely unalterable and therefore man is not free to make his own choices.

This essay will not only present the content of these diverse beliefs and examples of their use in varying contexts, it will also explore the cultural premises that underlie certain patterns that emerge in a Tamil's contextual choices from among the wide range of cultural alternatives available to him. I will begin with an examination of the cluster of ideas concerning fate that have a bearing on the issue of moral responsibility.

Fate

Villagers believe that in the beginning Śiva (Kaṭavul) created the vast

The field research on which this essay is based was carried out in 1974–1976 primarily in the village of Kalappūr (pseudonym), north of the town of Tiruchirappalli in the state of Tamil Nadu. Informants were predominantly of the Āru Nāṭṭu Veḷḷāla caste, the dominant caste in Kalappūr. However, many valuable informants were of the Brahmin, Paṭṭāram, Kavunṭar, and Āsāri castes. Less-intensive interviews were conducted with members of the other minority castes of Kalappūr and with informants from neighboring villages and the nearby town of Tiruchirappalli. I gratefully acknowledge the generous grant from the National Science Foundation that made this research possible.

array of living beings out of his own bodily substance. He molded each creature and determined its nature, be it good or evil, strong or weak. He then wrote upon the head of each entity its "headwriting" (*talai eruttu*), which was an exact and very detailed specification of every act it would perform, of all the thoughts it would have in its life, and of every event, good or bad, that would befall it. After creation the activities of the world began with each order of creation impelled to act in accordance with its own headwriting as specified by Kaṭavuḷ. As each entity began to act it began to generate good and bad karma according to the nature of its actions (*karmams*). At the end of each entity's life, Kaṭavuḷ reviewed that entity's karma, and on this record, caused it to be reincarnated in a new form with a new headwriting. The entity then acted according to its new headwriting, generated more karma upon which its headwriting in the next birth was determined, and so on through the cycle of births and deaths.

While it is believed that the headwriting in all except the "first" incarnation is based on a person's past deeds (karma), it is also believed that the headwriting is based as well on the past deeds of relatives or even chance acquaintances from whom the person acquired karmic substance. Let me explain.

When we employ the word "action" to render the concept of karma in translation, we unwittingly introduce into the karma concept the connotation of non-substantiveness or non-materialness which we habitually associate with the abstract noun "action." However, to treat karma thus, as a mere abstraction, is to miss the crucial ethnosociological point that karma, in addition to being a kind or kinds of particular substance, is contained in (Marriott and Inden 1977) and may only be transmitted by bodily substances. Informants schooled in the theory of the five body sheaths will readily locate karmic substance in the third outermost body called the causal body or *kāraṇa uṭal*. The *kāraṇa uṭal* is part of the subtle as opposed to the gross body (*pūta uṭal*) and therefore is constituted of a substance which is as substantive as its gross counterpart.

We do not have to go to the few educated Tamils who are schooled in body-sheath theories to encounter the substantive conceptualization of karma. Almost any Tamil villager will tell you that karma is inevitably transmitted from one generation to the next in the blood (*rattam*). Some also claim that cooked food is capable of transmitting one person's karma to another. Let us look closely at some examples.

Periyaswamy, a wealthy Veḷḷāḷa of Kalappūr, was a lecher of much notoriety and a moneylender who dealt ruthlessly with those unfor-

unately who became indebted to him. Villagers believed that his flagrant sins had resulted in bad karma, which caused him to be afflicted in later life with leprosy and rheumatism. They also believed that his bad karma had blighted the lives of his son and married daughter. The son, although himself a religious man and an outstanding member of the community, was thought to suffer from skin diseases and childlessness because of the bad karma that he had inherited from his father through their shared blood.

Periyaswamy's daughter, although a member of her husband's lineage after marriage, retained ties of shared bodily substance with her natal family. Through this shared substance she also incorporated his bad karma. She in turn passed on this karma to her husband, with whom she shared bodily substance, and he, as the result of this transfer, died at an early age. Thus, for the sins of the father both the children and their own families suffered childlessness, ill health, and even death.

In another case, a Veḷḷāḷa boy of about eight years fell seriously ill and died. His family could not trace his death to any sin of his own or of the known family members, but they confided to me that it must have been the result of the bad karma resulting from the sin of an ancestor two or three generations earlier.

Other types of karma exchange are said to occur when a person accepts cooked food from another person. It is for this reason that Tamils are eager to accept the cooked food and even leftovers (*mīti*) of gods, Brahmins, and holy men: they believe that they are acquiring some of their good karma and will gain greater prosperity as a result. For the same reason, they are selective about accepting food from undesirables such as thieves and prostitutes who will transfer a measure of their bad karma in the food which they cook.

Many types of karma exchanges occur through casual or accidental associations. For example, there was a case in which two college roommates in Tiruchirappalli parted company when the health of one boy declined and transfers of bad karma from his roommate (who was of the same caste) were blamed for the illness. The sharing of karma in this case was said to have occurred through co-residence, since the boys did not share food. Fear of karma transfers from mere physical proximity makes villagers cautious about whom they allow to enter their homes. A holy man or a well-respected villager is, of course, always welcome, since the presence of such a person in a house will have a beneficial effect on all the members of the household. The same cannot be said of widows or barren women.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate on the logic and rules of all such transfers. Suffice it to say that from all this flurry of exchanges of karma, some voluntary and some involuntary, it is clear that the individual does not have complete control over the karma that he accumulates and for which he must reap the benefits and punishments. Although it is believed that a person will be punished and rewarded for the acts which he himself initiates, so, it is believed, will his wife and his child. Similarly, he will be punished and rewarded for the acts of his ancestors, living kinsmen, and chance acquaintances, although he has no voluntary control over these acts.

As was noted earlier, the headwriting functions to determine all the events, thoughts, desires, and actions of a person within a particular life-span. It does this by coordinating the life circumstances and events of a person with the desires and willed actions on his part that fulfill what is foreordained in the headwriting. To take a hypothetical example, if it is in Rangasamy's headwriting that on such and such a day he is destined to murder his Kavunṭa (a goatherding *jāti*) neighbor, his headwriting will coordinate his inner nature (*kuṇams*, psychobiological qualities) and the particular emotions and decisions of that day with the appropriate environmental setting which provokes and accommodates the act. Thus, Rangasamy will be filled with a murderous rage that overrides his reason and results in his passionate decision to murder Kandan, the goatherd, who on this occasion is caught in bed with Rangasamy's wife. Kandan's headwriting in turn will orchestrate the events of his life and his inner nature and desires so that he commits adultery and is caught by Rangasamy and killed.

The effect of the headwriting on the "will" (on the processes of volition) are particularly important to our concern with the issue of moral responsibility. I will, therefore, briefly outline the Tamil villager's understanding of the functioning of the psychobiological "person" and deal specifically with the interaction of the will and the headwriting.

Headwriting and the Will

In Kalappūr culture, a person (*āḷ*), like everything else in the phenomenal universe, is constituted of substance. This substance is "ontogenetically" one but qualitatively many. The qualitative differentiation of the primordial or of any substance into different kinds of substances does follow cultural rules that often do not concur with non-Indian cultural expectations. For instance, the substance of a

person is not distinguished in terms of psychological as opposed to physiological qualities. Thus, *kuṇams*, which suffuse an entity's body, are coded with dispositions or qualities that are both psychological and biological at the same time, from a Western point of view. If a person is of a predominately *cātvīkakuṇam* (Skt. *sattva guṇa*), his bodily substance as a whole is refined and pure. This basic quality reflects itself in the nature and functioning of the various aspects of the person. For example, the *manam*, which is thought to be the seat of emotions and desires, gives rise, in such a person, to primarily *dharmic* (appropriate) desires. The *manam* of a person of *cātvīkakuṇam* would not even conceive the desire to commit a base crime, unlike the *manam* of a person of a predominately *tāmata kuṇam* (Skt. *tamas guṇa*), which is known to be filled with excessive and improper desires. Further, the *mūlai* (literally, brain) of a *cātvīka* person would be of a similarly refined substance, which would reveal itself in its ability to function in a disciplined manner when it performs its basic tasks of judging the desires of the *manam* and deciding which desires are to be censored and which are to be enacted. The *mūlai* is the reality-testing organ of the body, which attempts to deal effectively with the internal needs and pressures of the *manam* and the external influences of the environment. In a person of a *cātvīkakuṇam*, the *mūlai* is able to deal calmly and rationally with these internal and external pressures. In contrast, a *tāmata mūlai* is characterized by a lack of control, alertness, and intelligence and hence by an inability to function as effectively.

