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**The Contributors**
Of Dangerous Guardians and Contested Hierarchies: An Ethnographic Reading of a South Indian Copper Plate

Zoé E. Headley

Abstract

This contribution sets out to examine a copper plate inscription of great interest for the social history of a Tamil subcaste, the Pramalai Kallars, well known in the ethnographic literature of South India. Besides the central matter of the inscription, which is to establish a contract for the construction of a new hall in a local temple, two essential concerns emerge when reading this copper plate in a context-sensitive manner. On the one hand, details regarding the professional trade of a certain number of the men mentioned in the inscription, the now defunct traditional occupation of guardianship (kāval), reflect the literary and social figure of the ‘dangerous guardian’, a stereotype that still clings to the Pramalai Kallars today. On the other hand, the terms of the contract, which concerns the order of distribution of honours (mutalmai) within the temple, brings to the fore a concern still highly pertinent to our understanding of social interaction at the village level, that is, the ongoing competition for precedence among lineages of a single locality.

The object of this contribution is to offer a context-sensitive reading of an intriguing copper plate held by a modest tailor in a village of south-central Tamil Nadu. I had been doing fieldwork for over three years amongst the Pramalai Kallar subcaste in the district of Madurai when, returning to a locality I had not visited for some time, one of my main informants offered to show me a copper plate that had been discovered sometime back in a nearby field. The inscription, some forty-five lines long, is specified to be an agreement, or contract (oppanta), taken on by nine men. It begins by establishing these men as the recipients—in a prescribed order—of the honours (mutamai) given in a local temple in return for their participation in the construction of a new hall (mantapam). Besides this contractual aspect, most of the inscription is devoted to a somewhat convoluted narration involving a large number of protagonists—over several generations—entangled in shifting guardianship rights, murders, convictions and suicides which appear to have affected a number of the signatories of the contract and their relatives.
Though generally anthropologists rarely engage in the arduous task of studying first hand epigraphical materials, most of us are aware of the central importance Tamil (and Sanskrit) inscriptions have held and still hold in furthering our knowledge and understanding of the social and political history of this region. My own engagement with epigraphy was quite involuntary and this is certainly reflected in scope given to this contribution. Indeed, as a social anthropologist untrained in the study of epigraphical material, I will not attempt to discuss in any depth issues of dating, word order or palaeography. Instead, I will present some features of Pramalai Kallar morphosociology and oral history in order to provide the reader with sufficient ethno-historical information in order to facilitate a context-sensitive understanding of this inscription. As with any historical artefacts, the issue of whether this copper plate is authentic or a forgery is a legitimate concern and will be tackled from an ethnographic point of view, therefore not delivering a definitive answer but shedding light on two central concerns of the inscription which are of particular value in furthering our understanding of contemporary social life among the Pramalai Kallar subcaste. On the one hand, several factual passages of the Tottayamkottai inscription constitute a forceful echo of the universal stereotype of the ‘dangerous guardian’, till this day incarnated in Tamil Nadu by the Pramalai Kallars, a subcaste both feared and stigmatised. On the other hand, the most important section of the inscription, which ascribes the order of distribution of honours in the temple, reflects the ongoing contest for primacy between lineages of a single locality and constitutes, in certain morphosociological contexts, the locus of what anthropologist have glossed over by the term ‘hierarchy’.

Before getting to the heart of the contribution—the inscription itself—it will be useful to begin by sketching out briefly some of the main features of the socio-historical background of the Pramalai Kallar subcaste in order to contextualise the content of the copper plate as well as to visualise geographically their traditional territory, known as Kallar Nadu, within which can be found the localities mentioned in the inscription. In the second part of this contribution, we will see how given the scarcity of artefacts from the past pertaining to the history of the subcaste, the few copper plate inscriptions held by the Pramalai Kallars possess both symbolic, and even sometimes, strategic value. Whether venerated at the home of a traditional headman or produced in court as evidence during litigations, copper plates provide a rare, and therefore precious, testimony of their past.

The third part of this contribution is devoted to the transcription and translation of the inscription and in the fourth and final section I will provide a context-sensitive discussion of the inscription, sequence by sequence, from two angles. First, the understanding I make of it from my experience as
a social anthropologist concerned with contemporary Pramalai Kallar social life and the second, the meaning and value ascribed to the inscription by the Pramalai Kallars themselves.

The Pramalai Kallar subcaste: geographical and social features of a former ‘criminal tribe’

Today, many Pramalai Kallars still live in and around their traditional territory, the ‘Kallar Nadu’, (Figure 1) which lies west of the sacred city of Madurai. Pramalai Kallar oral history situates their arrival in this area around the sixteenth or seventeenth century and describes how they gradually evicted most of the local upper castes by various types of intimidation.

Numerically and socially, they still largely dominate this relatively rural area which is regularly described as ‘conservative’, ‘backward’ or worse ‘uncivilized’ by district officials and the media. The mental geography of the Pramalai Kallars does not define the territory of the Kallar Nadu by its boundaries but instead in a polycentric fashion, that is through its internal subdivisions: eight ‘provinces’, also referred to as nāṭu, a capital (rajadani) Urappanur, as well as some twenty-four ‘secondary villages’ (upakirāmam).

A patrilocal and patrilinear endogamous group, the Pramalai Kallars are strongly attached to the structure and texture of their communal ties that constitute the locus of this subcaste’s realm of identification and unity. At the village level, solidarity is largely, but not exclusively, defined in terms of lineage. The religious and social activities in and around the numerous temples are central to village life, and it is during the main celebrations that the anthropol-
ogist gets quite literally the clearest view of the hierarchical criteria of ‘mutal mariyātai’ (literally ‘first respect’, or more commonly precedence). Indeed, the order of distribution of honours defines the local hierarchy of lineages and is one of the most pertinent features of rank distinction at the village level, which I will be discussing more closely in the last part of this contribution.

The Pramalai Kallars subcaste belongs to the larger Kallar caste (comprising numerous subcastes with whom the Pramalai Kallars very rarely intermarry) which itself is comprised in the Tevar caste-cluster (which regroups the Kallar, Maravar and Agamudayar castes), one of the numerically predominant backward castes in the rural areas of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

The Pramalai Kallar subcaste stands out of the Tamil social landscape in a particular way as they have been both feared and stigmatized over the last few centuries for their alleged violent inclinations and criminal nature. The stereotypical characterisation of the Pramalai Kallar takes its source in social history (Pandian, 2005), literature–namely ballads of the late sixteenth century–and folklore (Beck, 1970; Shulman, 1980). The characterisation of the Pramalai Kallars as astute, fearless and even violent stems largely from the attributes of their former traditional occupation as village guardians (kāvalkārar). The duties incumbent to this occupation, which they shared with other Tevar subcastes throughout the southern districts, were to ensure “the material security of the village, just as other castes provide other services; and, at least for guarding the fields, they were effectively remunerated by a share of the harvest on the same basis as the barber, the carpenter, etc. Along with the field watch, there was a watch over the houses, paid in money. The watchman undertook to return stolen objects or to compensate for their loss.”

