



The last Vettiyan

A musical tradition and a degraded low caste profession

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The Last Vettiyan: On the disappearance of a musical tradition and a degraded low caste profession

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Abstract

As the feudal, caste-based organisation of labour in village India has given way to capitalist market forces and wage labour relations, traditional low caste professions are beginning to disappear. One of these professions is the inherited, highly stigmatized office of funeral drummer and graveyard attendant, called vettiyan. In Tranquebar, only one person from the Paraiyar caste is still serving as vettiyan, and even he dreams about a better future for his son. This article examines the gradual disappearance of the vettiyan profession in Tranquebar and the neighbouring villages in relation to the general changes in the economic, social, and symbolic status of the low castes. It looks into the ambiguous symbolic meanings of drums and drumming, and compares the vettiyan profession to that of other drummers and musicians from the Paraiyar caste. The article focuses on the subtle cultural encounters between people, who belong to the same caste and share almost similar cultural backgrounds, but still define each other as 'others'. It argues that the few remaining vettiyan are used by their Paraiyar caste fellows as symbolic repositories of the negative, degrading connotations of untouchables and impurity that are still associated with their existence and which they vehemently strive to escape.

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This article is based on empirical data from two-and-a-half months ethnographic fieldwork in 2006–2007. For the Tranquebar Initiative of the National Museum of Denmark, I studied the low caste communities in Tranquebar and collected daily life items for the Ethnographical Collection at the museum (cf. Lillelund 2009). The Danish foundation Bikubenfonden generously provided the grant. I also owe my thanks to S. Balakrishnan, who worked for me as interpreter and field assistant. Without his help and advice, this study would not have been possible.

Introduction

There is one house where we do not go. The elderly man pointed his head towards the end of the street to indicate the direction of the house, where nobody from the street apparently were willing to go, let alone sit or eat. *'The man of that house does village work'* he explained. I was baffled. For the past twenty minutes, my newfound informant had told me about the exploitation and discrimination that the Paraiyars¹ until quite recently had suffered from the 'upper' caste Vanniyars. How Paraiyars were not allowed to walk through the Vanniyars' streets, enter their houses or eat together with them, though they worked hard every day on these people's land. Now he told me outright that he and his caste fellows themselves were practising discrimination, and that even against one of their own caste fellows. *'We are all the same, but that family is looking dirty. We don't like to eat in that house.'*

The 'village work' (*ur velai*) that the elderly, protestant man was referring to was the playing of the *tappu* funeral drums and the related tasks of grave-digging and cremation, which have been hereditary duties imposed on men from the Paraiyar caste. This work is associated with the utmost degree of ritual pollution because of the close association with death, human corpses and animal skins. The pollution assumed to derive from this work has been used as an explanation for legitimating the low status of the Paraiyars in the local hierarchy of castes (Moffatt 1979b: 256; Greene 2002; Arun 2007b: 90).² In Tranquebar as in many other villages of Tamil Nadu, the funeral drumming and grave-digging duties are only taken care of by specific individuals, exclusively men, called *vettiyan*s. The majority of the Paraiyar men work as casual labourers in the fields, at the construction sites or at the beach loading and unloading equipment and fish to and from the boats of the large fishermen community: occupations which are not associated with any degree of ritual pollution, though they are indeed indicators of a low social and economic status.

Today, only one man officiates as *vettiyan* in Tranquebar, and his and his family's social and economic status and general life circumstances are remarkably different from the rest of the Paraiyars in the village. While the discrimination and ill treatment of the Paraiyars generally has diminished significantly in the course of the past twenty to thirty years, the *vettiyan* and his family are still subject to discrimination, abuse, and even physical violence. They live socially isolated from the rest of their caste people, who keep away from them because of the stigma associated with drumming and grave-digging, and are thus discriminated against by 'upper' castes and Paraiyars alike.

Until twenty five years ago, there were four *vettiyan* families in Tranquebar. However, three of the families have quit the work, as the sons of

the respective families have succeeded in finding other and better occupations free from the stigma of ritual pollution. In most of the surrounding villages, there are already no *vettians* left. Here villagers of all castes belonging to the Hindu faith³ now have to make do without *tappu* drum players for the funeral processions and instead engage other Paraiyar drum orchestras playing more 'decent' non-stigmatized types of drums, while engaging casual labourers of any caste for the grave-digging.⁴ This development reflects the marked decline of the 'upper' castes' authority in the village society and is one of the significant consequences of the breakdown of the old feudal caste structures, which have characterized the post-independence period. Today the 'upper' castes in Tranquebar generally no longer have the power to impose traditional work duties on the Paraiyars, and the Paraiyars are free to seek new and better opportunities on the labour market. However, it is still difficult to break social tradition in Tranquebar, as revealed by the case of the one man who still officiates as *vettiyan* in Tranquebar, despite discrimination and isolation.

The last remaining *vettiyan* in Tranquebar also dreams of a better future for his son free from the regular abuses at the funeral ceremonies of mainly the fishermen community and from the social isolation at home in the Paraiyar street. He is therefore determined to be the very last *vettiyan* in Tranquebar, despite the fact that his teenage son is a very talented *tappu* player, who often goes along with his father to play at local funerals. If the *vettiyan's* son manages to find an alternative source of livelihood, the *vettiyan* profession will completely disappear in Tranquebar and with that a distinct musical tradition, which for centuries has been closely associated with the cultural and artistic traditions of the Paraiyar caste.