The *mūlai* is the seat of decision making and the center of the "will." The English term is used to refer to the decision-making aspect of the *mūlai*. The term *sittam* can be translated as "will," but it is not frequently used by villagers. The term *iṣṭam* (wish) is the more commonly used word, as for example, when a villager says that so and so did such and such because it was his wish (will, decision) to do so. Insight into the Tamil notion of "will" (as decision making, intention) can perhaps best be obtained by examining the function of *putti*. The *putti* is that part of the *mūlai* which is associated with intellect and intelligence, and with a person's general mental disposition, which expresses itself as a tendency to will certain acts. When Tamils say that a person has a scheming *putti*, they mean not only that the general disposition of the *putti* is that of a schemer but that the *putti* intentionally schemes. This implies that the *putti* functions to will actions. The desire to scheme (referred to as *iṣṭam*, wish) may be thought of as the end product of the intent of the *putti*.

Consider this statement uttered by the *kōṭanki*, the village diviner,

when I interviewed him following a divination. On this occasion he had advised his client that the latter's problems had been the result of his failure (for the sixth time) to make a pilgrimage to his ancestral shrine in a distant village and to celebrate a *pūjā* with an accompanying feast for the poor. The client appeared very contrite and penitent and swore with all earnestness and conviction that this time he would most certainly fulfill the wishes of his ancestral deity. There was very little room to doubt the sincerity of his intent. I shared this latter observation of mine with the *kōṭanki* as we left the house. I asked him whether he thought his client was only a very convincing liar. To this the *kōṭanki*'s response was as follows:

There isn't a lie in what he says when he opens his heart and cries. The vows he opens his mouth and makes are all true. But even though he wants [to do something] in his heart, his *putti* doesn't let him. Without the *putti* allowing what can one do?

Avē manō viṭṭu aṟutu sattiō paṇṇuratile oru poiṟū illinka. Vāi terantu sattiṟō paṇṇuratu attaynayū uṇmatānunka. Ānā manatila virumbinālū putti viṭātunka. Putti viṭāṭṭi enna tā seiyaḷā?

In any event, the *kuṇam* permeates every organ and every aspect of the body, including the *mūḷai* and the *manam*. But the *kuṇams* of people are highly resistant to change. I was told by one villager that "for every 10,000 physicians or magicians who know a mantra to change bile into phlegm or phlegm into wind there is only one who knows a mantra powerful enough to change a person's *kuṇam*."

In fact, the *mūḷai*, besides being composed of the relatively immutable *kuṇams*, is also made up of more mutable substances such as the humors. Thus, if a person eats food that is too "heating," his body may produce an excessive amount of the humor bile (*pittam*). This bile will enter the *mūḷai* and will affect the *putti*, producing a kind of disorganization and madness (*pittam*). It is worthy of note here that the *putti* itself is on the one hand conceptualized as a particular expression of the brain's quality while on the other hand it is thought of as being a particular (substantial) composite of an aspect of the brain itself. The *putti* as a substantial entity is far less immune to change and transformation than one's *kuṇam* (E. V. Daniel 1979).

As in the above example, the *mūḷai* and the *putti* are affected by the substances from the environment which a person assimilates through food intake, residence, and so forth (Marriott 1976). For instance, if a

person of a very calm *kuṇam* (*sāntakuṇam*) marries and shares, through shared food and exchanged *indirium* (sexual fluid), the bodily substance of a person of a very excitable and hot-tempered *kuṇam* (*munkōpakuṇam*), the *putti* of the calm person will be affected by the incoming *munkōpakuṇam* of the hot-tempered person. The result will be a loss of some of the calm and level-headed functioning of the *putti*. The *sāntakuṇam* on its part will continue to mix with the changeable *putti* and thus qualitatively affect it, but the effect of the incoming *munkōpakuṇam* substance will offset some of the influence of the *sāntakuṇam*. Likewise, the hot-tempered spouse will undergo a change of *putti* because of the incoming *sāntakuṇam* and will become calmer and more controlled than before. (See E. V. Daniel 1979 for an elaboration of *putti-kuṇam* interaction.)

In order to complete this brief sketch of the Tamil villager's understanding of psychobiological functioning, it is necessary to consider the way in which karma and headwriting affect the *manam* and the *mūḷai*.

To begin, it is important to consider the exact nature of headwriting vis-à-vis the substance of the *kuṇams*, humors, and so forth. To the Tamil, headwriting is not merely an abstract "fate" in the mind of God (Kaṭavuḷ). It is a coded substance which is inseparably conjoined to the bodily substance of an entity at the time of birth. This fusion of substances occurs when Kaṭavuḷ writes on the entity's forehead his headwriting, which, from that moment onward until the gross and subtle bodies of that incarnation cease to exist, will exert a controlling influence on the destiny of that entity. It is the headwriting itself and not an intervening Kaṭavuḷ that effects the internal and environmental changes that are necessary to fulfill the encoded fate of the said entity.

One's headwriting is one of the most indelible and unalterable entities. It is far more resistant to mutation than one's *kuṇam*. The headwriting is said to determine when, where, and how a certain strand of karmic substance is activated. In the words of the local *pūcāri*:

[As to] how, when and where [a certain] *karmam* will come to fruition is written in one's headwriting.

Oru karmam eppaṭi, enkē, eppō paṟukkū enpatu talai eṟuttill eṟuṭiyirukku.

To continue to quote the same informant:

... the peculiarities of the *kuṇams*, and the dependent whims of the *manam*, the maladies of the brain, [and all such things], are none other than the products [results] of this *karman*.

... *kuṇappētankaḷ, ataiyoṭṭi manampōrapōkku, mūḷaikkōḷarukaḷ, itellā antakkarmattai oṟiya vēra onnū illa.*

It is the karmic substance then, under the control of the headwriting, that determines the nature of a person's *kuṇams* and hence of the general functioning of the *manam* and *mūḷai*. In addition, *karmam* acts simultaneously both upon the external environment and upon the desires of the *manam* and the decisions of the *mūḷai* (*putti*) to coordinate a sequence of motivations and actions with the appropriate environmental setting.

Just such a predetermined sequence of events was described to me by a Kavunṭā informant. The story had the flavor of a favorite anecdote about the power of a Brahmin's curse. According to the story, a Parayan laborer worked for a wealthy Brahmin landowner who had for years goaded the Parayan into silent hatred by the ruthless and unjust exploitation of his labor. One night when the moon was full, the Brahmin and the Parayan chanced to be out late together in the fields. The Brahmin began to disparage the work of the Parayan, and a quarrel ensued. The Parayan, seeing his chance to avenge himself, seized a stick and savagely beat the Brahmin to death. Before the Brahmin died, however, he cursed the Parayan, saying that with the moon as his witness, the Parayan would suffer for his sin of Brahminicide. The Parayan was so shaken by the curse that he went home and confessed his crime to his wife.

Life went on as before, and no one suspected the Parayan. The Brahmin had had so many enemies that no one in particular could be linked to the murder. Then one day the Parayan and his wife began to quarrel and he took a stick and began to beat her. In her anger she shouted, "And so are you going to kill me like you killed the Brahmin?" The neighbors who had come to intervene in the connubial dispute chanced upon the wife's remark as well. They bound the Parayan and turned him over to the police. He was later convicted for the crime.

"So you see," continued my informant, "you cannot escape the curse of a Brahmin. Neither can you escape that which is written in your headwriting." When I questioned him in more detail, he indi-

cated that it was the Parayan's fate to have the *kuṇam* to kill and to be born into that village and to become the laborer of that particular Brahmin. The headwriting also arranged it so that he met the Brahmin on that night and that his rage overcame the restraint of his *mūḷai*. Similarly, it was his fate to tell his wife his secret and for her to reveal this secret. The curse of the Brahmin was the immediate precipitating cause of the quarrel of the Parayan and his wife and of her revelation of his secret. However, it was the headwriting which ordained the entire sequence of events. Similarly, it was the headwriting of the Brahmin to be of such an irascible nature that one of his own laborers would eventually beat him to death.

I turn now to consider the import of the beliefs concerning fate presented thus far. We have seen that headwriting has pervasive control over a person's destiny. It not only orchestrates the setting and events that "happen" to him, it also controls his own internal nature (*kuṇams*) and influences the ongoing psychobiological functioning of the *mūḷai* in its interactions with the *manam*. It thus controls his "will" and therefore controls his actions. The headwriting causes an individual to experience rewards or punishments according to his karma or past deeds. As was noted earlier, this karma consists not only of a person's own past deeds but of the deeds of others from whom the person has received karma through shared blood, food, and so forth. Thus, a person's headwriting insures punishments and rewards for the deeds of others over whom he has no control. To add to the external constraints on a person, there is the problem of the original, arbitrarily assigned headwriting which skewed the fate of all entities in a positive or a negative direction. This first headwriting had no basis in former deeds and hence decreed events which were in some sense "undeserved."

Given the powerful influence of fate, one must ask whether a person ever has a chance to alter his headwriting, to correct a negative trend initiated by the first headwriting, to override bad karma assimilated from others or to simply resist the influence of the headwriting in order to chart a destiny which he desires and controls. The answer to this question hinges on the beliefs concerning the mutability of the headwriting itself.

Is Headwriting Mutable?