However, this occupation was the source of much ambivalence, as will be described further in the fourth section of this contribution. The British colonial administration, having banned the practice of kāval, went as far as classifying the Pramalai Kallars under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1919, their alleged proclivity for cattle theft and highway banditry. The stereotypical representation of the Pramalai Kallars is kept alive with new urban legends describing their astuteness for theft, a cinematography which portrays them as ferociously attached to their caste customs as well as by occasional damning media coverage of female infanticide or again of using extreme violence to contest the implementation of reserved constituencies for the Panchayati Raj.

In the late forties, the Pramalai Kallars were the object of the scrutiny of the French anthropologist Louis Dumont. His monograph, *A South Indian Subcaste: Social Organization and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar*, was published in French in 1957 and translated into English in 1986 and this work remains, according to Michael Moffat, “one of the most extensive and compre-
hensive description of an Indian caste in the ethnographic literature.” From this ethnography, as well as further fieldwork and research, Dumont built his subsequent theoretical interpretation of Indian society, *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966).

Presencing the past: the royal heirloom of Tavamani Tevar

If the landmarks of anthropological history hold next to no interest for the Pramalai Kallars, though some are aware that a foreigner wrote a book on them a half a century ago, they have a keen interest in their place in Tamil political history and a very dynamic use of their largely oral historical resources (Headley, 2007). Most of the Pramalai Kallar villagers with whom I worked during my research in the Madurai district knew of the existence of several copper plates—besides the one examined in this contribution—issued in the middle of the seventeenth century. There was a clear consensus among the villagers that these copper plates were issued by the Tirumalai Nayakkar some 300 or 400 years ago. This ruler, who reigned from 1623 CE to 1659 CE, is a prominent figure in Pramalai Kallar oral history, so much so that his persona clearly synthesises Hindu royal authority in the villagers’ narratives of the past. Though most had never seen these copper plates, and many were unsure of their exact number, they knew that they still belonged to the family they were originally issued to, the descendants of the founder and chief headman of the Kallar Nadu. This information, given by numerous villagers, neatly corroborated that given by Dumont who had met the tenth descendant of ‘Tirumalai’ Pinna Tevar along with his young son in 1949 and had photographed his royal heirloom which stood as the symbols of his traditional authority.

When, out of courtesy and curiosity, I met with the eleventh descendant of ‘Tirumalai’ Pinna Tevar, Tavamani Tevar, I asked whether he was still in possession of the copper plates issued to his ancestor Pinna Tevar. He confirmed that these inscriptions, as well as the royal gifts, were still with him and kept in a room at the back of his house. The sole contents of this room were a large wooden chest and numerous family photos, including one taken by Louis Dumont of Tavamani sitting beside his father in full regalia besides the copper plates and other royal gifts dating from the seventeenth century. When I asked whether he could show us the copper plates, Tavamani Tevar checked the time and then asked me to come back two days later in the early morning. Seeing that I was slightly surprised, he went on to explain that each time he unpacked the chest containing the royal heirlooms he, as his father and grandfather had done before him, had to first bathe and perform a small puja which, just as any other ritual, should be done only at certain auspicious times. When I returned for our second meeting, I was accompanied by two
men of the locality I was staying in at the time. Not knowing the headman personally, these acquaintances took this opportunity not so much to meet Tavamani Tevar, as the status of headman has lost much of its former prestige, but rather to see the copper plates. When our little party arrived in the home of the headman, he led us to the back courtyard of his house and into an old one room house where he had already unpacked the chest and had neatly arranged its contents for us to view (Figure 2). The reaction of my escorts in front of these artefacts from the past was of profound awe and respect. Instructed by Tavamani Tevar, the men venerated the plates with folded hands in the same manner as they would have in front of a deity. The headman then proceeded to describe each of the objects displayed for us to view.

Figure 2: Tavamani Tevar, eleventh descendant of ‘Tirumalai’ Pinna Tevar, sitting besides his ancestral heritage.

Against the wooden trunk are three copper plates issued by Tirumalai Nayakkar. The rug (on top of the trunk), the sandals and the vessel for sprinkling water (in front of the copper plates), all gifts from Tirumalai Nayakkar, are mentioned in a copper plate from 1655. These were to be used by the headman while delivering justice over his people. In the foreground are displayed a number of ōlai, (dates uncertain) as well as correspondences from the late 19th century. Among the family photographs in the background, figures the one taken in 1949 by Louis Dumont (detail).
The earliest plate, dating from 1645 (the year $pārttipa$) describes how Tirumalai Nayakkar, in return for a tribute of 50 rupees, granted Pinna Tevar some houses in a Konar\textsuperscript{10} area as well as the right to collect from them fees in kind (cattle). The second plate is the most important one as it appears to constitute a foundation charter of headmanship amongst the Pramalai Kallars.\textsuperscript{11} Issued ten years after the first one (the year $jaya$, 1655), it establishes Pinna Tevar as the headman of eight provinces ($nāṭu$), grants him the right to deliver justice over his people and to collect fees during the festivals of Adi, Divali and Pongal from both Konars and Nayakkars. The inscription also names a second and third headman; however, no specific privileges are attributed to them. The third copper plate issued by Tirumala Nayakkar to Tavamani Tevar’s ancestor establishes the boundaries and taxes to a village (Kongarpuliyanikulam) and divides the rights to levy taxes there between Pinna Tevar and a certain Irulappa Gounder. Besides the three copper plates held by Tavamani Tevar, we find in the literature reference to at least seven other inscriptions pertaining directly to the Kallar community, namely endowing them with $kāval$ rights and fees, which have been found over time both in the Madurai area and beyond.\textsuperscript{12} I have also come across the mention of another copper plate which apparently lists the territorial subdivisions of the Kallar Nadu in a court document (a judgement) dating from 1992. This copper plate was produced in front of the court along with Tavamani Tevar’s three copper plates during a trial opposing two traditional territorial subdivisions fighting over the right to be referred to as the ‘first nadu’. The use, during a trial of such historical artifacts as evidence was considered to be a decisive argument in favour of the party claiming traditional rights of territorial precedence.

The Tottayamkottai inscription: transcription and translation

The copper plate is 30.6 cm wide, 34.8 cm long and about 2 or 3 mm thick.\textsuperscript{13} The palaeographical features of the Tottayamkottai inscription include an abundant use of the $puḷḷi$\textsuperscript{14} and the vowel ‘ē’,\textsuperscript{15} unsystematic doubling of ‘t’ and ‘ñ’ as well as the use of the standard abbreviations for merpadi (aforementioned), $varusham$ (year), $macam$ (month) and $tedi$ (date).

The transcription given below fully respects the inscription.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore the same words are sometimes spelt differently or again appear as misspelt. Furthermore, although I have made the word separation appear here, all doubling of consonants have been kept in order to allow readers versed in written Tamil to make their own appreciation of the choices made in word separation and translation. Regarding the translation, I have taken some measure of liberty in order to facilitate an overall understanding of the inscription. Names of people, lineages and places are not transliterated in the translation, but spelled out according to the local pronunciation. Although it is not directly
relevant to the inscription it is nonetheless important to note here that several lexical fields used by the Pramalai Kallar appear to be specific to them, or at least to this part of Tamil Nadu. However, diglossia is a characteristic feature of spoken Tamil.