This article examines the gradual disappearance of the traditional *vettiyan* profession in Tranquebar and the neighbouring villages in relation to the general changes in the economic, social, and symbolic status of the low castes⁵ in the area. As part of the analysis, I will look into the ambiguous symbolic meanings of drums and drumming, and compare the *vettiyan* profession to that of other drummers and musicians from the Paraiyar caste. Contrary to the *vettians*, other Paraiyar musicians are not avoided by their own caste people, but accepted as part of the community and even respected for their musical talent. However, most of the other Paraiyar musicians in the Tranquebar area are also mainly playing for Hindu funerals, so why precisely are the *vettians* singled out and stigmatised even by people from their own caste?

The cultural encounters described in this article are related to the processes of social and economic change, which have not only significantly changed the power relations between the different castes in Tranquebar, but also added new dimensions and interpretations to the meaning of caste and

cultural identity. This is particularly true of the Paraiyar caste. In the course of the past thirty years, the Paraiyars in Tranquebar have experienced a gradual emancipation from the feudal caste norms and the demands of the ‘upper’ castes⁶, which has encouraged them to redefine their caste identity in an attempt to shed the negative connotations related to their caste. Like all other caste communities, the Paraiyars define themselves collectively in relation to the other castes in the village. However, the new identity that the Paraiyars attempt to carve out for themselves is also defined in opposition to the ‘old’ identity as low, dirty and depraved, which for centuries has been imposed on them by other castes.

This article addresses the cultural encounter involved in this process, where caste identity and cultural traditions are negotiated. The cultural encounters are not ground-breaking, historic encounters between people from different continents, religions, or ethnic groups, but subtle everyday encounters of those who share similar cultural backgrounds, but still define each other as ‘others’. In conclusion, I will make the argument that the few remaining *vettiyan*s in the Tranquebar area are used by their Paraiyar caste fellows as symbolic repositories of the negative, degrading connotations of untouchables and impurity which are still associated with their existence, and which they vehemently strive to escape.

It is characteristic of the present situation in Tamil Nadu that people from the Paraiyar caste interpret their supposed common cultural identity differently, depending on the specific caste structures in their respective villages and towns. The examples from Tranquebar are therefore not representative of the Tamil Paraiyars in general, but add new aspects to the existing studies of the Paraiyars’ musical traditions (e.g. Wolf and Sherinian 2000; Greene 2002; Clark-Decès 2005; Arun 2007b) and to the general body of literature on the gradual transformation of caste structures in India.

Contrary to the cases of the Paraiyars in the Tamil villages of Villupuram and Pappanallur⁷ studied by the anthropologists Isabelle Clark-Decès (2006) and C. Joe Arun (2007b) respectively, the Paraiyars in Tranquebar have not revolted collectively against the ‘upper’ castes’ demand for *vettiyan*s to play the *tappu* drums at funerals and village festivals. Neither have the distinct musical tradition of *tappu*-playing got any kind of revival among the Paraiyars, as is the case in a large number of other villages and towns in Tamil Nadu, where the *tappu* drum is today used as a positive symbol of the Paraiyars’ common cultural identity and tradition (cf. Clark-Decès 2006; Arun 2007b).

In Tranquebar, the Paraiyars generally believe that the sound of the *tappu* drums is unpleasant and inauspicious, and like the rest of the villagers, regard the *vettiyan* and his occupation as dirty and uncivilized. The Paraiyars thus share the ‘upper’ castes’ view of one of the Paraiyar caste’s most

distinctive cultural traditions. Still, nobody urges the *vettiyan* to quit the job.

The Paraiyars of Tranquebar

As in most South Indian villages, the Paraiyars and other low castes⁸ in Tranquebar generally live outside the main village (*ur*) in separate settlements referred to as ‘streets’ e.g. Samyan Street, Karan Street and Mission Street, the last mentioned because of the high proportion of protestant and catholic Paraiyars living there. The five Paraiyar settlements hold about twenty to thirty per cent of Tranquebar’s about 7000 inhabitants. Thus, the Paraiyar caste is the second largest community in the village, only exceeded by the fishermen community of Pattinavars, which makes up more than fifty per cent of the total population (PRAXIS 2005?: 17). However, the Paraiyars generally consider their settlements to be separate villages, rather than parts of the Tranquebar village, even when some of these settlements lie immediately next to the streets of the Vanniyar or the Pattinavar caste.⁹

The livelihood situation of the Paraiyars in Tranquebar is generally miserable. It is difficult to find continuous work, and the wages for casual and agricultural labourers are low—approximately a hundred rupees a day for men and seventy rupees for women. A large proportion of the Paraiyar population lives in utter poverty and barely manages to get enough to eat, while others make a somewhat better living employed e.g. as drivers, carpenters or school teachers.

Until about thirty years ago, most of the Paraiyars worked as agricultural labourers for the local landowning castes (mainly Vanniyars), but as the water of the Uppanar River ran low and irrigation possibilities diminished, the agriculture around Tranquebar collapsed, and now only very few people get work as agricultural labourers.¹⁰ While the agricultural collapse caused economic hardship and insecurity for the Paraiyars, it has had the effect of contributing positively to their social emancipation from the ‘upper’ caste repression. The century old ties between the Paraiyars and the landowning castes were severed, as the Paraiyars were not economically dependent on the landowners anymore. As a result, the landowning castes lost their former power to dictate to the Paraiyars and over the years the abuses and discriminating behaviour of the ‘upper’ castes has significantly diminished.