Although it is a generally accepted belief that headwriting is the most

permanent of all coded substances, in reality all substances are in flux and therefore are capable of change under certain conditions. Tamils hold two opposed beliefs concerning the conditions under which headwriting can change. On the one hand it is held that headwriting is subject to the powers of the will. I shall call this point of view, the "Free Will perspective." On the other hand, there is a somewhat opposed belief according to which the "will" has little or no power to alter one's headwriting. This, I shall call, the "Deterministic perspective." Let me elaborate on the latter perspective first. From this perspective, headwriting cannot be altered within the lifespan of an entity. Even death may not release a being from its headwriting, since a prolonged existence as a ghost or a demon (*picācu*) might be part of the headwriting. The headwriting does undergo change, but it does this through the internal processes of its own fulfillment. When all the events of the headwriting have occurred, the headwriting will have exhausted itself and become deactivated. According to this belief, "will" even if it is believed to possess some degree of independence from control by the headwriting (i.e., to desire a contrary fate and even to attempt to resist the headwriting), can have no effect on it and cannot change the headwriting no matter how intense the willed *karmams* (actions) performed (such as rituals to avert a predicted disaster).

In support of this view of the ineffectuality of will and karma (action) to alter headwriting, there are myths such as the Kāmuṇṭi myth which is enacted as a drama once a year in a village adjacent to Kalappūr.

In this myth, Śiva, in his capacity as the impartial instrument of fate, is obliged to write the fate of his own daughter. It is her fate, because of her past karma, to be widowed on her wedding day. Further, according to Śiva's own headwriting and that of the groom, Kāma (the god of desire), Śiva himself is to kill the groom cum son-in-law and thus widow his own daughter. Although gravely distressed by the fate which he is forced to write, Śiva is unable to alter it and thereby spare his beloved daughter the much-dreaded lot of a widow. The wedding occurs, and Kāma is burned to death by the fire of Śiva's third eye. The daughter is angry and distraught and rails against her father for having executed such an evil fate. Śiva tries to explain to her that one's fate is based on one's former deeds (i.e., on one's karma) and that not only is he powerless to avoid writing a bad headwriting in the first place, but he is unable to alter the headwriting once it has been

written. She does not believe that her father is in fact helpless, and she goes insane with grief and despair, circling round and round the ashes of her dead husband.

In desperation Śiva decides that although the headwriting could not be altered and Kāma had to die, there is yet a chance to alleviate some of the pain of such a fate. Using his powers as a creator, he recreates Kāma in a subtle body which cannot be seen by anyone except his wife, Radhi. Thus Radhi remains, socially, a widow, and Kāma is officially dead, yet they live as husband and wife. Śiva was unable to alter their headwriting, but he could mitigate somewhat its harsher aspects.

The myth is cited by villagers, not for its hope of divine assistance in coping with the unalterable edicts of fate, but to illustrate the often quoted saying that "one cannot change what God (Śiva) has written" (*Kaṭavul eṟutinatai manuṣanāl mātamuṇṭiyātu*). Informants interviewed during the Kāmuṇṭi festival cited the drama as an illustration of the fact that even the almighty Śiva is powerless to save a woman from predestined widowhood. "If he could not save his own daughter, how can he deliver us from an evil fate? What is destined to happen will happen. Nothing can change fate."

It is also of interest, however, that this myth can also be used to support the opposite aphorism that "Fate can be vanquished by wit" (*vitiyai matiṭal vellalām*). In the Kāmuṇṭi myth the headwriting itself could not be altered by wit, but wit could alter the "spirit" of the headwriting. Thus Radhi and Kāma were able to live as husband and wife even though their headwritings decreed Kāma's death and Radhi's widowhood. This would indicate a slight shift away from the "Deterministic perspective" toward the "Free Will perspective."

Belief in the power of "wit" to alter fate goes much beyond this limited application when Tamils adopt the view that headwriting can be altered, even within one life-span, by correctly executed *karmams* initiated by the will. In this view, the "Free Will perspective" is given predominance wherein the "will" (*putti*) is treated as relatively independent of the headwriting. Granted, this independence is within the context of pervasive influences both from the headwriting and from the involuntary effects mentioned earlier of karma intake, *putti* changes due to humor imbalances, substance exchanges with other persons, and so forth. Yet, the *putti* can effectively plan a course of action to counteract some of these influences. It does this by performing *karmams* which qualitatively affect the nature of the given or

“inherent” *karmam* substance, which in turn can change the headwriting, which is based on the *karmam* substance.

Myths that support this perspective of the nature of “will” and “headwriting” are such as the story of Markēṭēya, a Purāṇic myth frequently recounted in the oral tradition of the village.

Markēṭēya was a Brahmin boy who discovered at an early age (through astrological prediction) that he was destined to die at the age of sixteen. Determined to thwart this adverse fate, he set about performing *pūjās* to Śiva in order to win the boon of a prolonged life. When the time came for his predestined death, Yama, the god of death, came to take him away. However, so tightly did he cling to the Śiva *liṅgam* that Yama was unable to drag him away. This caused quite a disturbance in the three worlds, and Śiva himself was called upon to enforce the fate he had written. Śiva, caught between conflicting duties as the author and executor of fate and as the grantor of boons to deserving devotees, responded in favor of the boy. His reason was that the devotion (itself a *karmam*) of the boy was so powerful that it had, in effect, overcome fate (i.e., altered the headwriting). The headwriting, thus changed, had no further control over the boy, and he was free to live beyond his originally preordained life span.

The Markēṭēya myth supports the basic thesis that *karmams* can alter headwriting, but it implies that this requires *karmams* of an extraordinary kind. There is, in fact, a wide range of beliefs concerning the exact strength of the *karmams* needed to alter headwriting. An example of less intense *karmams* being used to alter fate is that given by E. V. Daniel in his discussion of the flower ritual (in this volume). He cites the case of a father who believed that his prayers, *pūjās*, and pilgrimages had changed the fate of his daughter, who was predestined to die at the age of six. The flower ritual itself, while aimed at altering a person’s *kuṇam* and not his or her headwriting, affirms the efficacy of the will to plan and perform *karmams* to alter aspects of one’s inherent nature (which is determined by one’s *karmam* substance and ultimately by one’s headwriting). Although it can always be argued by a Tamil that such minor alterations of the *kuṇams* were actually foreordained in the headwriting, this does not detract from the faith in action and initiative that such rituals reveal.

The mechanics of how the “will” generates *karmams* which in turn impinge upon and alter the headwriting are understood in two different ways, depending on which theory of karma encoding is adopted by a Tamil.

The first theory is what one English-speaking informant, Milraj, called the “bank balance” theory of karma. According to Milraj, a person gains points for a good deed and loses points for a bad deed. For example, if X commits the sin of cheating his brother, he loses 25 points and thus depletes his overall bank balance by this amount. He can restore and improve his balance, however, by performing a number of meritorious deeds that total or exceed 25 points, thus, in effect, canceling out his sinful deed. After explaining this, Milraj laughed and said, “So you see, you can still afford to commit quite a lot of sins as long as you perform enough meritorious acts to counterbalance them.” Speaking of his own case, he quite openly discussed his already well-known propensity for extramarital affairs and said that he felt that the meritorious *pūjās* which he performed routinely as the priest (*pūcāri*) of the local temple were sufficient not only to offset these sins but to leave him with a surplus of merit (*puṇyam*) in his karma bank account.

A person’s headwriting is based on the total balance in his karma account. If he has a balance of 60 points out of a possible 100 points, then he will have a headwriting with 60 percent good events and 40 percent bad events. According to the Free Will interpretation of the bank balance theory, even within the span of one headwriting, if the karma balance is radically altered in terms of either an increase or a decrease, this will affect the headwriting. Thus, an evil fate can be avoided if sufficient good *karmams* are accumulated to raise the bank balance, or a good fate may not be realized if the bank balance drops because of sins. There is a wide range of opinion concerning how much effort is required to generate the requisite amount of merit to tip one’s bank balance in one’s favor. Some say it requires extraordinary effort like that of Markēṭēya, and others, such as Milraj, are quite casual about it, feeling that one’s destiny can be controlled much as a shrewd man manages his finances, carefully calculating his gains and losses.

The second theory of karma encoding is what I shall call the “tit for tat” theory. Here every deed is recorded separately, and each must result in a reaction (reward or punishment) suited to the nature of the deed. Good deeds cannot cancel bad deeds, although the greater the number of good deeds, the greater the number of pleasant events to be ordained by the headwriting. The role of the headwriting, in this theory, is to determine what karma will be activated, that is, attain fruition, in a particular lifetime. Not all deeds performed in one

lifetime bear karmic fruit in the next lifetime. Some are deferred for several lifetimes.

The strategy employed to alter headwriting under this view of karma (presuming, of course, that one has adopted a Free Will perspective), is one that aims at the ritual blocking or deactivating of a particular karmic result. Thus, if a man is told that his wife is to die in the third year of their marriage, he will perform *pūjās* to the deities, give alms to the poor, fast, promise to perform a certain elaborate or costly ritual or to give a certain amount of money to a temple if a deity will intervene and prevent the fruition of that part of his wife's headwriting. Such measures do not eradicate the bad karma; rather, they defer its fruition until a later birth. In time, every *karmam* will bear fruit.