Given the important number of protagonists mentioned and a number of rather abrupt transitions, I have identified six sequences in the inscription which I have made appear by paragraph separation in the translation. These go as follow [1] Terms of the contract; [2] Rights of watchmanship; [3] Deadly incidents; [4] New order of precedence; [5] Inscription of names in the temple; [6] Date and signatures. In the final part of this contribution, the discussion will be structured around each of these sequences. Furthermore, in order to facilitate the comprehension of this dense inscription, I have provided in the annexe a comprehensive table of all the protagonists in the order in which they appear in the text. Besides each protagonist’s name is given all the relevant details regarding lineage, occupation, location as well as any significant detail regarding their status within the temple, kin relation to other characters mentioned and specific actions described in the inscription.
lukku vanta cōma tēvaŋ ēlumpa tēvaŋ iraŋtu pērkājl cōma tēvaṅukku mūṭtapīḷḷai paraṭṭai-

yāṇṭittēvaṅum ēlaiyaṅa pottaiyāṇti tēvaṅum pirantiṟuntārho ēlumpa tēvanu-

kku kaluvattevaṅ mūttā piḷḷaiyākavum iraṅṭavatu kupperañṭēvaṅu mūṇāvatu cilukkattēvaṅum

pirantiṟuntāraṅk karumāṭṭur vāṭakkampāṭṭi kīṟāmattukku kōvilukkum paraṭṭaiyāṇti tēvaṅ kā-

valāṭtu vantāṅ pottaiyāṇṭittēvaṅ vīkkiRAMAṆKALAM toṭṭaiyaṅkōṭṭi kāvalāṇṭu vantāṅ

kaluvattēvaṅkuppanañṭēvaṅ cilukkattēvaṅmuṅu pērkalukkum perumāḻ kōvilpaṭṭi kāṇṇa-

ngūl pullainati yinta mūṇu kirāmamum kāvalāṇṭu vantāṅkāl karumāṭṭurukku kīl nāṭṭiliruntu kāvalukku

vanta tūṅka tēvaṅ tāka tēvaṅ māṅguḷaṅkā tēvaṅ mūṇu pērkalum kāvalāṇṭu varumpōtu kāṟām-

ṇi ayyār kāṭukkāṇci nāyakkar pettelai nāyakkar mūṇu pēraiylum kāvalkārakal kolai ceyṆupō-

ṭṭāraṅkārakal cō-

laṅṭtevaṅ piṇaiṅkuṭtuttu vīlakki vantu tūṅka tēvaṅ pāṅkukku cōlai tēvaṅnum tāka tēvaṅ pa-

ṅkukku ṇṅṭāru tēvaṅnum māṅguḷaṅkā pāṅkukku pāricapuli tēvaṅnum teṇṭam kāṭti āṟuṅkāṅk-

ka ṇṅtu vārukiṟāṅkā paraṭṭaiyāṇṭittēvaṅ vakaiyaṅā onṭā tēvaṅukkum tūṅka tēvaṅ

vakaiyaṅā oyyātēvaṅukkum māṭṭukkāraṆpīḷḷai nimmittiyam caṇṭaiyāṅa virōṭṭal onṭā tēvaṅai

oyyā tēvaṅ vakaiyaṅā veṭṭipōṭṭārkaḷ onṭā tēvaṅ vakaiyaṅā īṟaṅmaṅṭā tēvaṅ pāp-

pa paṭṭikki peṇ aḷaikka pōyiruntavaṅ kaṇṇaṆūril vanturuntāṅ pottaiyāṇṭittēvaṅ

vakaiyaṅā āṇṭittēvaṅ toṭṭayāṅkōṭṭaiyul kāvalāka yirukkumpōtu “mēṟpaṭi” jamiṅṭār pet-

talai nāyakkar cākāṟukku toppā kuṭukkaṅa nimmittiyam caṇṭai naṭantatil mēṟpaṭiyār tāmpī kuppa-la
nāyakkarum āṇṭittēvaṉum “mēṟpaṭi” caṇṭaiyul irantupōṅjarkaḷ “mēṟpaṭi” kuppāḷa nāyakkar peṉ-
ǰāti pomammāḷ tīkkuḷī pāyum pōtu āṇṭittēvaṉ peṉjāti paṅcāyi kūṭa vīḷun-
tuviṭṭāḷ mēṟpaṭi caṇṭati tāṇaṅkaḷukku naṭakka vēṇṭiya mutamai tīṟṟtam tirunūru munti cōmatē-
vaṅ vakaiyaṟavukkum yiraṇṭāvatu elumpattēvaṅ vakaiyaṟavukkum mūṉjavatu karuttānce-
ṭṭikkum nāḻavatu cōlaittēvaṉukkum aṅcāvatu tevaṅka perumāḷ ācāri vakaiyaṟavukku na-
ṭantuvaravēṇṭiyatu “mēṟpaṭi” makāmanṭapam valatupakka tuṅil irupatti oṅṇavatu paṭṭākkārār
teyvapperumāḷ pūcāriyaiyum irāmaṇāta tēvaṅaiyum vakun(tu) tirukkēṟatu yḷatupuran tū-
.nil āṇṭi ttēvaṅ kuppāṅatēvaṅ karuttānceṭṭi mūṇu pēraiyum vakuntiyaṟirukkāṟatu “mēṟpaṭi”
vācalkmukappu valatupakkam muṅṭtuṅil cilukka ttēvaṅ tevaṅkaperumāḷ ācāriyaiyum vakun-
tu irukkēṟatu muṅṇāṭi iṭatupurarṭuṅil vaṭivēlkarai nallāṇṭi ttēvaṅ vakaiyaṟavai vakuntirukkāṟatu
vekutāṉiyā “varusham” māci “mātam” 27m “tēti” āṇṭavar tuṅai
yinta paṭṭikki teyvapperumāḷ pūcāriyāṛ rāmaṇāta tēvaṅ āṇṭītēvaṅ kaluvattēva-
ῃ kuppāṅa tēvaṅ cilukkkutūtēvaṅ karutt-
āṅ ceṭṭi cōlaittēvaṅ tevaṅka pe-
rumāḷ ācāri yitu yeḷutinatu “mēṟpaṭi” te-
vaṅka perumāḷ ācāri.

Civa Mayam

Having assembled in Tottayamkottai, belonging to Karumattur, before the shrine of the highly venerable Mummuti of the lineage of Kaliyugachidambareshwara, the person responsible of the above-mentioned temple, the priest Teyvaperumal, twenty-first holder of the title, as well as Iramanata
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Tevan and Andi Tevan of the lineage Soma Tevan, Kaluva Tevan, Kuppana Tevan and Silukka Tevan, of the lineage of Elumba Tevan, as well as Karuttan Chetty, Solai Tevan and Tevangaperumal Acari, for the lineage of the iron and wood artisans, these nine people named above have now assembled together for the construction of a front hall besides the two sanctuaries built already. For those responsible, the primacy of the gift of sacred water and consecrated ash should be done as follow. This is the main text on which the agreement is written.

