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"Self" rather than the 'Other': Towards a Subjective Ethnography of *Kani* community

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Pa-in-du pa-in-du Payamani mutta itta kalathey nanga irukkiyam Neenga Payamani kutty itta kala-t-they vanthanu

[Of ancient times and ancient times we have been living when Indian giant squirrel[1] was laying eggs. Now, it is the time of the squirrel giving birth, plains have appeared]

- Pemini (12)[2]

[...] my subject is not the truth of being but the social being of truth, not whether facts are real but what the politics of their interpretation and representation are.

- Taussig (1986)

ABSTRACT

Since the colonial period, Kanikkaran (Kani) *community has been portrayed as a 'primitive tribe' in the colonial and post-colonial ethnographies. The concept of tribe leads to the 'objectification' of* Kanis *and does not allow the* Kani's *subjectivity. This study argues that social memory, life experiences and oral history, are to be taken into account as methodological tool to write ethnography of* Kani's *"subjectification".*

Keywords: Kanis, ethnography, colonialism, objectification, methodology, subjectivity, social-habit memory, chattru-p-pattu [healing ritual], post-Independence, Tirunelveli.

FIELD ANECDOTE

Kanikkaran community lives in the southern parts of the Western Ghats, particularly in Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Thiruvananthapuram, and Kollam districts. Their habitation falls into the States of Tamilnadu and Kerala. My friend, M. Thirunavukkarasu, and I conducted fieldwork in the Papanasam forest area, Tirunelveli District, Tamilnadu. It was for a period of five months, from October 1997 to March 1998, for the project 'Ethnographic Study of Kanis in Kalakad-Mundunthurai Tiger Reserve Forest'. During our stay with the *Kanis*, two researchers came to the same field area to study the ethno-botany of the *Kanis*. They approached Pillayar *Kani* [one of the *Kani* community's leaders] for approving there stay in the village. I quote the conversation as it happened between the

researchers [who came from the Manonmanium Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli] and Pillayar Kani at Agasthiyar Nagar Kanikkudiruppu, Papanasam.

Researchers [Rs]: *Aiyya Vanakkam. Naanga Manonmanium Sundaranar Palkalai-k-kazhaga-t-thzha Irunthu Varrome*. [Sir, Vanakkam. We come from M.S. University].

Pillayar Kani [PK]: *Vanakkam.Vaanga. Romba nallathu. Inga, Neenga Etha-p-patthi padi-k-ka poringa?* [Welcome, Very Good. What are you going to study?]

Rs: *Naanga Vunga-ludaiya Mooliga marut-t-huvatta-p-pattri Padi-k-ka Vanthu-i-rukkom* [We have come here to study your herbal medicinal system].

PK: *Sari. Aana Naanga Muttalgal. Engalu-k-ku mooligaya-p-pathi onnum theriyathu. Neega* Mundanthurai forest office-*kku ethutthapla pathikanna mooliga pannai vacchurukkanga. Anga pona neraya mooliga kedaikkume Engalukku mooligaya patthi yuthuvumey theriyathu. Nanga adivasinga.* [Okay. But, we are fools. We do not know anything about herbs. A herbal farm has been set up just opposite to the forest department office of Mundanthurai. If you go there, you can collect lots of herbs. We do not know anything about herbs. We are adivasis].

In the conversation, Pillayar Kani had, thus, made an ironic statement about his own community: "We are fools. We do not know anything about herbals. […] We are tribals/adivasis." Here, Gates' (1988) concept of "the narrator's "signifyin(g)" [3] tactic of employing dual surface and latent layers of meaning" is helpful to understand the "mock critique" of the narrator. To figure out the meanings of the self-derogatory statement made by Pillayar Kani, we need to begin with an analysis of the wide range of ethnographic notes produced from the colonial period to the present on the concept of tribe.

I begin with a critical review of the ethnographies produced by the colonial and postcolonial ethnographers which objectified the *Kanis*. Then, I move on to propose an alternative methodology based on the social memory, life experiences and oral history as a means to recover the voices of the community. Recovering the voices of the community is essential, as I would show, to write the *Kanis* as subjects of their own.

Narratives of Static Portrayal

Focusing attention on the presence of the colonial imagination

in today's post-colonial society is not a gesture of ahistoricism- on the contrary. Problemmatizing historical distance, and analyzing the way streams of the past still infuse the present, make historical inquiry meaningful.

- Bal (1991)[4]

[...] peoples without history are peoples whose history we do not know.

- Diouf (2003)

Since the early phase of the colonial period, the *Kani* community has been variously named as *Malai Arasars, Malai Arayars* ('*arachan',* chief, or more distantly from *raja*, King), '*Vellanmar*' ('spearmen'), , '*Kanikaran*' (*Kani*) ('hereditary proprietor of land'), 'Natives', 'pre-*Dravidians*', 'Primitive Tribe', 'Aborigines', 'Tribals', '*Adivasi'*, '*Pazhagudigal*', and 'Scheduled Tribes'. The earlier ethnography of the community was conducted by European missionaries, administrators, traders and ethnographers. The first wave of ethnographic description, which adopted a 'fourteen-point format'[5] to report their lives, was a product of Orientalism. The narratives give an overall picture of a community. It treated the community as "frozen", "relics of the past", and "static". This was done by means of physical anthropology. The second wave of literature, once again produced by the colonial state, by and large, depicted the community as 'static', even though its descriptive intensity and methods varied. In general, the colonial ethnography depicted the *Kanis* as 'uncivilized', on the basis of moral value judgement, location of habitation, agricultural practices, religion, etc. Let me now turn to the details of these colonial constructions of the *Kani* community.