Today, the Paraiyars in Tranquebar are usually not openly discriminated against. The Paraiyars drink tea in the same teashops and eat in the same eateries as others, and are free to walk in whichever street in the village they please and to sit in the buses wherever they like. Compared to Paraiyar communities living further inland, where agriculture is still profitable and they mainly work as agricultural labourers, the Paraiyars in Tranquebar are significantly less troubled by prejudice, marginalisation, and discrimination.

However, they are still subject to subtle discrimination, particularly from the fishermen community, for whom some of them still work.

The fishermen community's continued discrimination and dislike of the Paraiyars became particularly evident immediately after the tsunami (December 2004), when many of the Paraiyars found that the fishermen actively tried to prevent the NGOs from helping the many Paraiyar families, who had been seriously affected by the tsunami. These families, who had sought shelter from the tsunami in schools and community centres in the inland hinterland, were in the first chaotic days after the catastrophe driven out by fishermen families, who refused to stay under the same roof as the Paraiyars. Later on, they had to block the road to get the attention of the local and international NGOs that rushed in to offer aid to the survivors, as the focus was entirely on the fishermen community.

On the second anniversary of the tsunami, the fishermen village *panchayat* (caste council) erected a large monument commemorating the tsunami victims. The monument was financed by a foreign NGO and situated at a prominent place at the entrance of Tranquebar. However, only victims from the fishermen caste were listed in the monument, while the names of the about twenty victims from the Paraiyar caste did not appear on it.

The examples show that the relations between the Paraiyars and the fishermen caste presently are characterized by unequal competition, and certainly not by mutual interdependence, which characterized the patron-client relationships between 'upper' castes and low castes of the previous feudal caste structures. The 'upper' caste status of the fishermen caste in relation to the Paraiyar caste is in other words not a given, but a position that the former constantly sustain and defend. On the other hand, people from the Paraiyar caste attempt to protect themselves against discrimination and ill treatment by avoiding all unnecessary contact with the fishermen and other 'upper' caste people, e.g. the Vanniyars.

The Paraiyars in Tranquebar do not have strong traditions for raising collective protests against 'upper' caste repression, as is the case in some Tamil villages. Rather, it seems that the Paraiyars to a large extent have tried to appropriate 'upper' caste norms and behaviours as a measure to become accepted as respectable citizens by the other villagers. An example of these efforts of sanskritization (cf. Srinivas 2002: 42 pp.) is the Paraiyars' general dissociation with the musical tradition of *tappu* playing, which according to many of the Paraiyars in Tranquebar earlier was a salient feature of their caste's cultural tradition. It is uncertain when the Paraiyars in Tranquebar actually quit *tappu* playing, if it is at all true that their male forefathers all used to play the *tappu* drum, but my impression was that nobody except the *vettiyan* (and maybe the men from the families, who were previously working

as *vettiyans*) knew how to play the drum.¹¹ On the other hand, my impression could indeed very well be wrong.

Drums that chase away the evil spirits

The *tappu* drum is a flat, circular drum made out of a wooden or metal frame covered by a single tightly stretched drumhead of calfskin or goatskin, glued to the frame and tightened with a thin leather or cotton rope. The *tappu* drum typically measures about forty centimetres in diameter, but this is subject to great variation.¹² When the drum is played, it is held upright between the arm and the chest and beaten with a thick wooden stick and a thin flat bamboo stick or in some cases, at least in Tranquebar, with ‘sticks’ made out of rubber stripped from discarded car tyres.¹³

The *tappu* drum, also known as *parai*, is closely identified with the Paraiyar caste, which is the only caste that plays it, and whose caste name assumedly derives from the name of the drum (cf. Moffatt 1979a; Viramma et al. 1997; Clarke 2002; Arun 2007b).¹⁴ In addition to funeral ceremonies, the *tappu* drum is traditionally played for the yearly village festivals and by the Paraiyar village messengers to announce local news about meetings, festivals—and deaths.

Today, the *tappu* drums are mainly associated with death and funerals, where they are played because of their strong power to chase away the evil spirits flocking around the dead body. The sound of *tappu* drums is therefore always interpreted as a sign of a recent death in the village and instantly associated with death pollution, misfortune, and distress—and generally, with the presence of the inauspicious *vettiyān*, who is supposed to be permanently polluted because of his close association with death.

For funerals and festivals the *tappu* drums are traditionally played by a *parai melam*: a drum orchestra consisting of usually five members: four *tappu* players, and one person beating the *satti*, a small drum made out of a clay pot (*satti*) with a drumhead of goatskin stretched over the mouth of the pot. However, this type of drum orchestra no longer exists in Tranquebar or any of the neighbouring villages, because of the very low number of *vettiyans* remaining in the area. When more than one drummer is required for a funeral, the *vettiyans* may now gather a small provisional orchestra for the occasion calling on a son or a *vettiyān* from another village, if they are available.

In the Tranquebar area, the *tappu* drums are today exclusively played by *vettiyans*. This is also the case in the villages studied by Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine (Viramma et al. 1997) and Clark-Decès (2005, 2006), respectively. In Pappanallur, on the other hand, most of the Paraiyars know how to play the *tappu* drum, though it is only a small number of men who actually beat the drums for funerals and festivals. In this village, the duties of

grave-digging and cremation are taken care of by men from the Thotti caste (Arun 2007b). In Alapuram, the village studied by David Mosse, the *vettiyan*s were not at all *tappu* players but woodcutters and gravediggers belonging to the Pallar caste, while drumbeating and sweeping was done by Thottis from the Paraiyar caste (Mosse 1999: 68).

