Rituals and Authority: Power made visible

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Abstract

Rituals are a part of every society. Though one may argue that there are societies without religion, one cannot deny the presence of rituals in any given society. Rituals being all pervasive, there are classifications of rituals serving multitude purposes, often overlapping across the classification. As a result, many attempts have been made in overcoming this overlap in classifying rituals. This paper focuses on political rituals arguing in accordance to the literature that, the most important contribution of political rituals is to bring to light the unchallenged power of sacred legitimacy. It implies that political authority and sacred legitimacy cannot be equated as complimenting each other. In the performance of political rituals, sacred legitimacy elevates the political authority of kingship but the vice versa is irrelevant as the sacred is legitimate.

**Keywords:** Kingship, Legacy, Rituals, Authority, Agrarian

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Rituals are a part of every society. Though one may argue that there are societies without religion, one cannot deny the presence of rituals in any given society. Rituals being all pervasive, there are classifications of rituals serving multitude purposes, often overlapping across the classification. As a result, many attempts have been made in overcoming this overlap in classifying rituals. These include broad classifications as in, positive (sacred) and negative (profane) rituals (Durkheim, 1965); instrumental and expressive rituals; life crisis rituals and rituals of affliction (Turner, 1967).

Other classifications have been more elaborate as in Grimes (1982) sixteen category classification. Without moving on to the many varied classifications, I stop with Bell who provides six categories of rituals stating that they are, ‘a pragmatic comprise between completeness and simplicity. They are rites of passage, which are also called “life cycle” rites; calendrical and commemorative rites; rites of exchange and communion; rites of affliction; rites of feasting, fasting, and festivals; and, finally, political rituals’ (1997:94). In this list, the last category political rituals, is the subject of this chapter. According to Bell, ‘political rituals can be said to comprise those ceremonial practices that specifically construct, display and promote the power of political institutions (such as king, state, the village elders) or the political interests of distinct constituencies and subgroups’ (ibid, 128).

Political rituals are thus, constructed to satisfy a complexity of meaning through their performance. This complexity of meaning weaves through symbolism the intangible sacred power to tangible authority through an orchestrated ritual, staged with an array of actors in specified roles and the distinction of honour. The authority referred to in this study is kingship, and through ritual, the authority of kingship receives sacred legitimacy.

As literature discussed below will show, the most important contribution of political rituals is to bring to light the unchallenged power of sacred legitimacy. It implies that political authority and sacred legitimacy cannot be equated as complimenting each other. In the performance of political rituals, sacred legitimacy elevates the political authority of kingship but the vice versa is irrelevant as the sacred is legitimate.
This approach is best brought out in the studies of ritual as practice which make, ‘a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural patterns to looking at it as that which makes and harbours such patterns. In this view, ritual is more complex than the mere communication of meanings and values; it is a set of activities that construct particular types of meanings and values in specific ways. Hence, rather than ritual as the vehicle for the expression of authority, practice theorists tend to explore how ritual is the vehicle for the construction of relationships of authority and submission’ (Bell, 1997: 82).

Here, in the ‘construction of relationships’ the main aspect of ‘power’ comes into play. Geertz, an important contributor to this line of research states that, ‘Political rites are elaborate arguments about the very nature of power, that make this power tangible and effective’ (Bell, 1997: 129). Bell adds that when ritual, ‘is the principal medium by which power relationships are constructed, the power is usually perceived as coming from sources beyond the immediate control of the human community’ (1997:129). The ‘sources beyond’ refer to the supernatural or the divinity, thereby making power, in this context, tangible through sacred legitimacy. Geertz in his study on Bali kingship, describes the relationship between the kingship and power as follows, ‘The whole of the negara (court life, the traditions that organized it, the extractions that supported it, the privileges that accompanied it) was essentially directed toward defining what power was; and what power was what kings were’ (1980: 124).

In his recent book Quigley (2005) underlines the importance and popularity of the institution of kingship. He states,

It is undeniable that many countries today function perfectly well without a monarch. And yet, in a great many others, a sizeable proportion of the population clings to the idea that kingship provides an indispensable mechanism for transcending political division and underwriting stability and harmony. While some consider that the symbolic function served by kings and queens has become redundant in the contemporary world, for others this symbolic function is as indispensable as ever because no other form of political
authority comes close to providing such a ‘shared symbol of a sacred authority above politics or personal power’” (ibid, 1).

The argument put forward by Quigley fits with the chiefs of Kongu Nadu, where they provide the ‘symbolic function’ in their territory. People in the territory associate and identify themselves more with the traditional ritual aspect of the kingship rather than the modern politics of the state. Also the social life in the palaiyappattu territory revolves around the caste system where the kings play an important and primary role in it as it was in the old regime. This according to Tambiah, is the second or indexical dimension of the political ritual. Tambiah identifies two dimensions of political ritual, namely, symbolic and indexical. In the symbolic dimension, ‘the structures of human authority are laid out as iconic with the nature of the cosmos’ and in indexical the, ‘key features of the ritual relate to and legitimate the current social hierarchy’ (Bell, 1997:87).