'Devil Gods' - Christianity – Othering

One of the strategies used by the colonial ethnographers to Other the natives was through specific readings of the 'beliefs' and 'rituals' of them. Such colonialist readings presented the native beliefs and practices as 'animistic' and 'strange'. In doing so, they claimed them to be pre-religious. As Kalpana Ram (2007) rightly notes, "We have scarcely begun to explore the smaller and seemingly innocuous categories through which castes and tribes were investigated and which have shaped the 'beliefs' and 'rituals' […] The centrality assigned to 'beliefs', for example, in defining and investigating the 'religion' of other cultures rests on a thoroughly Christian theology of religion" (*Ibid*: 77). Thus, Christianity is assigned the status of religion proper, and native faiths were treated as inadequately religious.

As an illustration, let me begin with a missionary-ethnographer's account of the healing ritual practices of the *Kanis* called "*Chattruppattu*", Mateer (1883), the missionary-ethnographer in question, writes, "When any one takes ill the headman [Shaman] is at once consulted; he visits the sick and orders two drumming and singing ceremonies to be performed. A whole night is spent in dancing, singing, drumming, and prayer for the recovery of the patient" (*Ibid*: 68). The ritual reflects the cosmology of the community that is however not focused on this description. *Chattu Pattu*, has been playing and continue to play a vital role in contacting deities for *Kanis* goodness. But, extract of the Census Report (1901) constructs this as a sign of *Kanis*' lack of faith in medicine: "The Kanis have no faith in medicine. It is their Chattu and Pattu, (hymns and songs) that cure them and not medicine."[6] The gods of the *Kanis* were also not assigned the status of gods. They were described as 'devil-gods' and spirits. For instance, Pate (1916) notes that the spirits and "devil-gods" live in "the lonely parts of the jungle are inhabited by vaguely conceived but powerful spirits, and for sixteen days after a relative's death a man who wishes to avoid them should either stop at home or keep to the frequent paths" (*Ibid*: 8). The Christian cosmology which works with the binary of devil as opposed to God is modified here to devalue the *Kani* worship.

These ethnographic accounts are suffused with references to the relative superiority of Christianity. For instance, Mateer (1883) writes, "The Kanikars have not much idea of the soul or immortality. When asked, they say, "Who can tell?" Some with whom we conversed said they knew nothing of a hell, or of the wicked going there. Some of their superstitions are connected with the serpent; for example, a vein in a certain granite rock is said to have been caused by a snake creeping over it before it hardened" (Ibid: 69). The reference to soul, immortality and hell are obvious references from Christianity which are employed here to mark as inferior the *Kani* religious practices.

In carrying forward such a representation of the *Kani* religion, the missionary ethnographers, presented their beliefs and practices as based on irrational fear and their Gods were powerless. According to Mateer (1883), "When the Christian religion is recommended to them, they reply that if they embraced it, the jungle-demons would be offended, and send elephants and other wild beasts to kill them, and destroy their cultivations. "Why then," it was asked, "do not the Europeans suffer, who cut down the forests?" to which they answered, "As the white men worship a mighty God, the demons take their flight from their presence." Jungle fever also is attributed to the agency of these deities, and they

move from a place where it prevails. Some altogether refused to hear our exhortations. When they see books in the hands of the Christian teachers, they will say, "Do you come to destroy us by bringing the wrath of the demons upon us?" One woman said, "I have only two children; do not kill them by teaching them your Vedam" (*Ibid*: 70).

As Bhukya (2008) notes the "implication [such ethnographic representations] was that such communities could be saved and civilised through conversion to Christianity" (*Ibid*: 106). This was evident in the case of *Kanikarars* as well. According to Mateer (1883), the Christian missionaries started coffee plantations in the mountain side to 'civilize' the people: "Coffee planting in this country seems as if largely intended, in the Providence of God, for the good of this hill tribe. In the plantations Kanikars and Christians meet and work together, and some of the latter are not backward in showing what the Lord has done for them in spiritual as well as in temporal things … In these plantations, too, catechists, and occasionally missionaries can speak with as many *Kanikars* as take employment there; and staying there at night, can spend the day in preaching in the unhealthy valleys below" (*Ibid*: 70-71). According to Mateer (1883), the encounters between the Christians and the *Kanis* had led to the latter losing faith in the power of their gods and accepting the superiority of Christianity. He notes that the *Kani* community had learnt "two valuable lessons. One is, that the spirits they worship have no power over Christians from Europe and the plains. When Europeans and native Christians began planting on the hills, some of the Kanikars went to their priests, and in the most solemn and religious manner got awful curses pronounced on their new neighbours. All were to be utterly destroyed unless they went away. This was done repeatedly, but nothing happened. Some of the priests now declare that it is in vain to curse Christians, or, as they call them, 'the people that have books.' Another lesson they have learnt is that Christianity is a civilizing and an elevating religion, and a good religion for this life generally" (*Ibid*: 71). In producing an overlap between Christianity and civilization, the missionary ethnography could not but produce the *Kani* religious practices as less than proper religion.