The *vettiyan* is today regarded purely as a profession among the Paraiyars in Tranquebar. Both the *vettiyan* and other Paraiyars deny that the *vettiyan*s constitute a specific Paraiyar sub caste or clan (*vagaiyara*), as it is the case in other places, where the *vettiyan*s are regarded as the lowest subdivision (Moffatt 1979a,b; Viramma et al. 1997; Clarke 2002; Clark-Decès 2005; Münster 2007). In Tranquebar, a person is only a *vettiyan* as long as he works as a gravedigger and *tappu* player. The families, who were previously working as *vettiyan*s, are today no longer marked by the stigma of the profession, but accepted and respected on par with all other Paraiyar families in the street.

The specific character of the *vettiyan* occupation and the caste structures in general thus varies significantly from one district to another in Tamil Nadu. It even seems that the content of the *vettiyan* profession has changed considerably during the past hundred years, and that they have not always been subjected to discrimination and stigmatization.

According to Edgar Thurston (1855–1935), ‘Vettiyan is the name applied to one of the officials of the Tamil Paraiyan settlement, who is also called Toti or Thotti. [...] The name Vettiyan is said to be equivalent to Bittiyan (bitti, for nothing), or one who does service, e.g., collecting grass, firewood etc., without remuneration’ (Thurston 1909 vol. vii: 392). Thurston’s description draws attention to the fact, that the *vettiyan* occupation is not an ordinary job, but principally an unpaid duty of certain Paraiyar men. Thurston states that the duties of the *Vettiyan*s are multifarious. The duties may include jobs as diverse as carrying revenues from the village to the government treasury, taking care of the graveyard and digging graves, and going around the rice fields and diverting the course of water to irrigate the various fields according to the rights of the agriculturalists (Thurston 1909 vol. vii: 393). Thurston further describes the office of the *vettiyan* official as a hereditary duty, which entitles the holder to ‘some respect among his brethren, and to certain emoluments in kind e.g., grain at the harvest season’. Thus, the duties of the *vettiyan*s may previously have been much more varied than they are today, as the officiating *vettiyan*s apparently were not looked down on and discriminated against, but actually respected by their caste and guaranteed a small livelihood from the local ‘upper’ caste landowners.

The *vettiyan* profession: a vestige of the past

The *vettiyan* in Tranquebar, Subaraj, is a man of about forty years. He

has been working as a *vettiyan* since he was only nine, when he took over after his father who had died suddenly. As many men of his age from the Paraiyar caste, he has never been to school and only knows how to write his name. From a very young age, Subaraj was taught to play the *tappu* drums by his father and uncle. However, the *vettiyan* occupation has not been passed down through generations in Subaraj's family. Subaraj's father himself was working as an agricultural labourer, when his younger brother, a very good singer who sang at funerals, died. The brother had been a very close friend of some of the *vettiyan* families in Tranquebar, and when he died, they asked Subaraj's father to join them in playing the *tappu* drums at funerals and village festivals. Thus Subaraj's father was drawn into the *vettiyan* profession.

The fact that Subaraj's father did not himself inherit the *vettiyan* duty, but apparently chose to take up the occupation freely, suggests that the *vettiyan* occupation was considerably less stigmatized among the Paraiyars fifty years ago. Further, it may suggest that the inherited *vettiyan* occupation was already beginning to disintegrate and disappear. For Subaraj, who inherited the *vettiyan* duty when he was still a young child, it has not been possible to quit the occupation, even though he feels very bad about the job.

Subaraj generally serves all the Hindu communities in Tranquebar and some of the neighbouring villages. Whenever a death occurs, the deceased's family sends for him. Subaraj is then in charge of digging the grave, if the deceased is to be buried, and of playing the *tappu* drum, first in front of the deceased's house and later in front of the funeral procession, which carries the body to the graveyard or cremation ground. Sometimes Subaraj goes to play alone, but most families prefer two or more *tappu* players for the rituals. Therefore, Subaraj often brings his son and his son-in-law to play at the funerals, and sometimes also the old man, Mariappan, who is the last remaining *vettiyan* in a village situated about six kilometres away from Tranquebar. If there are three or four persons playing at a funeral, one of them usually plays the *satti* drum, while the rest play *tappu*.

The funeral engagements of the *vettians* vary in time. Sometimes Subaraj plays for only eight hours and at other times, the engagement lasts both night and day. The payment is also subject to negotiation. Sometimes, Subaraj gets a hundred rupees, sometimes 200, and the amount may even go up to 600 or 700, if he and his son are engaged by other drummers to play for a funeral outside Tranquebar. However, this rarely happens. Only when Subaraj plays for funerals of the fishermen community, the price is fixed at 150 rupees for grave-digging and *tappu* playing, and while Subaraj is free to refuse working for the rest of the village communities, he is obligated to perform the grave-digging and *tappu* playing services for the fishermen caste. In return, Subaraj is entitled to claim a small amount of cheap fish from the

fishermen each day, if he goes to the auction hall at the beach, where the fish is landed. The *vettiyan* occupation is thus a vestige of the past feudal caste structures, characterised by hereditary patron-client relationships, which obliged the low caste clients to work for the ‘upper’ caste patrons and the latter to provide for the former.