From the eastern country, Soma Tevan and Elumba Tevan came to Kannanur to be watchmen. From Soma Tevan two sons are born, the first named Parataiyandi Tevan, and the second named Pottaiyandi Tevan. From Elumba Tevan eldest son is Kaluva Tevan, the second Kuppana Tevan, the third Silukka Tevan. Parattaiyandi Tevan was protecting the village and the temple of Vadakampatti, hamlet of Karumattur. Pottaiyandi Tevan was protecting Vikranmangalam, hamlet of Tottaiyamkottai. Kaluva Tevan, Kuppana Tevan and Siluku Tevan together had the protection of the three villages of Perumalkoilpatti, Kannanur, Pulacundi.

While Tunga Tevan, Taga Tevan and Manulagan Tevan, who came from the eastern country, were protecting Karumattur, Ciramani Aier, Katucarinji Nayakkar, Pettanai Nayakkar, were killed by these watchmen. Because of that, the sarkar (government/official) imposed a fine of nine-hundred gold (coins) and they were imprisoned. Solai Tevan gave the share for the bail of Tunga Tevan. The share of the bail of Taga Tevan was given by Andaru Tevan and the share of the bail of Manulagan was given by Parisapuli Tevan. Having paid the fine, they then enjoyed six shares. There was some enmity between Onda Tevan, of the lineage of Parattaiyandi Tevan, and Tunga Tevan, of the lineage of Oyya Tevan, over the cowherd’s son. Because of this conflict, a group belonging to Oyya Tevan cut into pieces Onda Tevan. Iramanatta Tevan, of the lineage of Onda Tevan, stayed in Kannanur on his way to obtain a girl from Pappampatti for marriage. When Andi Tevan, from the lineage of Pottayandi Tevan, was protecting Tottayankottai, zamindar Pettalai Nayakkar of the above-said village did not pay his due on the grove to the sarkar (official, government) and thus a conflict occured. In this conflict, Kuppana Nayakkar, the younger brother of the above-named man, and Andi Tevan died. When the wife of Kuppana Nayakkar, named Pommomal, threw herself on the funeral pyre, Panjayi, the wife of Andi Tevan, also threw herself in the pyre.

The first respect that is due is now given firstly to the lineage of Soma Tevan. Secondly, to the lineage of Elumba Tevan. Thirdly, to Karuttan Chetty, fourthly to Solai Tevan and fifthly to the lineage of Tevangaperumal Acari. In such a way this should happen.
In the main hall, the right hand side pillar is attributed to the 21st holder of the title, Teyva Perumal Pusari, and Iramanata Tevan. The left side pillar attributed to Andi Tevan, Kuppana Tevan and Karuttan Chetty. In the front entrance of the same hall, the first pillar on the right side is attributed to Silukka Tevan and Tevangaaperumal Acari. The front left side pillar is attributed to the lineage of Nallanti Tevan of Vadivelkarai.

The year of Vahudanya, month of Masi, the date of the 27
With the protection of god

The priest Teyvaperumal, Iramanata Tevan, Andi Tevan, Kaluva Tevan, Kuppana Tevan, Silukku Tevan, Karuttan Chetty, Colai Tevan, Tevanga Perumal Acari. Thus says Tevangaaperumal Acari.

Reading the inscription through an ethnographic lens

The Tottayamkottai inscription provides a rich window onto Pramalai Kallar social life, both past and present. In order to appreciate its full scope, a number of clarifications are called for. In the following pages, I will endeavour to comment on each sequence of the inscription through an ethnographic lens. In this process, I will try to render—when appropriate—the context-sensitive reading the Pramalai Kallars make of this copper plate. Besides the reactions and comments of the men who read through the inscription with myself and Krishnasamy, who was assisting me with my research, additional clarifications will be borrowed from Pramalai Kallar oral history and social structure. When necessary, additional illustrations or tools for a better interpretation of the inscription will be borrowed from anthropologists of the
Throughout the following pages, two issues will come to the fore that are of particular interest in my understanding of the Pramalai Kallar subcaste: one, the perennial struggle for precedence at the village level, and two, the ambivalent representation of this subcaste’s former traditional occupation, kāval.

The first sequence, which takes up the first nine lines of the inscription, begins by identifying the locality as well as the temple identified in the inscription. The temple still stands today in a small locality of one of the eight traditional subprovinces of the Kallar Nadu (Karumattur). Though the present name of the locality differs from the one given in the inscription, the latter, Tottayamkottai, is still remembered by the villagers. The Pramalai Kallars distinguish linguistically between three types of temples: the village temple (potu kōvil, a ‘common’ temple), the lineage temple (conta kōvil, ‘one’s own temple’) and the territorial temple (nāṭṭu kōvil, ‘territorial’ temple). The temple of the inscription, referred to nowadays as Kasinathar or Kasivishvanathar Koil, is a potu kōvil, which entails that all the households in the locality contribute to the cost of its festivals. As with most potu kōvil, as opposed to conta kōvil, the head priest (periya pūcāri) is not a Pramalai Kallar but belongs to another caste altogether: in our case the man is a Chettiyar, the so-called merchant or trader caste.

The inscription proceeds to identify, by name and lineage, the signatories of the copper plate whose names are reiterated in the exact same order at the very end of the text. Throughout the inscription, the caste origin of most of the protagonists is ascertainable through their titles. The vast majority of the men mentioned here bear the title ‘tēvan’. This caste title alone does not allow us to determine whether these men belong or not to the same subcaste. Indeed, the caste title Tevan or Tevar is not exclusive to the Pramalai Kallar and is used by numerous other Kallar subcastes, such as the ‘royal’ Thondaiman Kallars of Pudukottai studied by Nicholas Dirks (1987), but also by some Maravar and Agamudayar subcastes. However, though the terms ‘pramalai’ or even ‘kallar’ are not mentioned once in the inscription, all those with whom I discussed the content of the inscription readily believed that these Tevar men were undoubtedly Pramalai Kallars. Several elements lead us to agree with them. For one, the localities referred to are located within the Kallar Nadu, their traditional territory, and have been predominantly inhabited by Pramallai Kallars. Furthermore, a certain number of the lineage names that are mentioned are still to be found among the Pramalai Kallars residing in these localities, and the temple in question is today mainly frequented by members of this subcaste. Six of the signatories bearing the title ‘tēvan’ are therefore assumed to be Pramalai Kallars while two others do not belong to any of the subcastes of the Tevar caste-cluster: one belonging to the Chettiyar trader caste, another to the Acari artisan caste. The caste origin of the priest, Teyvaperumal, is unspecified. Though priests in lineage tem-
ples are almost exclusively Pramalai Kallar, the opposite is true for common temples. Among the non-Pramalai Kallar priests officiating during the time I spent doing fieldwork were some Nayakkars, Chettiyars and Paraiyars. As mentioned above, the priest currently officiating in the temple mentioned in the inscription is himself a Chettiyar.