Significantly, the Indian elite too represented the *Kanis* in the same manner as the colonial ethnographers. For instance, Indian elite-cum-colonial state ethnographer Nagam Aiya (1906) mentioned in his account, "The Kanikkar is thus still, if not in the fetish, in the primitive stage of worship - probably the first stage in the religious evolution of all races. Ethically he is much an undefiled being so far – however unclean he may be from a physical point of view" (*Ibid*: 411). The politics of such adopting

the ethnographic representations of the colonisers by the local elite has been well captured by Sumit Guha (1999). He rightly notes, "Racial ethnography was … being appropriated by the indigenous elites to justify indigenous hierarchy on the one hand, and to assert parity with the European upper classes, on the other" (*Ibid*: 16).

Occupation: Food Gathering – Unsettled Cultivation

As much as *Kani* religious practices, their mode of cultivation and their unwillingness to assimilate themselves into new jobs were treated in the colonial ethnography as signs of their primitiveness. *Kanis'* traditional farming was usually criticized as destructive of forest resources. For instance, a description of agrarian practices runs as follows: "These wandering husbandmen cut down a patch of forest, burn and clear it, and sow a crop, with little or no tillage. […] This mode of cultivation yields a larger return for the same amount of labour than permanent plough husbandry, but is highly destructive of valuable forest lands. Their migrant habits arise partly from laziness: it is easier to cut down and burn new forest than to rear cattle, plant trees, manure land, and build houses". Shifting cultivation was, in the colonial accounts, not only destructive of forest resources but also symbolizes the so-called laziness of the native. The solution offered to the problem was settled cultivation which was claimed to usher in civilization among the *Kanis*: "They … should be encouraged to settle if possible: only by such means can they be reclaimed to civilization and education, as has been done farther north".[7]

Similarly, Nagam Aiya (1906) too wrote, "These untrained people unable to apply advanced methods of rejuvenating the lands, mercilessly extract every iota of vitality out of it; thus the land sapped gradually of its richness by ignorance and avarice, refuses to yield after a certain time. The margin of cultivation being thus reduced to the lowest point, the cultivator has no other option but to quit the land upon which he has squatted" (*Ibid*: 409). If Mateer attributed the *Kanis*' laziness as the reason for them practicing shifting cultivation, in account of Krishna Iyer and Kunjan Pillai (1933) – the colonial it was their ignorance working within an environment deterministic model, often the ethnographic accounts, Indian and colonial, attribute the *Kanis'* so-called to the hot climate: "Excessive heat in the summer burns out the energy of the *Kanikar*, […] and others who live in forests of low elevation, and makes them slothful. In fact, the debilitating effect of heat and humidity, aided by diseases, has reduced them to the dead level of economic inefficiency."[8]

What is more, the *Kani* community did not show much willingness to participate in the colonial civilizing mission of weaning them away from shifting cultivation. It was only those who joined the mission by becoming wage labourers given were a positive evaluation in the colonial accounts. As Mateer (1883) writes, "Their [Kanikars'] circumstances have greatly improved of late wherever coffee estates have been opened and worked; but those who are unwilling to take work are driven farther into the hills in search of fresh lands" (*Ibid*: 66). Supporting his claim, Mateer quotes Honiss [a colonial ethnographer]:

"The fate of the hill-kings, says Mr.Honiss, is rather sad. For ages past they have boasted of being the undisputed lords of the primeval forests. The elephant and tiger were their only foes; but with snares and traps they could hold their own against these enemies. But they could not resist the onward march of a superior race. The planter approaches them in a peaceful way, offering wages for their hire, but demanding as his right the land he has purchased. The proud men of the woods decline to herd with coolies, and work like common people. As soon as the planter's axe is heard, the hill kings pack their traps and desert their homes to establish themselves in another valley. In this way they have been driven from hill to hill and from valley to valley, until some have found now a safe resting place in the dense jungles of the low lands of Travancore. If the planter wishes to penetrate some unexplored jungle, or cut a path in some out-of-the-way place, the hill men are ready to assist, and it is the universal testimony that they are more faithful to their engagements than their more civilized brethren from the plains" (*Ibid*: 66-67).

In this account, the profit-seeking deforestation does not get written as destructive of forests, but as the march of civilization. In contrast, the *Kanis*' attempt to preserve his autonomy by not participating in wage slavery gets ceded as a mark of their primitiveness.