While most low caste families were specifically serving one particular ‘upper’ caste family, certain individuals—among them the *vettiyan*s—were obliged to perform their service jobs for the whole village e.g. sweeping the streets, announcing deaths to neighbouring villages, disposing of the dead cattle, digging the graves for the dead and playing the *tappu* drums for funerals and village festivals. These traditional hereditary duties of the low castes, which by many contemporary anthropologists are referred to with the Tamil word *tholil* (literally ‘job’ or ‘duty’), have generally disappeared as a result of the ‘upper’ castes’ diminished power and the low castes’ refusal to carry out, what they regarded as highly degrading duties (cf. Clark-Dèces 2006; Arun 2007b).

Today, many of the previously hereditary duties of the low castes have been transformed into regular jobs, which are paid on market terms and carried out without force, while they are still performed by the same castes as before. In Tranquebar, it is, accordingly, the Thotti or Kattunaiyakar¹⁵ caste who now work for the municipal corporation as street sweepers and garbage collectors and for privates as septic tank cleaners and manual scavengers (cf. Lillelund 2009). Only, the *vettiyan* occupation is still a partly enforced hereditary duty. The fact that the fishermen community is still able to enforce the *vettiyan*’s duty to dig graves and play *tappu* for their funerals, reflects the strong position of power that this caste locally holds by virtue of its numerical and organizational strength.

During my fieldwork in Tranquebar, Subaraj actually once attempted to quit working for the fishermen community. After a big controversy over the payment for a particular funeral, where Subaraj refused to accept to be paid for only two men’s work, when there had actually been three men playing, he was told by one of the fishermen that if he did not accept the payment, he could not work for the fishermen community in the future. Accordingly, Subaraj refused the money and declared that he would no longer render his services to the fishermen caste. On the next occasion of death in the fishermen community, Subaraj staunchly refused to play at the funeral, but was at last talked into at least digging the grave for a smaller amount than the usual funeral payment.

However, the fishermen village *panchayat* was not willing to accept Subaraj’s resignation, and Subaraj and his wife were both scared that the fishermen would resort to violent reprisals against the family, if he maintained

his refusal to play. The controversy ended with a compromise between the fishermen *panchayat* and Subaraj, who agreed to resume playing if the fishermen stopped beating and abusing him during the funerals and promised always to pay him the correct amount for his services.

During the controversy, Subaraj approached the leader of the Paraiyar village *panchayat* for help. The *panchayat* leader, however, strongly urged Subaraj to resume his duties to the fishermen community on the grounds that *tappu* playing had been both Subaraj's and his father's special skill, and that Subaraj himself did not know any other work. Perhaps the *panchayat* leader feared that the conflict would escalate and involve the whole Paraiyar community if Subaraj continued to refuse playing for the fishermen caste, or maybe he just realised that Subaraj did not have any real alternative to make a living for himself. Still, it was clear to me that the Paraiyar *panchayat* leader and assumedly many of the other Paraiyar villagers preferred Subaraj to continue his *vettiyan* profession, even though they all intensely disliked the sound of *tappu* drums and generally avoided association with him and his family.

The dispute between Subaraj and the fishermen caste and the subsequent reaction of the Paraiyar *panchayat* leader show the ambiguities related to the status of the *vettiyan*s. On the one hand, the *vettiyan*s are looked down on and discriminated against, and on the other they are forced or pressurized to continue practising their polluting musical skills. One reason for this is obviously religious: the Hindu funeral rites are not complete without the presence of a *vettiyan* and the sound of *tappu* drums. However, the *vettiyan* also plays an important role as the social and symbolic 'other' of the fishermen and the Paraiyar communities.

In relation to the fishermen caste, the *vettiyan* represents the low, polluting 'untouchable', who sets the relatively low social status of the fishermen community in perspective.¹⁶ In relation to the *vettiyan*, the fishermen are powerful 'upper' caste patrons and not the rough, poor, and uneducated villagers that people e.g. from the urban, educated middle castes/classes see in them. Earlier, the entire Paraiyar caste played this role in relation to the fishermen caste, but today the Paraiyars increasingly refuse to take part in relations contributing to their own debasement and generally avoid unnecessary contact with the fishermen.

In relation to the Paraiyars, the *vettiyan* represents the 'old', imposed, dirty, and degraded Paraiyar identity as opposed to the 'new' and much more attractive identity as clean, educated, and respectable, which the Paraiyars today attempt to carve out for themselves. By making a distinction between an appalling old discarded Paraiyar identity and a new, respectable identity, the Paraiyars are better able to cope with the stigma still associated with their

caste. However, the very acceptance of a former, ritually polluted identity—today represented by the *vettiyan*—means that the Paraiyars have to distance themselves from their own history and cultural traditions. For Subaraj and his family, the coping strategy of the Paraiyar majority means that they are only further discriminated and marginalized.

From time to time, Subaraj also works for the local authorities. When bodies are washed up on the beach or a suicide is discovered, Subaraj is called by the police to remove and dispose of the dead bodies. This is a job that he loathes more than anything. After the tsunami, the local authorities were again making use of Subaraj's services, as he was ordered to remove the many dead bodies lying all over the village. He worked alone for five days continuously and filled six truckloads with dead bodies, without being paid anything apart from four packets of arrack (cheap local spirits) per day. Moreover, Subaraj was offered neither food nor any protective measures (shoes, gloves etc.), though he himself was highly affected by the tsunami and had lost both his house and his stores of rice.¹⁷

For Subaraj, the tsunami was not only a frightful experience and an economic disaster; it was yet another blow to his self-esteem, as the aftermath of the tsunami manifestly underscored his social position as a (lesser human) person, destined to perform the most physically and ritually polluting tasks, without any compensation. That Subaraj to top it all was offered large quantities of cheap liquor to keep him going only further emphasized the prejudice against him, and the *vettiyan*s in general, as dirty and drunken.