In summary, the difference between the Deterministic and Free Will perspectives can be highlighted through likening life to a drama and people to actors in the drama. According to this analogy, Śiva is the playwright who, for his own amusement and in accordance with the laws of karma, writes the script of the play and determines the role of each of the actors (headwriting). In the Deterministic perspective, the actors can be likened to marionettes pulled to and fro by the strings of fate. They have no choice but to enact their script (headwriting). In the Free Will perspective, the actors, although constrained by the setting and the script, are yet able to improvise and to prevail upon the playwright-director to make alterations in their scripts.

I turn now to the question of moral responsibility. First of all, I shall address myself to the way in which the Deterministic and Free Will perspectives rule on the issue of the responsibility (*poruppu*) of an individual for his actions.

Moral Responsibility

The Deterministic perspective generally treats an individual as responsible only in the sense that, because he is the agent of the deed and there is no one else to blame or reward, he must bear the circumstantial responsibility for the action. Yet, this perspective usually elicits pity for those who suffer or commit crimes and supports summary dismissals of the accomplishments of those who have been successful. It is the headwriting that is ultimately responsible, since the good or bad intentions of the person are only the by-product of the influence of the headwriting.

The Free Will perspective, in contrast, rests the responsibility with the individual, for it is believed that he has the ability to resist the control of the headwriting over his "will" and to initiate *karmams* that can reverse unfavorable events. If unexpected sufferings befall him because of his headwriting, he is still considered responsible, because they are thought to represent a just punishment for deeds freely willed in a former lifetime.

Let us consider now the most complex aspect of the issue of moral responsibility. This is: How do Tamils choose from among the wide spectrum of beliefs concerning the alterability of fate to decide questions of moral responsibility? Do they adopt a Deterministic or a Free Will perspective? The answer is that they rarely choose to consistently favor one perspective to the exclusion of the other. Rather, the choice of perspective is a context-sensitive one determined by needs and biases, among other factors. In one context, a villager may espouse the perspective he then favors as if it were the final and only correct judgment, and yet in another context, if it suits his need, he will support the opposing perspective. Often he will support first one perspective and then the other even within the same context—for example, in discussing the moral responsibility of a particular individual. The result is not only what appears to be conflicting perspectives of reality but conflicting judgments concerning the moral responsibility of the individual in question.

To illustrate this contextual usage, I shall present a series of examples. The first category of examples concerns those instances in which the headwriting must work through the desires and actions of a person in order to be fulfilled. The second category consists of those cases in which the headwriting does not have to work through a person's volition but can cause events through controlling the things that "happen" to a person.

In the case of fate that must be fulfilled through willed actions, I shall take the example of a debate over an issue of ethics: in this case, the moral responsibility of a thief for his crime.

In Kalappūr, three Kavunṭā men stole five chickens from the village schoolmaster. They feasted in secret on the chickens but carelessly left the telltale feathers scattered around their houses. The schoolmaster soon traced the theft to them and reported the incident to the village *munsif* (village policeman). The three men were called before the *munsif* and each was fined fifty rupees, a staggering sum for such poverty-stricken men. The schoolmaster's son, however, was not

satisfied with the punishment and publicly complained that they had not also been whipped in the village square.

The wives and relatives of the men pawned their jewelry to come up with the money to pay the fine. Kandasamy, one of the thieves, was reportedly upbraided by his wife, who denounced him as an irresponsible fool who gave no thought to his responsibilities toward his wife and three children. She, however, did eventually help him pay the fine.

The next day Kandasamy's wife and mother left as usual to work in the fields. In their absence Kandasamy, who felt utterly humiliated by the incident, ate nerium-seed paste, a poison. When his wife and mother returned from the fields at midday they discovered him unconscious and frothing at the mouth. The mother ran for assistance and managed to find a few men to help carry her son to the local hospital. There, unattended by the village doctor, who was having her afternoon siesta, he died half an hour later.

A crowd of villagers had gathered around the hospital and in the street outside. They openly discussed the case with little regard for the feelings of the family and for friends who were present. An elderly Vellāla man, who was also a friend of the wronged schoolmaster, called Kandasamy an arrogant bastard and said that he should have thought of the shame of being caught and punished before he committed the theft. He clearly supported the schoolmaster's son in his view that Kandasamy had committed the theft and the suicide out of his own free will, and that the folly of such disgraceful behavior was adequate proof that Kandasamy was a worthless wretch. An old Vellāla woman, who was not aligned on either the side of the schoolmaster or the side of the friends and supporters of the thieves, denounced Kandasamy, clearly blaming him for his sins. ("What a thieving wretch of an ass he is. He lived in disgrace and now he dies in disgrace. At least our committing suicide at our ripe old age is excusable. There is absolutely no excuse in his case.") Her husband vacillated between excusing Kandasamy at one moment, saying that he was a victim of his fate, and vehemently denouncing him as a man whose arrogance (*timir*) was responsible for his crime. One old woman explained to me that Kandasamy was to be pitied, since after all no one can prevent oneself from acting out one's headwriting. But, she added, he had, nonetheless, committed a crime, and it was only right that he was punished for that crime.

Family members quarreled with some of the detractors and defended Kandasamy as a man who had suffered from the harsh edicts of

fate and who could not have prevented either his participation in the theft or his own suicide. Yet, like many others present, even his family members vacillated between the Deterministic and Free Will positions in their reaction to Kandasamy's crimes. In the quarrel between Kandasamy and his wife over the fine, the wife seemed to treat him as a free agent who could and should have resisted the temptation to steal the chickens. Later, however, she was to defend him as a victim of fate. His mother, likewise, clearly addressed herself to him as if he were responsible for his actions and could have chosen not to commit suicide when she, as he lay dying, scolded him for killing himself and leaving his family behind. Yet, when he was dead, she was a staunch defender, saying that he was a good man who, because of the cruel *lilā* (play, sport) of Kaṭavuḷ (Śiva), had suffered a terrible lot. She denounced Śiva for his senseless sport and vowed that she would never again enter his temple or offer food for his worship.

The incident of the theft and suicide reveals the way in which the perspectives of Free Will and Determinism are used to accommodate the biases of the villager at any given moment. Kandasamy's supporters tended to favor the Deterministic perspective when arguing in defense of Kandasamy against his detractors (the schoolmaster's friends), who adopted the Free Will perspective, according to which Kandasamy was morally responsible because he could have acted otherwise. Yet these same supporters also adopted the Free Will perspective when they thought of the way in which they had been individually wronged by Kandasamy's actions. Neutral bystanders voiced both perspectives, evidencing no concern for the contradictory ethical judgments to which such statements gave rise.

The opposed nature of the two perspectives was, however, clearly recognized by the villagers when a detractor advanced a Free Will perspective and was countered by a supporter with a Deterministic interpretation of Kandasamy's responsibility for his actions. Within the limited context of such a debate a villager consistently applied the perspective which he then favored. Further, he implied that this perspective was the only accurate view of fate and that the ethical judgment that was based on it was the only correct one. He would, however, imply the same exclusive truth value for the opposite perspective if, in another context, he chose to favor it. The tendency to shift support from one perspective to another seemed to hinge on the discussant's shifting moods, as for example, when Kandasamy's mother wanted to defend him or alternately to blame him for aban-

doning her. Each perspective seemed to represent a true and valid evaluation of the moral responsibility of Kandasamy for the discussant at the moment at which the judgment was advanced. It seemed to matter little to the discussant or to the others present that "inconsistent" moral judgments were made and defended.

It is interesting to note that while some villagers also blamed the excessive fine and Kandasamy's quarrel with his wife for his suicide, these incidents were seen as only the precipitating causes. The real issue was whether Kandasamy was morally responsible for his suicide—that is, whether he could have and should have prevented himself from responding in this extreme way to these humiliations. This reasoning is similar to that in the story recounted earlier in which the Parayan laborer kills his Brahmin master. While the exploitation and the quarrel that occurred on that particular night were the immediate causal events for the murder, to the village informant who told me the story the real cause was fate (headwriting). Fate had caused the events that created the hatred and provided the circumstances in which the Parayan could get his revenge. The question that could be asked of this case as well as that of Kandasamy's case is whether it is possible to use one's *putti* to override the influence of one's headwriting. Put in specific terms, why did Kandasamy respond to the heavy fine by committing suicide when his co-thieves did not? Was he morally weak, or was it his fate alone to commit suicide, with the humiliation he suffered just the instrumental cause of this fated outcome?

A good example of an instance in which the issue of responsibility pivots around a person's ability to alter the events that fate causes to "happen" to him, rather than around the desires it conjures up within his *putti*, is that of an astrological prediction of disaster.