The forest department trained the *Kanis* as watchers. Those who took up this vocation, like who joins the plantations as labourers, were given a positive evaluation: "Though their physique is poor and fever seems to be almost general amongst them, they make excellent forest guides and show wonderful powers of endurance."[9]

'Good' qualities

Most of the missionaries, ethnographers, and officials alluded to some of the 'good' qualities of the local communities. Mateer (1883) noted, "These wild men [Kanis] are usually ranked above the more civilized Hindus of the plains in point of morals. Though rude, hardy,

and courageous, they are inoffensive, and are regarded as somewhat truthful, honest, chaste, and hospitable" (pa. 69). The community was also portrayed as "quiet, simple and inoffensive folks", and "straight-forward, honest and truthful to a fault."[10] The Census of India 1911 wrote of the *Kanis* thus: "high standard of domestic honour and social helpfulness and, in their unsophisticated purity, they are truthful to a fault."[11] Likewise, Nagam Aiya (1906) noted, "These hill tribes inhabiting the inaccessible wilds keep to their pristine purity in thought, word and deed. They in some respects surpass the civilised townsmen in the practice of cardinal virtues that regulate human life – truth, honesty, simplicity, credulity, modesty, law-abiding quality and above all hospitality" (*Ibid*: 412). Thurston's (1909) assessment was no different. He wrote of them as of "a high standard of honour, and straightforward, honest and truthful" (*Ibid*: 163).

Such descriptions, which attribute certain positive qualities to the *Kanis*, simultaneously infantalise them as child-like. As Bhukya (2008) notes, the colonial officials "equated the egalitarian values (honesty, frankness, communal life) of the tribals with Rousseau's state of nature, seeing them as innocent and childlike. They depicted them as noble, honest, loyal and ruggedly independent" (*Ibid*: 107). In other words, they are yet to reach the adulthood of civilization. Once again, they are marked as primitive.

Body Description

In the later part of colonialism, physical anthropology was used by the colonial ethnographers to represent the colonised communities as primitive. The politics of physical anthropology has been analysed by several scholars. For example, Oberoi et al (2007) note, "Many of the early anthropologists maintained an active interest in physical anthropology, pre-history, or linguistics, even as they focused primarily on society and culture. Most of them had prior training as natural scientists, and they accordingly sought to employ the tools, methodologies, and protocols of the natural sciences as they understood them. In this model, society was conceived as a 'laboratory' in which specimens of primitive humanity could be measured, and their social and cultural characteristics recorded and classified according to received scales and protocols (*Ibid*:33-34). On a different count, as Dirks (1992) notes, the physical anthropology works within the binary of body and mind and reduces the colonised to their bodies: "The individual for colonial anthropology thus became the body – the body that had been in precolonial times subjected by tradition, now the body as caste that could be measured by science, significantly always a body that could

be described without any reference to mind, will, or agency" (*Ibid*: 70).

In south India, Thurston (1909) is the first ethnographer to describe the physical features of any particular community. He portrayed the *Kani* community as, "the primitive short, dark-skinned and platyrhine type, though surviving, has become changed as the result of contact metamorphosis, and many leptorhine or mesorhine individuals above middle height are to be met with"(*Ibid*: 162).

Following Thurston, L.A. Krishna Iyer and N.Kunjan Pillai (1933), prepared notes on the so-called primitive tribes of Travancore, in which, the *Kanikar* community was described from the perspective of a social evolutionary model. It was a model which represented the 'primitive tribes' as savages and that, to become civilized, they have to come in to contact civilized. Before moving on to the accounts of Iyer and Pillai on the *Kanis*, we need to bear in mind that the Indian ethnographers' intentions might be different from that of the colonial ethnographers[12]. As Uberoi and others (2007) note, "Their purpose was not, however, merely to serve the empire – to open India and its peoples to scientific scrutiny and thereby enable its efficient administration and control. On the contrary, they believed that mastery of the science of that coloniser was the essential first step to qualify for self-rule and establish India as a modern-state within the world community of nations" (*Ibid*: 32). Whatever be the intentions of Iyer and Pillai, their accounts of *Kanis*, as we shall see below, was not much different from that of the colonial ethnographers.

Following colonial anthropology, Iyer and Pillai (1933) identified "short stature, low forehead, flat face and nose, and dark complexion"[13] as the characteristic feature of the primitive people. Of the *Kanikkars*, for instance, Krishna Iyer (1968) wrote, "average broad nostril of the *Kanikkars* is a primitive feature" (*Ibid*: 46), who also claimed a racial affinity between the *Kanikkar* community and the Negrito based his studies of physical anthropology and Serology (The study of Blood Grouping) which were conducted by Ruggles Gates who points out that "the *Kanikkars* have short stature and kinky hair indicating Negrito relationship" (*Ibid*: 35).

Here again, an environmental deterministic approach model is evoked to explain the physical features of the 'primitive tribes'. The explanation offered for the dark skin done of the *Kanikkars* by Iyer and Pillai (1933) is a case in point: "The pigment of the skin is found in the epidermis, and the influence of light favours its formation. In a cold climate, where the thermal action is weak, a discoloration of pigment in

the skin and others parts of the body produces a kind of albinism. The *Kanikar*, the Ulladan, […] who live on the plains and at low elevations are darker than the Muduvan, the Mannan […] of the High-Ranges" (*Ibid*: 219).