The inherited occupation as *vettiyan* is not only making Subaraj extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, but also strips him of his fundamental right to self-determination and governmental protection, despite the fact that the so-called 'untouchable' discrimination on grounds of caste has been prohibited by the Indian Constitution. The democratic Indian state's laws for protecting the low castes from exploitation and social discrimination did not protect Subaraj from being treated according to the rules of the previous feudal caste structures even by the authorities. This happened, despite the fact, that *vettiyan* is explicitly listed as one of the caste groups entitled to special protection and programmes of affirmative action in the state of Tamil Nadu (Govt. of Tamil Nadu 1984). The rules of the past feudal caste structures, which still define the *vettiyan* profession, are in other words so powerful and compelling, that they rule out the norms and values of the modern, democratic Indian state in an unruly situation of chaos and distress as the tsunami catastrophe.

The exploitation of Subaraj by the local authorities after the tsunami further underlines the marginalized status of the *vettiyan*s. In this case, the *vettiyan* occupation appears to have been so closely associated with the

former feudal, social order that it seemed incompatible with granting the individual rights guaranteed by contemporary democracy. Taken together, the examples above show how Subaraj, by virtue of his occupation as *vettiyan*, is customarily made to represent the rough, uncivilized ‘other’, in opposition to which the fishermen caste, the Paraiyars, and the local authorities all attempt to identify themselves.

Drums and status differences

While the *vettiyan* profession and the traditional *parai melams* of *tappu* and *satti* drummers are now generally disappearing in the Tranquebar area, other Paraiyar drum orchestras are not about to do so. On the contrary, these orchestras are developing and adjusting to the demands and possibilities of the contemporary society.

There are no drum orchestras based in Tranquebar, but in the village close to Tranquebar, where the old *vettiyan* Mariappan lives, altogether twelve men form an orchestra, which plays for funerals, temple functions, and marriages. The actual size of the orchestra depends on the occasion and the wish and financial capacity of the family engaging it. For funerals, it usually consists of five persons, four drummers and a clarinettist, while up to ten persons may be included in the orchestra in the case of a marriage.

No one from this orchestra plays the *tappu* drum, and the musicians generally distanced themselves from the *vettiyan tappu* players, during my interviews with them. For instance, they emphasized that they always were engaged separately by the deceased person’s family in case of a funeral, even though they from time to time—quite often, actually—ended up playing together with the *vettiyan* in the funeral procession. They emphasized that they always stopped playing especially at the entrance of the graveyard and never followed the dead body up to the grave, as the *vettiyan*s do. The leader of the orchestra, John, clearly preferred to talk about the orchestra’s engagements for village festivals and marriages, rather than about the funeral ones. However, most families—even among the low castes—today prefer to engage classical ‘upper’ caste musicians for marriage functions rather than folk musicians like the members of this orchestra. Therefore, in all probability the marriage engagements of the village folk orchestra are very few and only for the very poorest of the Paraiyar families.¹⁸

The typical instruments of the Paraiyar folk orchestras are wooden drums like the *pampai* double drum, the braying *urumi*, the small *ravanai*, and the *tavil*, a large double-headed barrel drum. These drums do not have the powers to chase away malevolent spirits and are not associated with any of the negative properties that adhere to the *tappu* drum. The *tavil* drum is even one of the important instruments of the classical music tradition and regarded as very auspicious by all castes (Wolf 2000: 286). Moreover, one or two

nayanam wind instruments of the oboe type also form part of the orchestra.

In the recent years, drum orchestras in the Tranquebar area have shifted out the typically traditional instruments with the more popular and modern ones. The *urumis* and *pampais* are replaced by *tavils* and conventional side drums, while the *nayanams* typically are replaced by clarinets. Further, the *tavil* drums are now covered with a fibre sheet drumhead on the one side, as these are not affected by water like the traditional ones of goatskin. This alteration of the *tavil* drums thus makes it possible to play it outdoors even in the rainy season. The musicians are generally proud of these and other developments and innovations, and all of them seem to be content and comfortable with their identity as village musicians.

The main difference between the members of the village folk orchestra and the *vettiyan tappu* players is—apart from the types of the drums beaten—that the orchestra members are not playing because they have inherited a caste specific duty, but because they have a musical ear and like to supplement their income with earnings from playing their instrument. The musicians of the village folk orchestra are all free to refuse any engagement, and to quit the occupation whenever they want to.

A few years ago, the orchestra members all joined a newly started association for Paraiyar musicians, The Tamil Nadu Thirupananar Musical Association, which among other things organises musical competitions and awards prizes for the best performances. The membership of the musical association clearly helped the musicians to identify themselves as artists and to express a sense of pride about their instrumental expertise. However, the musicians' persistent attempts to distance themselves and their musical performances from that of the *vettiyan*s' indicate that their close association with funerals and deaths make them vulnerable to prejudice and contempt despite the fact that they have voluntarily entered into the profession and are not beating the supposedly polluted *tappu* drum.

In the future, the families of deceased persons in Tranquebar and the nearby villages will probably have to engage only this kind of drum orchestra for the funerals, as it is already the case in many other villages in the district and in other parts of Tamil Nadu (cf. Münster 2007: 195). With the disappearance of the *vettiyan* profession, one of the salient features of the former feudal caste structures, the social institution of specific inherited low caste duties finally disappears. It also means that a distinct musical tradition is about to disappear and the rituals related to Hindu funeral ceremonies bound to change (cf. Clark-Decès 2006).