In these instances there are usually two phases to the debate over moral responsibility for control over one's fate. During the anxious days prior to a predicted disaster the person uses the perspectives of both Free Will and Determinism according to his shifts in mood. Applying the perspective of Determinism, he hopes that the astrological prediction is wrong. Since astrology is only an approximate reflection of the unknowable headwriting, there is always a chance that a prediction is inaccurate. Or he may begin to prepare himself for the disaster, adopting an attitude of resignation to a fate beyond his understanding or control. Yet, at other moments he feels that it is intolerable to wait for the worst to befall him, and so he frantically

clings to the belief in Free Will and sets about performing a range of ritual actions designed to alter his headwriting should it in fact spell disaster.

After the crisis is past and the results are known, the responsibility of the individual for his fate is again debated from the viewpoint of the two perspectives. From the perspective of Free Will, the person can be blamed for not having prevented the disaster, particularly since hindsight usually reveals the practical measures that could have been taken to avoid it. The individual may feel guilty and despondent, blaming himself for the misfortune. Other villagers are also quick to criticize and either blame some lack of practical effort or say that the individual is suffering for sins freely willed and committed in former births. If, however, the disaster predicted did not occur, the person may claim credit for having altered his headwriting. In practice, however, this claim is rarely made, since it is hard to substantiate. It is generally believed that the events that occur are those ordained in the headwriting. Therefore, it is easier to discredit astrological predictions than to defend the view that the headwriting itself has been changed.

The individual who has suffered the disaster generally seeks refuge in the Deterministic perspective, which offers him solace by depicting him as the helpless victim of an unalterable fate. Even though he may be deemed responsible, he is judged less harshly, and pity and sympathy are more naturally given him than criticism and blame.

In this type of situation, a person rather self-consciously shifts between perspectives, choosing that perspective which fits his changing moods and motivations (to fight or give up; blame himself or escape blame). He is aware of the moral dilemma over whether he is to be responsible and suffer anxiety and possible blame or whether he is to hold the headwriting responsible for whatever happens to him. Yet, he does not respond to the crisis by choosing one perspective and deciding the issue of his own responsibility once and for all. Rather, he continues to believe in whatever perspective is pragmatically meaningful. At the moment of his belief, it appears to be *the* final revelation of truth to him. But, moments later, he may believe equally fervently in the opposite perspective. At times he is aware of his inconsistency, but he is not generally troubled enough by it to try to make a lasting choice between the alternate perspectives of fate. Instead, he responds by yet another temporary shift to the perspective that he happens to favor at that moment. To illustrate this sort of contextual adaptation

of the perspectives, let me relate the story of Subiya, a *Paṅṭāram pūcāri* of Kalappūr.¹

Subiya owned land and a house and had the right to run the village Māriyamman temple and collect the offerings. He was not a wealthy man but was considered to be reasonably prosperous. Several years ago, a number of astrologers predicted that Subiya would lose all his property, including his ancestral house. He sought to avoid this fate by praying daily to the goddess Māriyamman for protection. He also sought the counsel and advice of a *Veḷḷāḷa pūcāri* (Milraj), who was a very wealthy man and who was the privileged devotee of the powerful goddess Kāmākṣi in whose temple he served in the capacity of primary *pūcāri*.

Milraj had been a family friend for years and was a trusted ally. When Subiya needed a 500-rupee advance for his daughter's marriage, he asked his friend Milraj to make the loan, which was to be returned within one week. He said that, of course, he was a man of property and that his property stood as collateral behind the loan. Milraj agreed and the loan was made. In one week's time Subiya came to return the money as promised, but Milraj publicly denounced him and said that the 500 rupees had not been a loan but an advance for the sale of all of Subiya's property. Subiya protested, but Milraj said that there were witnesses, and he produced a bill of sale on which Subiya (who was illiterate) was said to have made his mark.

Subiya took the matter to court, but he was no match for the wealthy Milraj, who spent thousands on bribes to false witnesses, to lawyers, and even to judges. In the meantime, Milraj sent men to harass Subiya and prevent him from farming his fields, thus cutting the income that Subiya could spend on the court expenses. As of this writing, the court case is still going on and has now reached the Madras court. Subiya is bankrupt and deeply in debt to his wife's family. It is very likely that Milraj will win the case by simply delaying so long that Subiya's money for court costs is exhausted.

Subiya, like most other villagers, draws on both Free Will and Deterministic perspectives according to which is useful to him. In his effort to avert the predicted disaster, he told me that he hoped that either the astrological prediction that he would lose his property was

¹The *Paṅṭāram jāti* is a *jāti* of non-Brahmin temple priests and temple servants. They are a "clean" *jāti* and unlike the *Veḷḷāḷas* of Kalappūr are vegetarians. However, they rank lower than the *Veḷḷāḷas* in the local caste-hierarchy.

erroneous or his *pūjās* to the goddess Māriyamman would win her support and that she would change his headwriting. In despondent moods, however, he told me that headwriting cannot be changed and that if the astrological prediction was correct his only hope was that the goddess would look after him when he was reduced to poverty.

This case has, as have many others that involve things that "happen" to people, an element of the control of the headwriting over the "will" as well as over other events. Subiya's wife and relatives frequently mocked and chided him for his stupidity in trusting Milraj in the first place. Sometimes Subiya would retort that it was the headwriting that had made him trust Milraj. At other times he would say that his trust in Milraj was fully warranted by the latter's previous behavior and that some strange twist in Milraj's own headwriting had caused him to turn against him. In this defense, Subiya was essentially insisting on classifying this misfortune as one that did not involve the headwriting's control over his judgments.

It is interesting to note that no one to whom I spoke suggested that perhaps Milraj, who had been the close friend of Subiya and who probably had heard of the prophecy, might have gotten the idea of exploiting him from the astrologer's prediction. It is conceivable that Milraj could have decided to take advantage of Subiya's fate by becoming the instrumental cause of his misfortunes, believing that, if it all was fated, then his scheme was sure to be successful in the end. This aspect of the case will have to remain a mystery, however, because Milraj was unwilling to discuss the incident with me, since he was in the midst of the litigation and suspicious of my association with Subiya.

Another interesting example of the fated incidents that "happen" to a person is the following story recounted or reconstructed for me by the parents of the young man concerned and sworn to be true by villagers familiar with the incident.

This story recalls the case of a young *Veḷḷāḷa* boy who was predicted to die of a snakebite when he was sixteen. The boy himself was said to have been skeptical about the traditional beliefs in astrology, headwriting, and so forth. His parents were orthodox Hindus who took this prediction very seriously. On the day on which it was predicted that he would be bitten, his parents locked him up in a room with no opening through which a snake could creep. They stationed servants as guards near the door and would not permit anyone to enter or leave. The boy, who was somewhat annoyed and amused by all this

fuss, spent the day studying. Then, as a private joke, he got up and drew a snake on the wall and said, "So you are supposed to kill me, are you?" With that he jabbed his finger at the snake's fang. A rusty nail happened to be slightly protruding from the wall at that point. It pierced his finger and infected him with tetanus. He died within a few days' time.

Neither the plausibility or the implausibility of the story nor its striking similarity to a Tamil folktale recorded by A. K. Ramanujan (personal communication) are of significance to me here. What is of interest is the way in which reconstruction of the event (however mythologized) by the villagers, including the dead boy's parents, is relevant to the general point I am making here. From the villagers' point of view, granted somewhat retrospectively constructed, it is impossible to change one's headwriting no matter how hard one tries. Some minor details might be altered, such as dying of the poisonous fang of a picture snake rather than of a real snake, but in the end, the headwriting is fulfilled. As the parents see it, it is clear that prior to the death, they had shifted between a belief in Free Will, which prompted their attempt to thwart fate, and a fear of Determinism. After the boy's death they adopted a Deterministic perspective of the incident and ruled out the Free Will perspective, since they thought that they had done all that was humanly possible. There was more consistency in their final preference for the Deterministic perspective than in many of the examples thus far cited.

In the examples given above, the perspectives of Free Will and Determinism have been used by villagers according to their own advantage. If it was to their advantage to shift rapidly between the perspectives, they did so. If, as in the snakebite example, it was to their advantage to stick to one particular perspective, they did so. What seemed to govern the choice of the perspective and the consistency with which it was used was the contextual bias of the discussant rather than any allegiance to an ideology that one must be consistent in the use of explanation.