Moreover, whenever so-called positive physical features were identified in *Kanikkars* or others it is often attributed to their coming in touch with superior communities and admixture of blood. As an illustration, let me cite Iyer and Pillai (1933): "The other tribes [included the *Kanikar* community] have been subjected to extraneous influences and have, therefore, received an infusion of fresh blood and new ideas from the more civilized people with whom they have come in contact. This is seen clearly in […] the Kanikar. Owing to the admixture of foreign blood these tribes are now approaching the composite type of civilized humanity" (*Ibid*: 219).

Postcolonial Ethnographies

> *Vadai Vathi Pochu Padai Thavari Pochu*[14] *[Spirit has withered away we have lost the way!]*
>
> *Only those who respect the law and assist the Forest department are eligible to live and obtain rights in the forest*[15]
>
> *[...] although anthropologists have tried their best, they have not been able to dissociate the concept of tribe from the lurking of primitivism.*
>
> - *Srivastava (2008)*

The ethnographies that appeared in the postcolonial period followed more or less exclusively the same modalities of the colonial ethnographers. However, their intentions were different. These ethnographies carried out by Indian scholars were meant for the "efficient administration and control" to be exercised by the post-colonial Indian state.

In his preface to the Census of India 1961**,** P.K.Nambiar, a postcolonial ethnographer, noted that Thurston's ethnographic survey on castes and tribes was totally "outdated", even though, it contained useful materials on different communities. He stated that the main objective of Census 1961 was to capture the "present conditions with the impact of the post-colonial period on tribal communities those who were living in the remote areas and not yet dealt with any ethnographic study". In the Census (1961), the *Kani* community was described by and large within the framework of colonial anthropology. Like the colonial anthropology, the post-colonial ethnographies too presented them as

primitive and unchanging. For example, Iyer notes, "No doubt a lot of effort has been put in to educate the *Kani*, provide him with alternate employment and alter his manner of living, but the *Kani* has not undergone any fundamental change in his nature and still appears to be as simple and as primitive as Mr. Pate found him in 1917" (*Ibid*: 87).

Let we now turn to some accounts of the *Kanis* made by Indian ethnographers in the post-Independence period. Like the colonial ethnographies, the Census 1961 represented the *Kani* community as dirty and unhygienic: "[…] the flowers were the only pleasant things we noticed … The exterior of the house was clean but the interior presented a picture of squalor and filth" (*Ibid*: 89). Moreover, their personal cleanliness was also presented as not meeting the standards of the civilized. The census 1961 noted: "The average *Kani* is short, not more than 5` 5`` in height apparently with a lot of fussy hair. On a closer scrutiny we found that the hair was not fussy, but was matted due to the constant accumulation of dust mixed with grease, as the *Kanis* shirk from anything resembling a bath. Personal cleanliness is set at a low premium. We know it, not only from our observation, but also from their own statements that they do not even brush their teeth or wash their mouths. The colour of their loin cloth, which is the only thing most *Kanis* like to wear, provides a dull grayish black in contrast to the surrounding vivid green and blue. This cloth, they seldom like to wash. This lack of personal cleanliness and hygiene was uniform whether the *Kanis* live in pucca houses built for them by the Government, or in their crude huts set amidst the forest" (*Ibid*: 89) Additionally, the ethnographers lamented "the *Kanis* live amidst the dirt". In a similar vein, a study by Agesthiyalingom (1976), a well-known Tamil linguist, done in the 1970s notes thus: "They do not keep their huts clean and tidy though the surroundings are very picturesque and beautiful. The healthy and hilly surroundings are marked by the unhealthy and filthy upkeep of the huts" (Ibid: vii-viii). These descriptions of the *Kanis*' are no different from that of colonial ethnographers such as Mateer.

The colonial stereotype of the lazy native also finds its re-articulation in the postcolonial ethnographies carried out by Indian scholars. Agesthiyalingom, for instance, writes in his study, "They are generally lazy and they grow all these [vegetables, plantains, jack fruit, pepper] not in a systematic and scientific way" (*Ibid*: vii). Similarly the Census 1961 noted that, their agricultural practice is quite different from the people in the plains: "If we take them overnight from the forest and give them fertile lands and ask them to cultivate the lands, they will be helpless. Forest is to them just as water is to the fish" (The Census of

India 1961: 101). Based on this observation, it suggested that "they need proper guidance" to avoid soil erosion on the terrace slope and noted that "they cannot be called steady hard working cultivators". Likewise, the same stereotypical description was once again reproduced with slight modification by the postcolonial ethnographers.[16]

The colonial-type physical anthropology was also employed by these scholars to present the *Kanis* as primitive. Let me once again quote Agesthiyalingom: "The Kanis are generally very short and dark skinned as most of the tribes of Tamil Nadu […]. They have round face and stout and flat noses. They used to grow their hair and knot it at the back of the head which was found to be not uncommon among the rural people of the plains. Their hair looks more curly than that of the people in the plains and it would not be very difficult for the people like the present author to distinguish them even from their hair" (*Ibid*: vi).