Following the list of the nine signatories, the inscription tells us that these men have assembled together in order to take on the responsibility of constructing a new hall (*maṇṭapam*), more precisely a ‘front hall’ in the temple in addition to the two already built, and in return will receive “the primacy (*mutamai*) of the gift of sacred water (*tīrttam*) and consecrated ash (*tirunīṟu*).” This sentence opens up the issue of the hierarchical criterion of distinction within the temple, and by extension, within the locality, which remains of utmost importance in Pramalai Kallar social life. This issue, which will be taken up again in the fourth sequence detailing the order in which they should be given out, constitutes, I believe, the central matter of the inscription. The term—used twice in the inscription—is *mutamai*, or ‘properly’ spelt-out *mutalmai*. Derived from the term *mutal*, that is ‘first’ or ‘prime’, it is generally translated into English as ‘primacy’ or ‘precedence’ and often used interchangeably with the compound term ‘*mutal mariyātai*’ (literally ‘first respect’). The notion of rank established by the notion of ‘precedence’ in a given locality materialises itself in the shape of the order in which honours are distributed in the temple. In Tamil temples, these honours generally consist of perishable, less frequently non-perishable, items that have been in direct contact with the deity, such as the garland (*mālai*) worn by the deity, water sanctified by contact with the deity (*tīrttam*), the food presented (*prācatam*), the sacred ash (*tirunīṟu* or more commonly referred to as *vipūti*) and, less commonly, the cloth used to dress the deity (*parivaṭṭam*) during a festival. A number of rights to perform certain acts before or during the ritual also constitute an honour, such as the right to carry the chest containing the deity’s personal effects, or again the right to ring the bell.

In the Tottayamkottai copper plate, the honours identified are relatively common by Pramalai Kallar standards, that is the right to obtain before other devotees a share of consecrated water (*tīrttam*), which is drunk at the end of the puja, and a share of the sacred ash, a part which will be smeared on the forehead by the head priest, and a small handful which will be kept for further use during a couple of days following the puja. The process of distribution is a fixed one: at the end of the celebration the head priest—raising his clasped hands above his head—calls out the name of the first lineage to receive the honours three times and the headman of the lineage, eventually accompanied by one or two prominent men of the same group, will come up to receive the honours. Once all the honours have been handed out, the rest of the devotees
will queue up to receive their share, generally some prācatam and vipūti. In
the first sequence of the inscription, we are simply informed that the pre-
scribed order of the distribution of honours “should be done as follows”, with
no further details until some twenty lines later, in the fourth sequence, when
the precise order is given.

The second sequence introduces five new protagonists. It begins by go-
ing back one generation and presents the geographical origin of two men,
Soma Tevan and Elumba Tevan. These two men are said to have come from
the ‘eastern country’ in order to watch over Kannanur, a locality neighbour-
ing Tottayamkottai. Further down in the inscription, three more men (Tunga
Tevan, Taga Tevan and Manulagan Tevan) are also identified as coming from
the east. This reference to the ‘eastern country’ is very familiar to the Pramalai
Kallars. It is a recurrent motif in their narrative repertoire of the foundation
of their subcaste and territory (Headley, 2011: 105-106). These stories re-

dvolve around a common narrative feature, that is, the conflict between male
siblings leading to the severance of the relationship between the elder and the
younger brother. This results in the departure of the younger brother in search
of a new territory in which to start up again.23 The Pramalai Kallars identify
this generic elder brother as the Ambalakārar, another Kallar subcaste. The
Ambalakārars’ traditional territory is located in and around Melur, a town
which lies to the north-east of Madurai. Both in the oral narratives and in
the reading of the Tottayamkottai inscription, the ‘eastern country’ is readily
understood by the Pramalai Kallars as a direct reference to the traditional ter-
ritory of the Melur Ambalakārars and heard as an echo of their own migration
to the west of Madurai, which several authors situate around 1600.24 Once
again, though there are no references in the inscription of conflict between
older and younger brothers, the repeated reference to ‘the eastern country’
and, as we will see below, the search for new land to watch over constituted,
for the Pramalai Kallars with whom I discussed this copper plate, an obvious
reference to the foundation of their territory and subcaste.

Soma Tevan and Elumba Tevan fathered five of the signatories: to Soma
Tevan two sons were born (Parataiyandi Tevan and Pottaiyandi Tevan) and
three to Elumba Tevan (Kaluva Tevan, Kuppana Tevan and Silukka Tevan).
We then learn of the six localities—all located in the Kallar Nadu—over which
their sons have watchmanship rights. Among the Pramalai Kallars, as well as
the Maravars in Tirunelveli (Reiniche, 1978), the right to the office of kāval
was generally hereditary. Though there is no direct mention of the hereditary
nature of the right to the office of village guardian in this inscription, it ap-
ppears that Elumba Tevan, who had the right to watch over Kannanur with
Soma Tevan, passed this right over to his three sons (Kaluva, Kuppana and
Siluku). Further evidence is given elsewhere in the inscription, when we learn
that Pottaiyandi Tevan (the youngest son of Soma Tevan) has passed his right to watch over Vikramangalam, a hamlet of Tottayamkottai, to Andi Tevan, belonging to his own lineage. Though, in the Tirunelveli region, a distinction is made between *kuṭi-kāval* (guarding the home/locality) and *tēca-kāval* (guarding the country), the only distinction made here is between the locality and the temple.

The issue of *kāval* also dominates the next sequence, the third and most dense one, running some fifteen lines long. Five distinct sets of events are described, which all involve, in one way or another, the proverbial figure of the dangerous guardian: (1) a triple murder, (2) a deadly conflict over the son of a cattleherder, (3) a marriage in the making, (4) yet another murder and, finally, (5) two suicides by fire (sati). The articulation between this chain of events is not always clear, neither is the very purpose of their inclusion in the inscription. Indeed, the events described appear somewhat out of place in the context of a temple contract, their presence here seems to indicate that they have contributed, at least in part, to the re-ordering of the distribution of honours for which this contract was written up. In the course of this sequence, over fifteen new protagonists are introduced; eight will meet untimely and brutal deaths and another six will have their watchmanship rights changed, for better or for worse, by the dramatic events.

The men with whom we discussed the content of the inscription found further echo of Pramalai Kallar oral history in this series of deadly incidents. Indeed, the mention of the murder of three higher caste men (one Iyer and two Nayakkars) by Tevar watchmen mirrors Pramalai Kallar oral narrations of their brutal settlement in their area. Indeed, their oral tradition recounts how their forefathers arriving from the ‘eastern country’ gradually evicted the local higher castes by various means of intimidation and violence. One of the numerous versions I collected goes as follow:

*Veluda Tevan and his younger brother Mani Tevan came from the eastern country. They stayed some time in Aneiyur but there was no work for them as watchmen there. Someone told them to go to Valandur because there a Nayakkar had been killed by his watchman and his family were searching for new watchmen. The son of the Nayakkar took them on and then left for some time. He returned after the harvest which had yielded little that season. He accused the two brothers of stealing from him and a fight broke out during which the son, like his father before him, was killed. The Nayakkar family, full of fright, decided to flee their home and fields.*
The ambivalence attached to this traditional occupation of the Pramalai Kallars, reflected in the inscription and in the above narration, is described by Dumont in the opening pages of his monograph: “In our own time, the Kallar appears primarily as a peasant, perhaps a mediocre farmer, but someone more or less attached to the soil and drawing at least part of his subsistence from it. He has, or has had, two sources of additional revenue: theft and the protection from theft—the occupation of watchman” (Dumont, [1957] 1980:14). Both the Tottayamkottai inscription and this narrative convey the image of a stereotypical figure of Tamil literary and folk culture, that of the dangerous guardian. This figure, one of the many incarnations of the universal category the “bandit” (Hobsbawm, 1969) has its own south Indian twist: “Southern India has its examples of what may be called bandits; indeed, as in the rest of India, the striking innovation lies in the institutionalisation of this field of activity by recognising jatis of thieves and dacoits. In South India a bandit is thus not “made” but rather born as such, and highway robbery becomes a traditional, socially recognized occupation of specific castes with its own symbolic legitimation” (Shulman, 1980: 283). Indeed, the analogy between ‘theft’ and the ‘protection of theft’ has a long and rich history in the Tamil social and literary landscape.