This personal bias can, in some cases, be rooted in more deep-seated needs rather than in those dictated by more fleeting contextual expediency. For example, many Tamils have a rather consistent sense of what their own headwriting is and often make decisions and interpret past events in terms of this "script." Some people also seem to be more consistent in their preference for a particular perspective when they consider their own fate and whether or not they, personally, can

alter it. Some tend to favor a Free Will perspective and seem to fight to shape their own destiny against contrary astrological predictions and at great odds. Others favor a Deterministic perspective and give up and let what will happen, happen. Such acquiescence is not always passive, however. In many cases a person's decisions in life are affected by his concept of his fate. He will tend to give in to those events and desires which he feels are dictated by his headwriting and cannot be resisted, while resisting desires and turning down opportunities that he feels are destined to be thwarted anyway.²

This kind of preference is based on a sense of self which is deeply rooted and long lasting. For example, a positive sense of self may be behind one person's confidence in his ability to change even fate itself, whereas a negative sense of self may be what leads a person to believe that his is to be a life of suffering. The consistency with which the perspectives of Free Will or Determinism are applied in these cases appears also, as in the cases of more superficial contextual biases, to be the result of the persistence of the need or bias behind the choice of the perspective rather than in the person's conscious attempt to choose between perspectives in order to answer to some ideal of consistency and non-contradiction. Let me illustrate this type of consistent choice of a perspective through the example of Kamalam, a poverty-stricken Vellāla widow whose tendency to favor the Deterministic perspective had a profound effect on her life.

Her mother died when Kamalam was six years old, and she and her infant brother were raised by her mother's sister who, even before the death of her mother, had become the mistress of her father. The mother's sister was a woman noted for her vicious temper. She frequently beat Kamalam and rubbed chili powder into her eyes. The father did not intercede on Kamalam's behalf and instead treated her as a domestic servant to be overworked and neglected. Kamalam said that no one ever spent money to have her horoscope drawn up by an astrologer, but that she had no need of a horoscope, for she "knew" at an early age that her headwriting had destined her for a life of suffering.

When she came of age, her father insisted that she marry a forty-year-old man who was a cripple and who lived openly with a low-

²The belief in a life script written in the headwriting has interesting parallels with Eric Berne's concept of "scripting." Here the Tamil beliefs concerning an actual, substantial script add a new twist to the universal scripting process posited by Berne (1972).

caste mistress. Kamalam refused and was beaten by her father and chased from the house. While wandering alone in the fields, however, she said that she came to realize that it was her fate (headwriting) to marry this man, that Kaṭavuḷ had chosen him to be her husband. She knew that such a marriage would mean a lifetime of suffering, but she was convinced that this was her destiny and that no amount of rebellion on her part could alter it. She returned and agreed to the marriage. The husband, predictably, neglected and abused her. He continued to live with his mistress and never contributed toward the financial support of Kamalam or the two children born of the marriage.

When I asked her about her life she wept and cursed Kaṭavuḷ for having given her such an evil fate, but she never believed that she could have avoided any of the suffering. Her fellow villagers, however, were not as sympathetic. They believed that her poverty and hard lot were just punishment for some sin in this life or in a previous life and also, alternatively, that she could have done better; how, they did not specify.

This case is a good example of the power of the belief in headwriting and the extent to which an individual's tendency to favor a particular perspective, in this case the Deterministic perspective, can shape the events of a lifetime. Although Kamalam was no exception in her belief in Free Will as well as in Determinism, she never applied the Free Will perspective in the context of talking of her own life events. Although a Deterministic perspective did work to her advantage in excusing her for her sufferings, it was also, however, instrumental in leading her to accept and even cause much of this suffering.

Contextual Variability and *Lilā*

Thus far I have sought to establish the fact that Tamil culture supports a wide range of acceptable viewpoints concerning the freedom of the individual to control his own thoughts and actions. At the two extremes are the positions of absolute Determinism and of Free Will, with a variety of positions within the Free Will perspective concerning the amount of effort required to change the headwriting. I also illustrated the use of these divergent beliefs in contexts in which the villager must choose among them in order to decide an issue of moral responsibility. Several features of this contextual usage are of particular interest here.

(1) Tamils clearly perceive the Deterministic and Free Will positions as mutually exclusive and will argue for either one or the other in instances such as the debate over the moral responsibility of the chicken thief for his theft and suicide. (2) When they choose to support a particular perspective they argue with dogmatic fervor that the perspective which they then favor is the one and only "true" description of fate, implying that, therefore, it is the only perspective which should be utilized in contexts in which fate is an issue. (3) Yet, despite the emphasis on an either/or choice and the ethic of consistency implied in the assertion that one perspective is "true" across the board, Tamils, in practice, seem to be little concerned when they vacillate in their support of the two perspectives and make inconsistent and contradictory ethical judgments based on these perspectives. Thus, as we saw in the examples cited, it was a common occurrence for villagers to shift rapidly from favoring a view of absolute Determinism to favoring one of Free Will, and further, for others who witness such inconsistency to take it as a matter of course.

I noticed a similar lack of concern on the part of the persons themselves when I confronted them with their inconsistent responses and asked them to explain why they were saying apparently contradictory things about the mutability of headwriting. One Tamil, a more educated woman, said to me: "So what's so virtuous about consistency?" A Vellāla informant responded by saying, "All these things are the result of the *lilā* of Śiva." When I asked her why it was Śiva's *lilā* to change headwriting in the Markeṭṭēya incident but to say that it was impossible to alter headwriting in the case of his own daughter (Kāmuṇṭi myth), she replied: "It is Śiva's *lilā* to do all these things. How am I to know such things? Only Śiva understands such *lilā*." An old Vellāla man responded more cynically: "What do you expect in the Kali Yuga? Just look at Śiva's family life. One son is a womanizer and the other refuses to marry. Śiva and Pārvatī can never stop quarreling. If even the gods behave like this, what do you expect of men? Who are we to question such *lilā*?"

A Brahmin informant, however, viewed Śiva's *lilā* in a more positive light: "We are mere human beings. It is hard for us to understand the *lilā* of the gods. After all, aren't they far wiser than we?"

The implication of their responses is that the inconsistencies of men are nothing when compared with the inconsistencies of the gods. If such behavior on the part of the gods is defensible as their *lilā*, who is it

that can rightfully censor this behavior in god or man? In short, if Śiva did not feel it necessary to choose once and for all between the view that headwriting can be changed and the view that it cannot be changed, although he favors one or the other view in different contexts, then how were they, mere ignorant mortals, to be expected to choose consistently between them? Here the contextual dogmatic adherence to a particular perspective obviously did not bind Śiva or the villager to follow through on its exclusive claims to truth by espousing that perspective alone in all contexts. Rather, the ethic of consistency seemed to be set within a larger cultural context in which inconsistent responses across contexts were acceptable and reflected a more overarching truth: that the world itself is complex and that it is Śiva's *līlā* to sustain multiplicity and opposition rather than to "resolve" it. As Wendy O'Flaherty has written concerning the *Purāṇas*, oppositions are "suspended" rather than "resolved."

These fleeting moments of balance provide no "solution" to the paradox of the myth, for indeed, Hindu mythology does not seek any true synthesis. Where Western thought insists on forcing a compromise of or synthesis of opposites, Hinduism is content to keep each as it is; in chemical terms, one might say that the conflicting elements are resolved into a suspension rather than a solution. (1973:317–318)

This tendency to suspend diverse beliefs rather than to seek to synthesize or to make an exclusive and lasting choice between them seems to be characteristic of Śiva's *līlā* and of the villager's response to cultural alternatives.

In Beals's ethnographic work he has also noted a similar tendency on the part of his informants. He has described it as the propensity to collect cultural beliefs like pieces of a puzzle, which are assumed to go together in some way to form a unified whole (1976:185). Kundstater (1975) has touched upon a related point, that in many societies the average person simply makes use of the cultural alternatives available to him without concerning himself with the logical compatibility of the systems of thought to which they belong. (His point was with reference to the acceptance of Western and indigenous medical systems as alternate forms of treatment with little concern for the underlying incompatibility of the theories of illness and of the body which these systems represent. Amarasingham [1980] has made a similar observation about the use of medical help of diverse sorts in Sri Lanka.)

Yet there is more to the approach of the Tamil to cultural alternatives than just a tendency to avoid dealing with complex philosophical problems and making exclusive choices. The difference lies in the fact that villagers justify their inconsistent behavior by citing the example of Śiva's *līlā*. To understand the significance of this reference to *līlā*, it is necessary to consider the meaning and relevance of Śiva's *līlā* to the villager.

To the gods, life itself is a game. They engage even in apparently serious endeavors such as war or marriage all in the spirit of fun. As one informant put it, "For the gods, it is all *līlā*. Everything is Śiva's sport."

Yet in all games there are rules by which one must play. For example, soccer is a type of play for the villager, but it also has rules which the players must follow to sustain the game itself. While Śiva's *līlā* is considerably more spontaneous and unpredictable than a game of soccer, it nevertheless also conforms to some basic rules. To decode the rules of Śiva's game, let us consider a Kalappūr variant of a well-known Hindu creation myth.

According to the myth, there was a time when nothing existed in the universe except God (Kaṣavuḷ). He was in a totally peaceful, undisturbed, meditative state. Then one day there was a disturbance in his body caused by *kāma* (desire). This disturbance caused the three *kuṇams*, the three humors, and the five elements to separate and become distinct. The humors, *kuṇams*, and elements in turn recombined and became redistributed in different proportions. This process was compared by one informant to a massive "turning of the stomach" (*vaiṭṭu peraiṭṭal*). The god's stomach exploded, and out from it came all manner of creatures (*jāṭis*), such as gods, demons, humans, animals, plants. The process of recombination and redifferentiation continues, resulting in degeneration and regeneration. God still exists, but not as before. He is, however, still closer than the rest of creation to that primordial state of perfect equilibrium (*amaitinilai*) in which all the *kuṇams*, humors, and elements were balanced. As a result of this more equilibrated condition God enjoys a more healthy state than do less equilibrated entities such as humans.