The traditional accompaniment of the *parai melam* to Hindu funerals has already been transformed, as there are no longer any proper *parai melams* in the Tranquebar area. The musical traditions associated with the *tappu*

drums are thus subject to considerable change. The knowledge handed down through generations regarding the manufacturing of the drums and the many different intricate rhythms and their relation to specific rituals and occasions are no longer transmitted to the next generation and thus soon forgotten. Subaraj does not know where to buy new wooden frames for his drums, and he therefore still uses his father's old, lopsided frames for his drums, covering them with new skins from time to time.

In addition to the *vettiyan*s and the village folk orchestras, there are furthermore two Paraiyar drum orchestras of a completely different type in the town of Poraiyar about three kilometres from Tranquebar. These two orchestras differ from the village folk orchestras in the area, in that they only play for marriages, receptions, and other functions and never are engaged for either funerals or Hindu festivals. These orchestras use only modern style instruments like bass drums, side drums, saxophones, and percussion instruments, and the band members are never subjected to any degree of prejudice or disrespect because of their musical performances, but quite the contrary.

In one of these orchestras, one of the drum players is a former *vettiyan*, who has managed to quit his hereditary duty and change his *tappu* drum for a modern non-stigmatised type of drum. This way, he has been able to change his social status and shed the stigma of pollution of an 'untouchable' that he suffered, when he was still working as a *vettiyan*. In this orchestra, the fear of ritual pollution is not even an issue, and none of the members is apparently trying to distance himself from the former *vettiyan* drummer.

Drums are in other words closely associated with the social hierarchy of caste, and in Tranquebar, the *tappu* drums and the *vettiyan*s who play them, are to be found at the absolute bottom of the hierarchy. Modern style bass drums and side drums, on the other hand, are regarded as prestigious instruments, which add to the social status of the musicians who play them.

Concluding reflections

As a result of the general emancipation of the low castes in the Tranquebar area, the inherited low caste occupation of a *vettiyan* is now about to disappear. While the men from the other previous *vettiyan* families in Tranquebar have succeeded in freeing themselves from the inherited duty of the family and leaving the occupation, the last *vettiyan* in Tranquebar, Subaraj, is still bound by his duties towards the fishermen community. There may be a host of different social, economic, and psychological reasons as to why Subaraj as the last and only person in Tranquebar has not been able to free himself from his inherited duties. For instance, Subaraj was only a child, when he inherited the *vettiyan* occupation; he has no education and does not know how to do any other job, and most important probably he does not

have the support of his Paraiyar caste to stand up against the powerful fishermen community. In this article, I have described how the gradual transformation of the rural caste structures is affecting the few remaining *vettiyans* in the Tranquebar area as compared to the other Paraiyars, notably the musicians. Concentrating on the cultural encounters internally in the Paraiyar caste, the article argues that the *vettiyans* are used by their caste fellows as symbolic repositories of the negative, degrading connotation of untouchable impurity, which is still associated with the Paraiyar caste. Thus, I have suggested, that the reason why the Paraiyars in Tranquebar so clearly distance themselves from the *vettiyar* and his family is that they themselves try to escape from the humiliated and stigmatized identity as dirty, drunken, uneducated and uncivilized, that they previously were—and to some extent still are—endowed with by the other castes.

However, I do not find that the Paraiyars' avoidance of the *vettiyar* and his family indicates that the Paraiyars generally accept the internal hierarchy of caste, or that they practise caste discrimination in the same way as the self-professed 'upper' castes, as it has been suggested by the anthropologist Michael Moffatt (1979a). The Paraiyars in Tranquebar are generally very conscious about caste, and though most of them prefer to socialize with people and most definitely marry within their own caste, they do certainly not approve of the existing hierarchy between the various castes in the village.

While the sound of the *tappu* drums is generally intensely disliked by the Paraiyar villagers in Tranquebar, *tappu* drum play is currently revived and reinterpreted by Paraiyars in a large number of cities and villages as a positive symbol of their common cultural identity and tradition (cf. Clark-Decès 2006; Arun 2007b). Instead of attempting to distance themselves from the traditions and practises that the 'upper' castes have condemned as inferior, uncivilized, and polluting, these mostly young people take pride in the cultural customs of the Paraiyar community and for instance take up the musical tradition of *tappu* playing. The *tappu* drums are now played at organised concerts for an admiring (Paraiyar) audience and at functions and rallies of the political *Dalit* movement, that struggles for the social and political rights of the low caste *Dalits* (cf. Arun 2007b: 97).¹⁹ Even Subaraj's son, Kumar, who in Tranquebar is being condemned by his Paraiyar caste fellows for playing the *tappu*, has won prizes for his excellent drum play in competitions in the state capital Chennai. The symbolic meaning of the traditional *tappu* drums is thus subject to radically different interpretations among the Paraiyars today.

In Tranquebar, there are still only a few active supporters of the Tamil *Dalit* movement, who have even heard of this alternative interpretation of the meaning of *tappu* drums. However, the *Dalit* movement is now gaining increasing support in some of the Paraiyar streets in Tranquebar, so it is

possible that the alternative interpretations of the Paraiyars' cultural traditions, including the playing of *tappu* drums, will catch on in the coming years.