Similar to the Christian missionaries, the postcolonial state treats the *Kanis'* religious practices as unworthy. The *Kanis'* access to forest is intimately associated with their religious system which has God, *Thambiran* and *Vadai*. These all reside in "trees, rock crevices, caves and hill tops" inside the forest. The denial of access to the forests by the forest department came in the way of the *Kanis* performing their annual rituals to their *Vadais* and *Thambiran*. The *Kanis'* comment, "*Vadai Vathi Pochu Padai Thavari Pochu*" ('Spirit has withered away we have lost the way!), reflects the desolation of the community. According to Jayapathy (1981), the community is increasingly borrowing the religious practices of the plains folk such as the Sabarimala pilgrimage to cope with its present problems.

As we have noted above, the colonial ethnographies infantalised the *Kanis* by presenting them as child-like. Similar representations continue to be part of the postcolonial ethnographers. The Census of India 1961, for example, noted "The *Kanis* are a peace loving tribe. They love the jungle and its life. Forest is their home [...]. There is no timidity associated with any *Kani* […]. The code of conduct of the Kani clan as practiced by them is simple and not elaborate […]. The *Kanis* have simple and practical laws regulating their social conduct. They can be changed from time to time. The changes are made by the slow processes of evolution and by acculturation" (*Ibid*: 99).

If the civilizing mission of the colonisers saw the salvation of the *Kanis* in embracing Christianity and becoming wage labourers in plantations, the same agenda took the shape of the welfare programs in the postcolonial period. The government has set up a Tribal Welfare

School and provides "free food" to the school-going children. The deadly disease of small-pox claimed around hundred peoples' lives in 1962. When health officials visited the area, the *Kani* people accepted them to administer the vaccination. Earlier, as we have seen, the *Kanis* fully depended upon the traditional healing performance of *chattru-pattu*, which is performed by their shaman, *Pilathi*, to cure such diseases. A housing scheme was also initiated for the *Kani* community to improve their quality of life. However, the Government–built houses did not afford any privacy to the *Kanis* compared to what their traditional houses provide.

Towards "Subjectification"

> *[...] the story has remained like a knot in my stomach. It is my memory.*
>
> *- Radkibai*[17]

> *[...] reverse the essential issue in historiography, especially postcolonial historiography, which is that of constructing a genealogy that "puts the past in question" in order to guarantee its connection with the present.*
>
> *- Diouf (2003)*

> *[...] 'work up' one's research materials, to search for hidden meanings, non-obvious features, multiple interpretations, implied connotations, unheard voices.*
>
> *- Ragin (1994)* [18]

It is evident from the above accounts of the ethnographies' forays into the *Kanis* lives that it has failed in capturing the subjectivity of the community. They are objectified and treated as the other of the analysis. This has been done both by the colonial and indigenous ethnographers.

In developing an alternative methodology which would return the subjectivity to the *Kanis*, let me begin with a cue from Diouf (2003) who, in the context of Africa, critiques the existing historical methods for not accommodating existing narratives of "plural consciousness of history" in terms of "the memories of communities and individuals".

According to him, the available methods borrowed from the western historiography "established in the Enlightenment vouches for a linear history that associates reason, progress, and civilization. This history, which spread as universal history and was imposed as a chief modality of producing the frameworks for understanding the past, organizing the

present and preparing for the future, is on every continent in a deep crisis and/or a phase of continual recomposition. Although it has accompanied and strongly supported the construction of nations and their juridical formulas such as the state (or perhaps it is the other way around, when the state becomes a historian), the challenging of the paradigms of Western modernity, of the postcolonial promises, has opened up new directions and new orientations" (*Ibid*: 5).

To challenge the Western historiographic paradigm, Diouf recommends Archie Mafeje's statements that abandoning the fixed categories of "tribe," "ethnic group/ethnicity," "nation-state," and "racial groups" is very important to "comprehend the developments and transformations of social formations instead of fragments" and to "conceive social history as an enterprise of coding and decoding the people's ethnographic texts in historic time" (*Ibid*: 4). Diouf's proposition is quite helpful, here, to move beyond the existing 'objectification' history of the *Kanis* to write a new history of subjectification. To write such a history what sort of genres need to be taken up for analysis?

In the studies of ethnography, as we have already seen, the 'other' has uniformly been portrayed as an object. Hence, it cannot "address the basic issue of human self constructing the other" because it considers "the non-western people as living fossil who drew support from the historical and biological theories of the times" (Sarukkai 1997: 1406). The rational epistemology denies any "ethical relation between the self and object". However, there are other epistemological systems which play important roles in terms of capturing the subjectivity of people and communities. From an ethical ground[19], the objectification has been questioned by Sarukkai. To go beyond the objectification, fiction – auto-ethnography - of the community has been identified as a legitimate tool. Pandian (2008) proposes that the creative genre and life stories are "a compensation for the deficiencies of dominant modes of theory-making in social sciences." Here, Pandian underscores the importance of life stories and fictions which are: "Not bound by the evidentiary rules of social science, the privileged notion of teleological time, and claims to objectivity, and authorial neutrality, these narrative forms can produce enabling re-descriptions of life-worlds and facilitate the re-imagination of the political" (Ibid: 35). In the context of literary studies, Vargas (2008) places his emphasis on the importance of the locals' episteme. When the creative writings employ oral testimonies, it opens up the possibilities of alternative readings from the perspective of the subaltern, against the established state histories. In this context, he notes "[…] the valorisation of subalternised archives of knowledge and manners of

expression such as gossip and exaggeration that are traditionally not granted much epistemic importance" (*Ibid*: 56).This is precisely where the importance of Pillayar Kani's ironic comment, which I began this paper with, has.