This ambivalent traditional occupation was not an exclusive birth-right of the Pramalai Kallar but common to two of the three castes bearing the title ‘tevan’ (Kallar, Maravar) and also, according to Reiniche again (1978), by men of untouchable communities in some other (unspecified) regions of Tamil Nadu. In the Tirunelveli region, this occupation is clearly identified with the Maravars, and in the Madurai area with the Kallars and more specifically the Pramalai Kallars. However, nowadays, several factors such as the meaning associated with the caste name Kallar, that of ‘thief’ (kaḷḷaṉ), and the fact that the British predominantly criminalised the Kallars, and more especially the Pramalai Kallar, have contributed to the contemporary identification of this subcaste as the stereotypical dangerous guardian.

In his study of the symbolism and social reality of bandits in South Indian literature, David Shulman depicts the Kallars as follows: “The thief becomes a watchman, the guardian steals from his master: the Kallar belong in this respect in the universal category of dangerous watchmen” (Shulman, 1980: 286). Shulman’s short but fascinating study, as well as evidence found in various ballads from the Tamil region dated around the seventeenth century,26 is particularly important as it clearly demonstrates that the ambivalent portrayal of the Kallars pre-dates their antagonistic relationship with the British, and their subsequent criminalisation.
The proverbial danger of the Kallar guardian is also reflected in the inscription shortly after the beginning of the third section when we learn that three Tevars from the ‘eastern country’, who were guarding Karumattur, killed three higher caste men, one Iyer and two Nayakkars. Following this triple murder, these three watchmen are fined and imprisoned by the government. The term translated here as ‘government’ (carkār)–which appears twice in the inscription—is of Persian origin (sar- head) and can in fact designate both the government in general or an official of the ruling authority. Given the absence of evidence, discussed below, to date precisely the copper plate, we are unfortunately left guessing as to which ruling authority is designated by this term.

The three murderers are freed by three other caste fellows who share the cost of their bail. As a result, “they now enjoyed six shares.” We can only speculate what exactly is shared by the six men. My assumption, which was shared by those I discussed the copper plate with, is that this ‘share’ refers to the rights of kāval over the locality of Karumattur, which was previously shared by the three murderers. Indeed, though watchmanship rights were generally transmitted hereditarily, they could be acquired by sheer force or negotiated, as it is I believe the case here. Unfortunately, as the literature on this topic is pretty scarce, we are left to rely almost solely on contemporary oral narratives to understand these kāval rights.

Following the triple murder, another deadly incident occurs. This time it is a conflict over a cowherd’s son between two Tevars: Onda Tevan and Tunga Tevan, the latter having been involved—if it is indeed the same person—in the previous murder. Though Onda Tevan dies violently (“cut into pieces”), the inscription abruptly moves on, without mentioning any consequences to this murder, to the marriage intentions of a male of the lineage of the deceased man. Just as abruptly, this new thread of information is left at that to move on the final conflict described in this inscription in which no less than four people will ultimately die. The conflict erupts between the guardian of Tottayamkottai, Andi Tevan, and the zamindar of the locality, Pettalai Nayakkar, over unpaid dues on the latter’s grove. During the ensuing fight, the younger brother of the zamindar and the guardian die leading their wives to commit suicide by throwing themselves onto their funeral pyres (sati).

In this third section, three conflicts occurred, leading to the violent death of eight people (six men and two women). As the stated purpose of the inscription is to establish a contract for the rights of precedence within a relatively unimportant temple of a largely unnoteworthy locality, the convoluted narration of these bloody events is somewhat bewildering. The only explanation to be found is that the events described in this third section influenced the order of precedence in the temple to be described in the following section.
Following the description of this deadly series of events, the inscription returns to calmer shores in the following sequences. The fourth sequence enumerates the new order of distribution of honours, or precedence, which constitutes the object of this contract. It is not clear whether the recipients listed below had previously benefited from this prestige. Five beneficiaries of these temple honours are mentioned in hierarchical order. The beneficiaries comprise all of the nine signatories, as two of the lineages mentioned (Soma Tevan and Elumba Tevan) include, respectively, two (Parataiyandi and Pottaiyandi) and three (Kaluva, Kuppana and Silukka) of the signatories. That a contract should be written up regarding the issue of the distribution of honours made perfect sense to my Pramalai Kallar interlocutors, as the issue of precedence, which defines hierarchy at the local level, is routinely the subject of renegotiation and, occasionally, open conflict. One of my very first experiences of this contest for precedence was a very ‘physical’ one. I had been attending a festival in temple not far from the one mentioned in the inscription, in order to record the oracles given during the ritual by the possessed singers of each lineage of the temple. Concerned at the time with the role of the possessed singers and more specifically the poor quality of my recording that day, I was relatively indifferent to the ritual’s closing protocol of the distribution of honours. However, suddenly there was a commotion at the entrance of the shrine with men shoving each other fairly violently. The sight of the main priest holding up way above his head a swaying tray containing the sacred ash and shouting at the men who were tugging violently at each other caught my attention. Several groups of women, their shrill voices piercing above those of the men, started vociferating at the men as much as between themselves. My assistant was now himself shouting at me to get off the main platform of the temple as fists started flying and my presence was clearly embarrassing to those who weren’t busy yelling and tugging. I was later told that there had been a disagreement as to the order of the distribution of honours and given a long explanation of the ongoing struggle for precedence among three groups present that day. Eveline Masilamani-Meyer also observed how in Tamil villages “the fight for first respect can lead to a physical fight,” so much so that “many festivals are canceled because of the rivalry for first respect” (2004:177). The importance of mutamai, or mutal mariyātai, in defining the prestige and standing of an individual or group over another has been repeatedly reported by anthropologists in this region.30 The inscription enumerates the order in which these honours are to be given in a manner that is coherent with the order of appearance of the names of the signatories both in the first sequence and in the last one. However, here, the names of the Tevar individuals are not given but only that of their lineages. Furthermore, in accordance with ongoing practices, the priest does not figure among those to receive honours. Hence, the inscription lists the five benefici-
aries of the honours as: firstly the lineage of Soma Tevan, secondly the lineage of Elumba Tevan, thirdly Karuttan Chetty, fourthly the lineage of Solai Tevan and lastly the lineage of Tevanga Perumal Acari.