So here we have in the first or symbolic dimension the king as iconic through sacred legitimacy and in the indexical dimension through political ritual he ‘legitimates the current social hierarchy’. This role of political ritual and kingship is also pointed out by Dirks, where he argues that, ‘caste was embedded in a political context of kingship. … the prevalent ideology had not to do, … with purity and pollution, but rather with royal authority and honor, and associated notions of power, dominance, and order’ (1987: 7). Dirks further adds that his research argument has been raised earlier by other scholars who include, Appadurai (1981), Breckenridge (1976), Daniel (1984), and McGilvray (1982).

This chapter looks at how the above aspects of political ritual, kingship, political authority, power and sacred legitimacy play a role in the lives of the pattakkarars and palaiyakkarars of Kongu Nadu today. In this connection it will focus primarily on how sacred legitimacy is used by the pattakkarars and palaiyakkarars in keeping alive their political authority in their erstwhile palaiyappattu territory. Referring to the four practices listed above by Geertz, ‘court life and extractions’ for the pattakkarars and palaiyakkarars of Kongu Nadu were subdued during the British regime (1800-1947), and further subdued to their negation by laws introduced by the
Indian state from 1947 onwards. However, ‘traditions and some privileges’ which were established in the past continue to survive. These traditions and privileges associated with Kongu chiefs, in the form of political rituals, are taken up for discussion in this chapter, to see how in the weakened state of their traditional political authority, the sacred legitimacy helps keep the traditional political authority alive. The political rituals discussed below include the pattabishekam (coronation), ponnunchal (golden swing), dassara (ten-day festival) and makaliamman (mother goddess) festival.

The pattakkarars and palaiyakkarars of Kongu Nadu continue to practice these rituals in their respective palaiyam territory. These rituals have their origin in the kingly regimes of South India and continue to survive in the present through the constant effort of the chiefs. These ceremonies serve multiple functions in the local social life, on one side it helps the little kings to maintain their status and authority and on the other, it rekindles collective memory of the people, creating a platform for the support and submission to the institution of kingship and their chiefs.

1. Kingship, Rituals and Sacred Legitimacy

In understanding the complexity of meaning constructed into political rituals the following presentation of the four selected rituals of the Kongu Vellala chieftains is set in a sequence. This sequence first highlights the origin of the ritual. It then goes on to discuss sacred power, here building the connection between the tutelary deity and the king. This link leads to the discussion of the temples related to the ritual and the aspects of gifts and endowments. This leads to the description of the social hierarchy which lists the role and status of the different caste groups in relation to their participation in the ritual. Finally, the symbolism of the ritual act will be discussed. This then will help understand the play of sacred legitimacy as a result of which other attributes of honour, patronage, dominance and submission come to the fore. The significance of some of the attributes in this sequence is discussed below through anecdotal responses.
In south India the institution of kingship and the old regime\(^2\) which facilitated it underwent changes in the hands of the foreign powers as the Nawabs and the British. Post-independence, the introduction of modern politics made a big impact on the institution of kingship, where it led to the demise of kingship, and the kings had to slow down from the way they functioned earlier. The legitimacy they had in the socio-economic and politico-religious realm was curtailed to only the social and religious realms of the vast territory of palaiyappattu.

Even the territory of palaiyappattu shrunk from one central power to the other. But the palaiyappattu political system with its associated practices continues to exist with the constant effort of the chiefs and at the same time no other institution could replace this age old institution. The introduction of modern politics not only decapitated the religious aspect from politics it also distanced the actors such as people and chiefs from it. Before going further, some of the studies which emphasize the ritual significance of the social organization and the roles played by kingship is highlighted here. Two important studies on south Indian kingship, one by Nicolas Dirks (1987) and other by Pamela Price (1996), emphasize the organization and functioning of Indian caste system and the ritual nature of kingship which facilitated it.

Dirks studied the Tondaiman palaiyakkarar (Kallar caste) of Pudukottai Princely state; while Price studied the adjacent Sivaganga and Ramnad palaiyakkarar (Maravar caste). Both argue that the pre-colonial political systems of south India can be ascribed to the ritual kingship, where the institution of caste is organized around kings and the rituals.

The same can be seen in the case of Kongu Nadu pattakkarar and palaiyakkarar too. In this connection, the work of A. M. Hocart (1936, 1969) on Indian kingship argues that rituals played a connecting role in ascertaining the sacred supremacy of the kings and thereby bringing in prosperity to the kingdom and its people. He spoke of how the different service groups in the village performed different roles in rituals thereby consolidating the king’s ritual supremacy and adding to its politico-social relations.