To change the misconception about the tribal communities - conceptualised as "primitive", 'static', 'simple' and "uncivilized" - Sunepsungla (2006) prescribes a tribal epistemology[20] which stands in diametric opposition to the Western knowledge- "modern scientific thinking – rational, logical, conceptual and abstract thinking - as cognitive part of man cannot decrease the space of the unknown, the finite, for man's faculty is limited and regressive" (*Ibid*: 108). To bring to life the tribal epistemology, one needs to take into account the "cultural insiders' ways of theorization" which is based on legends, myths, symbols, folklore, poetry, etc., that are … vital constituents of a tribal culture" (*Ibid*: 108). In general, the tribal epistemology of a particular community can contribute towards pluralizing the reason, truth and knowledge in opposition to the singularity of the westernized knowledge system. In addition, Uberoi and others (2007) recommend "methodological innovations proposed to address the asymmetries and biases inherent in the production of anthropological knowledge, including 'dialogical' or 'experimental' ethnography, a greater emphasis on life histories and oral histories, and an anthropology of the 'self' rather than the other" (*Ibid*: 14-15).

Let me give an allusion to a fiction based on the real life of a *Kani*. *Anantha Vikatan*, a popular Tamil weekly, published a 36 - episode thriller, *Krishnaveni*. The story plot was set against the backdrop of background of place, characters, dialect and incidents related to the *Kani* community. The story is about Vikraman Kani, a dead-body rescuer from the water falls, Vanatheertham situated in Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve. The rescuing activity was considered as risky and his wife Valliammal asked him to give it up and go to Kerala to find out another job there. He answered back: "*Vura vittu na yeam yena povanum. Intha-k-kadu, intha yedattha vitta vera vazhiyum yenakku theriyathu. Vellath-larnthu thani-c-cha meenu pola chetthu-p-povum*"[21] (If I leave this place, where I will go? I do not have any place other than this forest. I will die like a fish out of water). In another occasion, he replies to his wife in a voice of sorrow that "*Enthru yena parai-nathu. E kat-t-tina vittu po-vuthu nadakkuna Kariyama? E kadu, mala, aruviya vittu na yengoottu povum*?"[22] (What do you say? Is it feasible to leave the forest? After leaving this forest, mountain, falls – Where will I go?) The answer expresses the kind of intense feeling and attachments he has with the

forest which goes beyond the reason of sustenance. Without life stories, capturing this shades of feelings and yearnings are impossible. Without capturing such feelings and yearnings, ethnography of subjectification is not possible.

Likewise, here, I propose the use of 'social memory' and 'individual memory' as one more methodological tool to capture the subjectivity of *Kanis*. At this juncture, we have to take de tour to figure out the importance of these memories in the field of anthropological history.

Connerton (1989), in general, classifies the memory into three types: personal memory, cognitive memory and habit-memory. Personal memory offers meaning of "a personal past". The past is narrated and expressed by a particular subject itself. It remembers its own past histories which are quite helpful to bring different voices of the community, even though, it "cannot have to the histories and identities of other persons and things" (pa. 22). As Connerton (1989) precisely notes, the personal memory is, in certain extend, not adequate to capture the subjectivity of a community because of its own principle – "own conception" of its "own character and potentialities." Now, move on to cognitive memory which is closely associated with 'remember'. The remembering things – "the meaning of words, or lines of verse, or jokes, or stories, […] or mathematical equations, or truths of logic, or facts about the future" – "must have met, experienced or learned of it in the past."[23] Both memories are very closely associated with the individuals' capability of remembering – mental act. On contrary, 'habit-memory' has proficiency "to reproduce a certain performances" through body, for instance, how to respect elders in a society or to participate in a ritual or to follow traffic rules – this kind of memory is sedimented in the body. Connerton (1989) rightly clarifies the uniqueness of this memory that "it has all the remarks of a habit, and the better we remember this class of memories, the less likely it is what we will recall some previous occasion on which we did the thing in question; it is only when we find ourselves in difficulties that we may turn to our recollections as a guide" (pa. 23). Here, again, 'habit-memory' has been classified into two types – individual habit and social habit. As compare to individual habit-memory, social habit-memory is socially constructed. This social construction of memory "works within kinship groups, within religious groups, and within classes" (pa. 37). So, social-habit memory has been identified as an appropriate methodological tool for this study.