Notes

- 1 Today, most of the Paraiyars in the Tranquebar area use the Gandhian term *Harijan* (often pronounced *Arijan*) to designate themselves. As one of the formerly so-called 'untouchable' castes, the Paraiyar caste is included in the official list of Scheduled Castes, while the many NGOs that have come to Tranquebar after the tsunami call them Dalits. For the purpose of describing change in specific local caste structures and cultural practices, however, I find that these three popular terms are all too vague and all-encompassing, as they are used to designate a myriad of different castes from all regions of India without distinction. My use of the caste name Paraiyar is not meant as an offense and I apologize to those who may feel hurt by my use of a caste name, which locally has been—and still is being—used as an offense and abuse.
- 2 David Mosse (1999: 67) and Isabelle Clark-Decès (2005: 13) both argue that the relation between ritual pollution and social status is inverse, and that it is because of their low social status that the Paraiyars have been forced to carry out polluting jobs as drumming, scavenging, etc.
- 3 Only Hindus make use of drummers for funeral ceremonies.
- 4 Daniel Münster describes a similar development in the village of Somanathapuram (pseudonym) in the district of Thanjavur (2007: 195pp).
- 5 I prefer to use the term 'low castes' to designate the vaguely defined group of people otherwise called as Untouchables, Harijans, Scheduled Castes, or Dalits. I find that the term 'low caste' calls attention to the fact that the people encompassed by this term belong to communities, which are all characterized by their low social status, but may differ vastly from each other with regard to occupation, lifestyle, religion, political influence etc. In Tranquebar, nobody from the four different low caste communities generally identified themselves as belonging to a common group of Harijans/Scheduled Castes/Dalits, though people from the Paraiyar caste frequently used the term Harijan to designate specifically their community. Cf. note 2.
- 6 I use the term 'upper' castes to designate all castes that locally are attributed with a higher social status than the 'low castes' (i.e. Scheduled Castes). This means that some of the 'upper' castes of this article e.g. the Vanniyars and the Pattinavars (fishermen caste) are castes, which in other contexts are often referred to as 'low castes', because they generally rank low in the overall caste hierarchy.
- 7 These villages are located to the north of Tranquebar in the districts of

Villupuram and Kanchipuram, respectively.

- 8 The Paraiyar caste is by far the most numerous of the four low castes in the Tranquebar area. The others are the Pallar or Devendra Kula Vellalar caste of small-scale peasants and casual labourers, the Chakkiliyar caste of traditional cobblers, now mostly shoe menders and casual labourers, and the Thotti caste—or Kattunaiyakars, as they prefer to call themselves today, who are mostly working as street sweepers and manual scavengers (cf. Lillelund 2009).
- 9 The idea that each caste constitutes a separate community—even a separate village—is shared by all the numerically large castes in Tranquebar.
- 10 The Uppanar River runs on the southern edge of Tranquebar and flows into the sea immediately south of the Danish fort. The river is part of the large Kaveri River basin, which for centuries has supported intensive irrigation of the highly fertile agricultural land in the area around Tranquebar. During the past decades, the water content of the Uppanar River has considerably reduced, due to the still unsolved dispute over the distribution of water from the Kaveri River between Tamil Nadu and the neighbouring state of Karnataka.
- 11 It is in this context relevant to mention that the British colonial ethnographer Edgar Thurston a hundred years ago cited H. A. Stuart, who was in charge of the Madras Census Report, 1891, for writing that ‘it is only one section of the Paraiyans that act as drummers. Nor is the occupation confined to Paraiyans’ (Thurston 1909 vol. vi: 78).
- 12 See Arun (2007b: 85 pp) for a thorough description of the traditional manufacturing process of *tappu* drums in the village of Pappanallur. In Tranquebar, the *vettiyan*, however, prefers to use goatskin rather than calfskin, because it makes the drum sound better and it does not stink.
- 13 There are apparently local variations in the ways that the *tappu* drum is beaten. In Pappanallur, the *tappu* is played with only one stick and the open palm of the other hand (Arun 2007: 86).
- 14 See also the interesting commentary by Clark-Decès (2005:199), who argues that ‘Parai’, the etymological root of the word Paraiyar, should not be translated as ‘drum’, but instead as ‘information by beating the drum’. This could indicate, that the Paraiyars traditionally were a caste of village messengers, rather than funeral drummers, and that the *tappu* drum once primarily was associated with informing services, rather than with deaths and funerals.
- 15 This community was previously known exclusively as Thottis in the Tranquebar area, but today they call themselves Kattunaiyakars, which they consider less degrading than the term Thotti. However, the state

government of Tamil Nadu is not ready to accept this community as Kattunaiyakars, but insist that they are Thottis by caste. Contrary to the Thottis described by Mosse (1999: 68), Thottis/Kattunaiyakars are not regarded as a subgroup of the Paraiyar caste in Tranquebar.

There is only one family from this community living in Tranquebar, while there is a large Thotti/Kattunaiyakar community in the neighbouring town of Poraiyar. Despite the Manual Scavenging Act of 1993, which prohibits the emptying of open toilets manually, a few of the Thotti/Kattunaiyakar women still work as manual scavengers in Tranquebar and Poraiyar. However, this work is not imposed upon them.

16 Cf. note 7.

17 Men from the Kattunaiyakar caste of the neighbouring town Poraiyar were paid fifty rupees per day for the same work, but were not offered food or protection, either.

18 For a short discussion on the difference between folk music (*natupura esai*) and classical music (*karnataka esai*) in Tamil Nadu, see Wolf and Sherinian (2000: 913).

19 Cf. note 6.

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