The fifth sequence, describes to whom and where are attributed pillars within in the temple (Figure 4). It was readily assumed by the Pramalai Kallar that by this ‘attribution’ is meant the right the designated men had to have their names inscribed on the pillars. In total, four pillars were designated and the proximity to the sanctuary and the attribution of the right-hand side appears to support the superiority of one group over another. This hierarchical ordering by proximity to the *sanctum sanctorum* and the emphasis given to the right-hand side mirrors the specific placements of possessed singers during ceremonies such as the one described above.

However, three elements of this short sequence are intriguing. First, of the eight men mentioned in the attribution of the pillars, only seven are signatories to the inscription. The two missing signatories are Kaluva Tevan (whose two younger brothers’ names are inscribed) and Solai Tevan. Unfortunately, there are no elements within the inscription to determine whether this is an involuntary omission or not.

The second intriguing element of this sequence is the attribution of the front left side pillar to a certain Nallanti Tevan of Vadivelkarai who appears here in the inscription for the first and last time without any further detail as to his relationship to the other signatories and protagonists. Finally, one is left to wonder why Silukka Tevan’s name appears here behind that of Karuttan Chetty as he precedes him both in the newly established precedence and in the signature.

![Figure 4: Ascription of the pillars to the signatories](image-url)
In the final sequence, the date of the inscription is given: the year ‘vekutāṉiya’ is the twelfth year of the cycle of Jupiter (comprising 60 years) and the month of māci corresponds to the lunar, or synodic, month running from mid-February to mid-March. As the day of the week is not mentioned we can not elucidate in a definitive manner the Gregorian equivalence to this date. The inscription does not offer any of the standard clues used to date copper plates, such as the mention of the name of the ruling king, which would have allowed us to narrow down the period of its production. The only reference given to outside authority is the Persian derived word for government ‘carkar’ whose usage is too widespread time-wise to allow us to narrow it down a specific century. Hence, with no firm elements to determine the dating, we are therefore left to speculate among the different years that have coincided with the year ‘vekutāṉiya’: 1938, 1878, 1818, 1758, 1698, 1638, etc. When discussing the issue of the date of the copper plate with several erudite men of the locality, they spontaneously admitted to having no definitive answer, but believed that it was written ‘some four hundred years ago’. They were drawn to this approximate dating by the details given of migration of some of the watchmen from the ‘eastern country’ and their subsequent conflict with other castes in the area which they situate around the sixteenth or seventeenth century.

Whatever the correct date is, the concerns, representations and values laid out in this inscription do not appear intriguing or quaint to the Pramalai Kallars. The question of whether this copper plate might be a forgery did not arise in our discussions, and I believe such a suggestion would have been perceived as absurd. However, since this copper plate had only recently been discovered at the time I saw it and had not been recorded by the Archaeological Survey of India, the question of whether it is authentic or a forgery legitimately arises. This question was reinforced when I learned that is an ongoing litigation between the Chettiyar family, who currently hold the right to serve as priests in the temple, and some Pramalai Kallars of the same locality who would like to re-claim what they perceive as being their own hereditary right. At the time of my research, the Pramalai Kallars were planning to present the copper plate in court as evidence. This element in itself induced some doubt as to the authenticity of the copper plate, as it appears to have provided added motivation to embark into a legal procedure.

However, some elements in the inscription do not support the assumption that this copper plate is fabricated evidence. For one, the priest who figures among the signatories, bears no caste title, leaving open the possibility that he was not a Tevar. Secondly, having scrutinised every pillar and corner of this temple, I was not able to find the names said to have been carved out. If this were a clever forgery, why mention something so easily shown
to be non-existent. Furthermore, the fact that there is an insufficient amount of indication to allow a precise dating of the contract, which is not an un-common feature of inscriptions, supports, in my view, that the inscription is authentic. Indeed, many of the Pramalai Kallars men I spoke with consistently placed their historical anecdotes and stories within the reign of such and such a ruler. The dates of the reigns were rarely indicated but the time frame simply given as “at the time of so and so….” The recurrent rulers referred to (Tirumalai Nayakkar, Malik Kafur, the British, etc…) have obviously become generic figures who are indicated in order to validate the historicity of a given narrative. No such reference is given in the inscription. Furthermore, in the convoluted narration of the third sequence, five of the seven protagonists die during a conflict with Tevar guardians. It hardly appears plausible that potential forgerers would choose include deadly conflicts that perpetuate the negative portrayal of the Pramalai Kallar subcaste. Although I cannot give a definitive answer to the question of whether this copper plate is authentic or a forgery, the inscription remains of great interest either way: either as a historical artefact worthy of study or as a contemporary reinvention of caste history, and therefore also worthy of interest. The subtext attached to the eventuality that this copper plate might be a forgery is fairly straightforward: if this is a forgery it holds no historical interest. My own take on this issue is equally straightforward: as an anthropologist the interest of this copper plate would certainly be enhanced if it is indeed a forgery.

At the time of my last visit to the temple, the litigation was following its slow course, the copper plate gathering dust in the backroom of its current owner—as the lawyer indicated it could be of no help to either party—the Chettiyar priest tending to his temple duties and the Pramalai Kallars still negotiating who would obtain mutamai at the next festival...
## Appendix: Lineage, locality and occupation of the protagonists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Lineage</th>
<th>Locality of occupation</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Other details</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teyvaperumal</td>
<td>Soma Tevan</td>
<td>Perumalkoilpatti</td>
<td>Priest</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>-signatory of the inscription</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-shares the pillar with [2]</td>
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<td>Soma Tevan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-shares the pillar with [1]</td>
</tr>
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<td>Soma Tevan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-shares the pillar with [5] and [7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kannanur Pulacundi</td>
<td></td>
<td>-signatory of the inscription</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kannanur Pulacundi</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>-shares the pillar with [3] and [7]</td>
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<td>Kannanur Pulacundi</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-shares the pillar with [9]</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-shares the pillar with [3] and [5]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solai Tevan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Paid the bail of [14]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-signatory of the inscription</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<th>Other details</th>
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<td></td>
<td>-shares the pillar with [6]</td>
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<td>Kannanur</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Came from the east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elumba Tevan</td>
<td>Kannanur</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Came from the east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parataiyandi Tevan</td>
<td>Vadakampatti</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Eldest son of [10]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pottaiyandi Tevan</td>
<td>Vikranmangalam</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Youngest son of [10]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunga Tevan</td>
<td>Karumattur</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>-Came from the east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Kills [19], [20], [21]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Conflict with [24]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taga Tevan</td>
<td>Karumattur</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>-Came from the east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Kills [19], [20], [21]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manulagan Tevan</td>
<td>Karumattur</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>-Came from the east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Kills [19], [20], [21]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciramani Iyer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Killed by [14], [15], [16]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaducarinji Nayakkars</td>
<td>Zamindar</td>
<td></td>
<td>Killed by [14], [15], [16]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pettanai Nayakkar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Killed by [14], [15], [16]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andaru Tevan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paid the bail of [15]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parisapuli Tevan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paid the bail of [16]</td>
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</table>
### Appendix: Lineage, locality and occupation of the protagonists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Lineage</th>
<th>Locality of occupation</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Other details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 Onda Tevan</td>
<td>Paratayandi Tevan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Iramanatta Tevan</td>
<td>Onda Tevan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking a wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Andi Tevan</td>
<td>Pottayandi Tevan</td>
<td>Tottayamkottai</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>-Dies in a conflict with [26]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Pettalai Nayakkar</td>
<td>Tottayamkottai</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zamindar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Kuppana Nayakkar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Younger brother of [25]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Dies in a conflict with [24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Pommomal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tottayamkottai</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Wife of [26]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Commits sati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Panjayi</td>
<td>Pottayandi Tevan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-wife of [24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Commits sati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Nallandi Tevan</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vadivelkarai</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Is attributed a pillar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTES

I would like to express my thanks to Dr A. Murugaiyan for giving me the opportunity to present a much earlier version of this contribution during the “Journée d’Epigraphie Tamoule” held at the EPHE on the 9th of April 2005 (Paris). His patience while helping me read through the copper plate and his interest in my ethnographic approach made this contribution possible. Professor Subbarayalu and Professor K. Rajan extended their expertise by correcting the mistakes I had made in the transcription and clarifying the doubts I had over the translation. In the field, I would also like to express my gratitude to Virumandi Tevar and to V. Krishnasami—with whom I have conducted most of my research. The writing up of this article was made possible by a Clemens Heller fellowship during a postdoctoral stay at the SAI (University of Heidelberg). I would also like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions to two of my colleagues there, Dr Torsten Tschacher and Dr Thomas Lehman.

1 Throughout this contribution, a transliteration will be given for Tamil technical terms. However, names of places and people will be given in a common English transcription following local pronunciation. Though the term designating ‘honours’ is giving in the inscription as mutamai, and pronounced as such, its more common written form is muttalmai.

2 For the Tamil region, several anthropologists have engaged in the translation and analysis of different corpuses of inscriptions in their endeavour to unravel the ethnohistory of their subject of study; such as Brenda Beck (1970) on the issue of left and right castes, Nicholas Dirks (1987) on the little kingdom of Pudukottai, and more recently, Tiziana Leucci in this volume.


4 The Pramalai Kallars remained under the CTA until 1949, that is two years after Independence, when they were finally ‘de-notified’ through the help of a prominent Maravar political figure, Muthuramalingam Tevar.

5 The most prolific film director is certainly Bharati Raja, a Kallar himself, who shot a number of his films in a Kallar rural setting.

6 The first press article “Born to die” written by S. H. Venkatramani, and published in India Today vol 31, 15 (June 1986) 26–33, describes the Kallars and their “savage” customs.

7 For over nine years, no elections were held in two reserved constituencies of Madurai district (Pappapatti and Keerapatti) due to the various strategies of resistance and intimidation by Ambalakārars as well as Pramalai Kallars, which culminated in several murders, notably the Melalavu murders in June 1997.

8 Michael Moffat, who himself did extensive ethnographic research in Tamil Nadu translated the monograph into English. See page XIII of the ‘Editor’s introduction to the English edition’ of Dumont’s monograph.

9 Pinna Tevar was bestowed the right and honour to bear the royal title ‘Tirumalai’ by Tirumalai Nayakkar. This right was passed on to his descendants.

10 The Konars, also known in Tamil Nadu as Idayars, are a pastoral community whose traditional income comes from the raising of sheep and cows. In the Madurai region, the Pramalai Kallars largely consider the Konars as shepherds.

11 A full transcription and translation of this second plate can be found in the annexures of Louis Dumont’s 1957 monograph.
Nelson (1868:44) mentions a plate issuing the right to kāval fees in the Thirumbur district. Sathyanatha Aiyer (1924) mentions two copper plates issued in Pallimatan, see Sathyanatha Aiyer. [1924] 1980.; Blackburn (1978:46) mentions further evidence of the Kallars taking up the duties of kāval in the temples of Kanchi, Srirangam and Alagarkoil. In his research into colonial correspondences, Pandian (2005, p.34) also finds evidence of a copper plate in Pappapatti, a locality within the Kallar Nadu, attesting to Kallar kāval right.

Only three-quarters of the surface of the plate is inscribed. The lower quarter of the plate has a faint sketch of a lotus flower, with three corollas, on a stalk. This sketch could also very well be interpreted as a trident.

In the Tamil script the presence of a puḷḷi marks a mute consonant.

According to Dr Torsten Tschasher, the script of the long vowel ‘e’ became current in the nineteenth century (personal communication).

The Tamil alphabet, composed of 12 vowels and 18 consonants which when combined result in 216 combined letters, is transliterated here according to the norms given for Indian languages by the Bulletin 64 of February 1964 of the Library of Congress.

For instance, while reading through the inscription, the doubling of the title ‘tevan’ for both personal names and lineage names may introduce some confusion, which is clarified in the annexe.

The ethnographic data presented were gathered from local informants, mainly between 1999 and 2004, but also more recently.

Louis Dumont spent two years (1949 and 1950) gathering data in Tamil Nadu during which he spent nine months doing fieldwork among the Pramalai Kallar.


It is relatively difficult to offer an exact or complete description of the sub-groups comprising the Kallar caste, as no anthropological study has been undertaken to this effect. However, nine different Kallar subcastes are identifiable through government sources: Ambalakārar, Easanattu Kallar, Gandharva Kottai, Kallars, Kallar Kula Thondaman, Kootappal Kallars, Peria Suriyur Kallars, Pramalai Kallars (Source : Government Office Ms. No. 28, BC & MBCW Dept. Dated 19.7.94 et G.O. Ms. No. 100 BC and MBCW Dept. dated 24-11-97).

The actual layout of the temple (see Figure 2) leaves us guessing as to which section is referred to here. A change of pattern of the stone slabs making up the ceiling between what is identified by the villagers as the oldest section (the actual mūlastā ṉaṇṭapam) and the muṉ maṇḍapam could be interpreted as following the description given in the inscription. Much more recent sections clearly stand out, as they have been constructed either out of brick or cement.

The figure of the ‘younger brother’ permeates many Pramalai Kallar narratives, whether in relation to the numerous other Kallar subcastes, or in relation to the Kallar caste as a whole as against the two other castes (Maravar and Agamudayar), with whom together they form the Tevar caste-cluster.
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24 Sathianathaier (1956) and Blackburn (1978).


26 For instance ‘Madurai Viran’, certainly the most famous one, is discussed at length is Shulman’s article (Shulman; 1980: 283–304); but also “Cinna Tambi”, a translated version by Brenda Beck is available in Nirmala Devi, R. (1987). Ed. The Wandering Voice: Three Ballades from Palm-leaf Manuscripts. Folklore of Tamil Nadu Series 1. Madras: Institute of Asian Studies.

27 The ‘sarkar’ will appear again, a few lines latter, levying a tax from zamindar’ land (a grove).

28 The term used here is paṅku, literally ‘a share’.


32 It was possible to convert the date given in the copper plate establishing the headman’s charter issued by Tirumalai Nayakkar into the Gregorian calendar, as the day of the week is inscribed: it was issued on Monday the 11 of panguni (mid-March to mid-April) in the year of Jaya (twenty-eighth year of the cycle of Jupiter).


34 The only year we can probably safely eliminate is 1938, as by then the practice of kāval had been outlawed by the British.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