Social-habit memory has been rarely used in historical studies to recover the subjectivity of community. Now, one question arises: How the social memory is recollected by the communities? To answer the

question, I take a cue from Connerton (1989) who correctly explains that the social recollection activity is at work in two different areas. One is, in "*commemorative ceremonies"* and another is, in "*bodily practices*." In the social activity, bodily social memory is extremely important, even though, it has been completely ignored. Once again, here, Madison (2005) underscored the importance of bodily expression against the written expression in the Western tradition of social science research, who noted: "Writing is valued within the higher realms of knowledge, cosmopolitanism, and civility."[24] Madison was inspired by Conquergood's proposition of the body – he "dignifies the body by recognizing embodied practices as constituting knowledge, emotion, and creation." Moreover, he says that, it has mind and soul beyond the physical appearances. How does this category of knowledge become insignificant? The act of insignificant of the bodily expression happens when the writing becomes the center of attention which wipes out "the everyday expressions of orality and symbolic embodiment that pervade in cultural spaces often hidden and cast out from the center of writing."[25] Here, Connerton (1989) cautiously writes that the insight of 'reading' ritual or bodily practices should not miss "a literary political tract." Further, he argues for the importance of habitual performances in terms of its characteristic feature of ambiguity and the "significance of the second term of its meaning." As a whole, both the memories – social-habit memory and personal memory – are going to be applied in this study to bring out different voices of the community.

Let me conclude with a reference to the bodily social memory, particularly a healing ritual, of the *Kani* community. The music instrument, *Kokkarai* and healing songs, *Chattru-p-pattu*, both are identified as the symbol of the community by *Kani* society itself – identified from preliminary fieldwork - and outsiders too. This is the prime cause to choose the ritual for this study. *Chattru-p-pattu* is a traditional healing ritual of the *Kani* community, which is performed by *Plathi* [Shaman] accompanied with *Chattru-k-karars* [young and co-performers] who recite healing songs with musical instruments, *Kokkarai,* for various causes. The performance starts at night and ends the next day early morning. Its principal intention is to cure an ailing person from any sort of severe sufferings but this is the last resort after the failure of medication. If the *Chattruppattu* fails to cure the ailing person form the diseases the Kani community would not try again to save the life because the sick person will be decoded as 'wrong doer' to nature and their deities and spirits. The ritual has been empirically described[26] in the post-independence period. Here, I quote notes of Hardiman (2007) on the *Chattru-p-pattu* ritual and its importance in *Kani* lives: "Despite the

advent of modern medical facilities, the ritual continues to be popular, as it satisfies a demand for a community based healing over and above the more individualistic forms of healing provided by allopathy" (pa. 1405). The community based healing needs to be understood from the subjective experience of the *Kani*s. Otherwise, capturing the subjectivity of the *Kani* would be impossible.

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NOTES

1 Johnsingh (2001)

2 qtd. in Maruthakutti (1998)

3 qtd. in Vargas (2008). Henry Louis Gates, Jr defines signifyin' as the linguistic technique of repeating, imitating, revising, parodying, and critiquing the nature of meaning and representation. When used as a rhetorical technique, signifyin(g) "is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning" and it "presupposes an 'encoded' intention to say one thing but to mean quite another" (Gates 1988:82).

4 qtd. in Willems-Braun (1997)

5 It "consisted of the following sorts of categories: origin and tradition of caste or tribe; habitation; marriage customs; pregnancy and childbirth; inheritance and tribal organisation; religion, magic, and sorcery; funeral ceremonies; occupation; physical and mental characteristics; food; and social status" (Ram, 2007:77).

6 qtd. in Census of India 1961: 114

7 Mateer 1883: 64-65

8 Iyer and Pillai 1933: 236, qtd. in Hutton,J.H., (ed.) 1933: 217-243.

9 Pate 1916: 7

10 Extract from the Census of India 1901, qtd. in the Census of India 1961: 113, 115.

11 Extract from the Census of India 1911, qtd. in the Census of India 1961: 115

12 Iyer used the same description once again to establish the *Kani* community as 'primitive tribe' in his later books (1961, 1968) appeared in the postcolonial period.

13 qtd. in Hutton, J.H., 1933: 220

14 qtd. in Jayapathy (1981)

15 Sethi,Nitin, 2008, "Tribe feels the heat as forest fire rages", The Times of India, 7th July. Quoted in a notice, which served by the Deputy Director of Kalakad Mundunthurai Tiger Reserve Forest to *Kanis,* who did not give the information to the forest department when the fire broke out in the forest.

16 Parthasarathy (1997), K.S.Singh (2001, 1998). See also, "Kanikkar" in Subramoniam, V.I., ed, *Dravidian Encyclopaedia* (1990: 379-80).

17 qtd. in Munshi 2007: 100

18 qtd. in Ten Have 2004: 5

19 The ethical ground "demands responsibility of the observing self towards the native other" (Sarukkai 1997: 1407)

20 "tribal epistemology focuses on the process through which knowledge is constructed and validated by a cultural group, and the role of that process in shaping, thinking and behaviour" (pa. 122)

21 Rajanarayanan (21.1.2009: 32, episode no. 27)

22 Rajanarayanan (04.03.2009: 89, episode no. 33)

23 Connerton 1989: 22

24 qtd. in Madison 2005: 166

25 ibid

26 Jeyapathy 1981; Stephen 1997; Arivalagan 2002; Dharmaraj 2005; Rajashree 2006; Karmegam 2008.

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