But even in Him the elements, the humors and the *kuṇams* move around, try as He might to keep them in equilibrium [*ōṣāmal āṣāmal*]. That is why He is unable to do the same kind of thing for too long. If He meditates for more than a certain number of years, the amount of *cāṭvikam* begins to increase. So then Kāma comes and disturbs Him and then He goes after Śakti... or the

Asuras. . . This results in an increase in His *rajasa kuṇam*. When *rajasa kuṇam* increases beyond a certain limit He must return to meditating. But most of the time, He is involved in *līlā*. . . All our ups and downs are due to His *līlās*. But that is the only way He can maintain a balance [*samanilai paṭuttalām*]. (E. V. Daniel 1979:5)

This brief allusion to *līlā*, the play of Kaṭavuḷ, indicates quite clearly that *līlā* is far more than mere caprice. *Līlā* is a way to achieve some measure of balance in a world that is beset by the disequilibrating activities of desire (*kāma*). Specifically, *līlā* is necessary to balance the various substances (*kuṇams*, humors, and elements) of which Śiva is composed.

According to a Veḷḷāḷa informant, Śiva's *līlā*, which involves shifts between life as a householder and life as a yogi, not only balances his *kuṇams*; it allows him to enjoy the pleasures of the world and yet to enjoy the pleasure of meditating on his *ātman*. He added, "That is why I also meditate even though I am a householder."

Thus, while Śiva's *līlā* appears to be utterly erratic play, with Śiva at one moment playing the role of the archetypal ascetic and at another moment playing the part of a frenzied lover, this seemingly inconsistent behavior conforms to the underlying logic of Śiva's game. This is, that anything taken to excess is disequilibrating and that, therefore, it is necessary for Śiva to alternate his enjoyment of the various pleasures of his creation.

The notion that *līlā* is what one does to enjoy diverse pleasures and yet maintain a balance between one's various diversions is a theme expressed not only by the villager but in the *Purāṇas*. While only a few villagers were noted for their mastery of Purāṇic stories, these storytellers drew crowds of interested villagers during festivals such as Śivarātri and amused their family and neighbors during the course of many a late evening gathering on the veranda of their houses. The *Tiruvīlayāṭal Purāṇam* was a particular favorite, which was read in the home by the educated villager on occasions such as Śivarātri when the family must keep awake during the all-night vigil. In addition, popular Tamil movies to which many villagers went portrayed mythological themes. These movies, which often were shown in thatched-hut movie theaters, brought to the village the textual tradition which was the focus of more serious study by the more educated villager.

A central theme in these Purāṇic stories and movies is the *līlā* of Śiva. All of Śiva's actions are, in fact, said to be his *līlā* (sport). Thus,

whether he quarrels with Pārvaṭī, incarnates as a local deity, or grants a boon to a devotee, it is all a function of his *līlā*.

To gain some insight into the *līlā* of Śiva, it might be useful to consider the type of sport in which Śiva engages. In the *Śiva Purāṇa*, which was the subject of my M.A. thesis (1974), I studied four volumes of mythology on the *līlā* of Śiva, and I referred to a wider range of *Purāṇas* illuminated by the work of Wendy O'Flaherty (1968, 1969, 1971). From my study of these *Purāṇas*, it became apparent that Śiva rather predictably intervened whenever anyone became too embroiled in a certain type of action. Thus, in the Pine Forest myth, Śiva seduces the wives of sages who are overly involved in their meditation on the *ātman*. He awakens in them desires and jealousies which link them once again to the temporal world. Conversely, he censors those who are overly embroiled in the concerns of the world and who value their limited virtues above the wisdom of the ascetic who knows the *ātman*. Typically, a householder such as Brahmā or Viṣṇu becomes smug and self-righteous about his status and virtue. Śiva then deludes him with *māyā* (illusion) and causes him to enact suppressed aggressive or adulterous desires. When the householder is humbled, Śiva reveals to the offender the higher truth that all the distinctions of the particularistic world are irrelevant from a more enlightened perspective, according to which the wise know that all of creation is but an illusory emanation of Śiva's expansive nature. Yet, it is Śiva's *līlā* to sportively create and sustain the illusion, and it is his *līlā* to qualify it by a higher wisdom. His *līlā* is thus an enlightened "transcendent perspective" that balances the "dualistic perspective," according to which the distinctions of the world seem real, and the "monistic perspective," according to which there are no distinctions to be experienced. It is Śiva's *līlā* to sustain both perspectives so that he may enjoy both the pleasures of the world and the *mōṭṭcam*-like (salvation-like) states of his ascetic interludes. His *līlā* thus balances the temporal world and the *ātman* and strikes a balance between desire and restraint (S. Daniel 1974).

In summary, *līlā* in the textual tradition and in Kalappūr culture is a mixture of a playful orientation toward the world and a measure of restraint. To the gods, life itself is a game-drama. While the main purpose is play (*līlā*, *kūttu*, *vilayāṭṭu*), it is also necessary for one to live in accordance with the rules of the game. For god and man alike, this means maintaining a certain degree of balance without which there is no well-being and consequently no enjoyment.

There are in Kalappūr culture, however, two very divergent perspectives on the degree to which gods and men are tempering their desire in order to keep to the basic rules of the game of life. According to what I shall call the Kali Yuga perspective, the world is so degenerate in this final *yuga* that neither man nor god is capable of exercising much restraint. The Kali Yuga is an epoch in which desire has gotten out of hand and it is no longer possible to even hope for any satisfactory degree of stability. Śiva's *līlā* is the result more of caprice than of any attempt to balance out all the multiple and opposed aspects of the cosmos. He does manage to achieve some measure of balance as the result of his *līlā*, but it is the type of balance that comes when an immediate desire is gratified and there is momentary relief from excess desire. In the short term this is equilibrating, but in the long term it leads to other complications. Thus, in a popular Tamil movie Śiva destroys Pārvaṭī in a quarrel over who is more important, only to find himself without a wife. Such shortsighted solutions are the essence of Śiva's *līlā*, according to the Kali Yuga perspective.

According to what I shall term the "Ideal" perspective, god and man alike, despite the degeneracy of the Kali Yuga, are yet thought to be capable of exercising restraint and of seeking to achieve long-term substantial well-being. Śiva's *līlā* when judged by this Ideal perspective is seen as an enlightened relativism. His apparently inconsistent behavior in various contexts is in the service of a consistent, higher-order code for conduct: *līlā*. Thus, according to this perspective, Śiva's *līlā* is playful, but it balances desire and restraint and facilitates equilibrium not only within Śiva's own body but in the universe as a whole.

Śiva's *līlā*, as a model for achieving substantial equilibrium, is significant to the villager in different ways, depending on his point of view. According to one perspective, which emphasizes the separation of gods and men, the codes for conduct that are appropriate for gods are not appropriate for men. Gods and men are seen as separate orders of creation or rather as belonging to two distinct levels in the degenerative process of creation (see E. V. Daniel 1979). Stated simply, gods have many more entities or forms into which they can degenerate than do human beings, and they also have more powers than humans to effect such transformations. Thus, gods can assume human forms with ease, whereas it is practically impossible for humans to regenerate into godly forms with the appropriate divine powers. From such a perspective, then, Śiva's *līlā* becomes a code for conduct that enjoins a level of caprice which is appropriate for gods but excessive for men.

No sooner than such a distinction between gods and men is esta-

blished, it is challenged at the level of ideology by the more encompassing view of nondualism (to be dealt with below) and at the level of praxis by the *jāti* hierarchy among and between humans. In the village of Kalappūr the terms of address used by lower *jātis* toward higher ones, Brahmins and Vellālās in particular, were the same that devotees used toward their deities. The same held true in food transacting behaviors, and in much of the deference and demeanor coded in proxemic and kinesic conventions. On more than one occasion an informant from a lower *jāti* has excused or explained away the "eccentric" activities of members of the higher castes—especially the licentious and drunken behavior of some Vellālās—as being the privilege of gods. In other words, what may clearly be seen as "excessive" to and for a Parayan or a stonemason may be deemed appropriate for a Vellālā. The disequilibrating conduct to be avoided as excess for one *jāti* becomes the equilibrating sport to be engaged in by another. That the *jātis* of gods and men belong in the same continuum is quite clear. The essential component of *līlā* (its concern with achieving balance through avoiding excesses) is as much a part of the human privilege, need, and quest as it is that of the divine. The *līlā* of Śiva, in so far as it is displayed with such engaging abandon and lavishness, is but an extreme expression of a culturally valued means for achieving substantial wellbeing.

The breakdown of the clear dichotomy and its corollary perspective is carried to its limit in the nondualistic ideology alluded to above. The latter introduces a quite different perspective on the relationship of gods and men; it collapses all traces of the distinctions that seem to separate them. This perspective is said to express the more enlightened view that all of creation is but a manifestation of different aspects of Śiva and Pārvaṭī. Thus, even as local deities are said to be incarnations of Pārvaṭī and Śiva, so human beings as well are thought to be incarnations of the divine couple. The belief that every man is Śiva and every woman is Pārvaṭī is not only a familiar theme in Purāṇic mythology (S. Daniel 1974) it is celebrated in the Vellāḷa marriage ritual when the groom and bride are explicitly said to be incarnations of Śiva and Pārvaṭī (see Allison 1980).

It is said to be the *līlā* of Śiva and Pārvaṭī to incarnate in more delimited forms. Although they choose to experience some limitations in these forms, it is all in the spirit of their sport. The wise are not fooled by such disguises and recognize the more encompassing and expansive nature of Śiva and Pārvaṭī in whatever form they assume.

From this perspective then, *līlā* is Śiva's code for conduct in all his

manifestations. The range of his sport may be limited by his incarnation in a human form, but his *lilā* remains essentially the same; it expresses the same relativistic inconsistency in search of balance and harmony.

In summary, Śiva engages in *lilā* in order not only to stabilize his own *kuṇams* and humors but to achieve some stability in the three worlds. The degree of stability he is thought to achieve depends upon one's perspective. If one adopts a Kali Yuga perspective, then Śiva's *lilā* achieves balance only in the short term. If, on the other hand, an Ideal perspective is favored, then Śiva's *lilā* is thought to be necessary to achieve long-term stability. From either a Kali Yuga or an Ideal perspective, Śiva's *lilā* is paradigmatic for the villager either as a relevant art or as an expression of a code for conduct that is appropriate for Śiva in both his divine and his human manifestations.

Let us return now to the references made by villagers to *lilā*. When the villager cites *lilā* to justify his own tolerance for multiplicity and opposition (i.e., his tendency to suspend rather than to resolve opposition) and his inconsistent preference for one perspective or another in different contexts, he is in effect likening his behavior to the *lilā* of Śiva.

Like *lilā*, his behavior can be judged by either a Kali Yuga or an Ideal perspective. For example, in a context in which villagers observe a person change his beliefs to cast himself in a positive light, they might favor a Kali Yuga interpretation of his behavior. According to this perspective, he is judged to be just another crass opportunist, another Kali Yuga degenerate. Rarely is this opportunism severely criticized. It is tolerated as a product of a degenerate age. On the other hand, the villager himself and his supporters might choose to view his inconsistencies in the light of the Ideal perspective. By defending his behavior with reference to Śiva's *lilā* they imply that there is good reason for apparent nonsensical and contradictory behavior. It is all in the service of maintaining one's balance. It expresses a more enlightened awareness of the relativity of all beliefs and perspectives.

I wish to make it clear at this point that I do not intend to imply that the inconsistent and contradictory responses that first caught my attention are peculiar to the people of Kalappūr. I suspect that in every culture people are inconsistent and tend to contradict themselves. In fact, recent research on the behavior of individuals in different contexts lends support to the view that people are a great deal less consistent than our expectations of consistency would lead us to suspect (Shweder 1979).

What is of interest is the fact that the villager justified or explained his behavior with reference to the culturally validated ethic of *lilā*. *Lilā* is, in essence, a culturally patterned mode for ordering the multiplicity of the Hindu world view. It enjoins a certain relativistic and consequently an inconsistent pattern of choosing among the various options available within the culture. It legitimizes a "contextualized" approach to decision making and discourages trans-contextual, consistent preferences. The latter may be good for a time, but they are ultimately disequilibrating.

It would perhaps be useful to consider an analogy. The villager can be likened to a man who has before him a tool box that contains all the beliefs of his culture about what he is and what he ought to be doing. He is to pick and choose among the cultural beliefs (tools) available to him to make sense of the life circumstances and dilemmas with which he is faced. In Kalappūr culture he is free to pick whatever tool fits his immediate contextual need, knowing that such contextual choices can be justified in terms of either the Kali Yuga or the Ideal interpretations of *lilā*. Thus, an ethic of *lilā* encourages him to tinker in a playful and inconsistent way with the distinctions of the particularistic world. This style of tinkering is what I shall call the "Tool Box approach" of the Tamil. The Tool Box approach is a culturally validated style which emphasizes contextuality and which sanctions inconsistency in the light of a search for substantial equilibrium.

The Tool Box approach, as a construct is, I submit, more generative and culturally meaningful than several other concepts that have been suggested for handling apparent intracultural inconsistencies. Milton Singer's well-known concept of "compartmentalization" employed to explain the shift between the traditional-familial and the modern-industrial behavior of Madrassite industrialists is a case in point (1972). Compartmentalization is certainly an interesting analytic category. However, it retains its focus on behavior and does not provide the underlying cultural explanation of this behavior. A. K. Ramanujan's adaptation from linguistics of the notion of context sensitivity comes closer to what I have tried to present here (personal communication). I believe, however, that I have gone a step further in trying to discover what in Tamil culture makes context sensitivity a "culturally" meaningful response.

I also wish to make it clear that I am not assuming that the ethic of *lilā* necessarily motivates villagers to behave in an inconsistent manner. It is quite possible that their behavior is motivated by an opportunistic exploitation of the cultural options available to them. How-

ever, to conceive of the Tool Box approach as being merely an expression of the general human propensity for opportunism is to miss the point. In one sense, in a trivial sense, the Tool Box approach may be an instantiation of a generalized opportunism. But to elevate an opportunism thus conceived to the status of a practical logic upon which the cultural variable depends is to commit a fallacy similar to the material reductionism so cogently argued against by Sahlins (1976:206). To deny an opportunism based on a supposed universal practical logic the status of all-moving force is not to deny the real effects that some form of opportunism may have on the cultural order. The point being made is homologous to the one made by Sahlins.

[T]he nature of the effects cannot be read from the nature of the forces, for the material [practical] effects depend on their cultural encompassment. . . . The force may . . . be significant—but significance, precisely is a symbolic quality. At the same time, this symbolic scheme is not itself the modè of expression of an instrumental logic, for in fact there is no other logic in the sense of a meaningful order save that imposed by culture on the instrumental process. (1976:206)

In my treatment of the Tool Box approach of the Kalappūr villager to the multiple options of his culture, it is the texture of this encompassment, the form and shape of this symbolic logic that I have tried to represent. What gives the villager's Tool Box approach its cultural distinctiveness is the ethic of *lilā* which pervades it, an ethic which makes defensible inconsistent, contextually advantageous choices.

In conclusion, although I began with an apparently simple problem—to explicate the villager's beliefs concerning fate—I discovered not just one composite cultural understanding of "fate" but diverse perspectives and variations on these perspectives. Further, my analysis of the way in which my informants pick and choose among these perspectives led me to explore a culturally patterned attitude toward multiplicity itself (the Tool Box approach), which I found reflected the larger Hindu world view and evidenced in particular the significant influence of the culturally valued ethic of *lilā*. Such a culturally patterned mode of orientation is, I would suggest, as interesting and worthy of further research as the particular beliefs concerning fate themselves. It is essential to an understanding not only of what Tamils believe but of how they use their beliefs to explain, justify, and judge their own actions and those of others.

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Fate, Karma, and Cursing in a Local Epic Milieu

Brenda E. F. Beck

Looking at folk literature can be a very useful way of deepening our knowledge of folk concepts. Basic ideas about causation and about the ethical underpinnings of human life are often expressed in folk stories. The folk epic is a particularly appropriate place to look for such concepts because epic accounts attempt to mirror actual human life more closely than do shorter forms of story. Tamil folktales often deal with fanciful events and focus on magicians, talking animals, or trickster figures. By contrast, Tamil folk epics claim to link up with actual local history. They depict a rich social order that is full of local, caste-specific characters. These local epic heroes also embody a moral perspective. They often depict the overthrow of the unjust. Though the heroes and heroines of such epics may be idealized figures, their very purpose seems to be to challenge some wider framework or destiny. By studying the actions of these epic figures we can come to a better understanding of what such larger concepts of fate may be.

The data for this essay are drawn from the text of a local epic called *The Brothers' Story*, which is currently popular in the Coimbatore District of Tamilnadu.¹ This regional legend draws heavily on patterns and images found in traditional *Mahābhārata* accounts. At the same time it is thoroughly local in terms of its basic descriptive format. The subtle overlap between events and patterns in this regional story and in that celebrated pan-Indian epic are usually lost on casual observers. This is particularly true of spontaneous commentaries on oral versions, less so where interpretations are offered of written

¹It is locally called the *Annanmarāmi Katai* or the *Ponnaraka Renum Kallaraka Ammanai*. This epic-length legend does not seem to be known in the southern and eastern parts of Tamilnadu.