Supporting and participating in the political rituals of kingship brings not only material benefits for the participants but it gives recognition and honour which is valued more dearly than the

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\(^2\) Prior to 1746, the coming of Hyder Ali
material benefits. Talking about recognition and honour, it is appropriate to quote a discussion with a paṇṭāram caste person (interview no 16) who serves both as pūjari or pūcāri (priest) in the clan deity temple’s of a pattakkarar, and also as a cook in his palace. This person is not alone; there are many from his caste who do the same job on rotation basis for the temple and the palace. This is a common feature throughout Kongu that men from the pandaram caste are responsible for the pūjā in the clan deity temples of the Kongu vellala kavundars (Beck, 1972: 48). In this interview the pandaram pūjari was asked why he and his caste members were still rendering their service to the palace, when other employment opportunities were available for him and others? His reply given below highlights some of the core attributes of kingship,

first, it is our urimai (right); for generations my parents and ancestors worked for the palace, so we do not want to let go of our rights. Second, since our attachment with the palace and royal family (loyalty) runs for many generations it cannot be severed so easily, and finally, when we (he and members of his caste associated with palace) go outside our village, we introduce ourselves as coming from Thenkarasu nadu (Thenkarai nadu, one of the 24 nadu divisions of Kongu, of which this pattakkarar has the ruling rights). This association with the palace gives us special respect among our relatives in the neighbouring nadu territory

The above interview shows the relationship of pandaram caste men with the chief. There are multiple reasons behind this relationship and attachment.
But the strongest motivation to continue the service to the pattakkarar is in connection to the respect and recognition they receive from their relatives, that outweighs all the economic factors. The pandaram caste, as other servicing castes, was provided tax free land, maniyam, by the pattakkarar for their subsistence. The maniyam land is not their only source of income and food requirements.

Apart from the maniyam land, they receive additional income through the temple offerings. Besides, service to the temple and the palace is done on rotation by each pandaram family. Here, each family gets its turn once a month so the rest of the time they are involved in other income generating activities. This scope in being involved in other income generating activities does not
force dependency on the chief, however, valuing their urimai (right) they do not want to part with it. Both economical and emotional attachments between the two, kings and their servants, connect them with each other. Conducting and organizing rituals facilitates this relationship and brings the chiefs and people together. As pointed out earlier, Weber’s (1946) account of social honour, overrules its influence over ‘mere economic’ power.

The attributes of status and authority are closely linked to honour, where honour seems to be the medium through which these other attributes are conveyed. This is explained by Dirk’s, who states that, ‘Honors (and here I include both royal and temple honors) were important not only in and of themselves, but because they signified, even if they did not autonomously constitute, authority, position, and stature in the community. To be given honors in a particular place and time meant that one held a particular office, position, or status. To be a village ampalam one had to be given honors in the village festival as the village ampalam. Without these honors, one would lose one's office, position, or status. Honors were the perquisites of office at the same time that offices were the perquisites of honor’ (1987: 290).

These interpretations are important as they bring out both the composite and related meanings and functions of each attribute of kingship. Another attribute of kingship is dominance discussed by Gloria Goodwin Raheja (1988). Raheja highlights that dominance is often understood as relating to numerical and economic superiority to the neglect of its ‘sacrificial function’.

One pattakkarar comments on this attribute of dominance where he on the lines of Raheja highlights the sacrificial meaning with which dominance comes into play. He states,

Maybe two or more generations ago our forefathers exhibited their power through direct coercion for they held the complete control over land on which the rest of the population was dependent. This made their economic dominance obvious in their territory. But today domination cannot be achieved in the same way because in the present political system, i.e. the State has taken over legitimate coercion. Though direct coercion is one of the qualities in kingly realms it is seldom used in real life except in capital offences. In the realm of domination, coercion is a last resort, whereas other forms such as gifts and patronage played a major role to maintain the dominance. Apart from these factors, kings
obtained their authority through their ritual supremacy, kings obtained it from the
superior beings, i.e. from gods, by performing various rituals. This is simultaneously
feared and valorised by the people and helps in their dominance over the social hierarchy
and the submission of the people.

This is evident from kingships all around the world as stated in the literature, where kings and
queens claimed their origin through the divine intervention from gods and goddesses. The
sacred power of the kings and queens is believed to affect the well-being and prosperity of the
people and the kingdom. As Gonda shows from his study on Indian kingship,

“In so-called primitive or semi-primitive societies the belief is widespread that the
welfare and prosperity of the community depends on harmony with the invisible powers.
The Indians shared with many other peoples the conviction that their rulers possessed
supernatural power. One of the most striking characteristics of the Indian king is his role
as a mediator. He is an intermediary between the powers of nature and society. As such
he is an essential factor for the well-being of the people”. (1969: 6)

Though the position of the king as the apex of the political realm has changed with time, his
sacred nature and that he/she is ‘intermediary between the powers of nature and society’ is
reiterated by scholars like Dirks (1987), Geertz (1980), Hocart (1927; 1936), Price, (1996),
Quigley (2005), Raheja (1988a; 1988b). Their works on kingship emphasis that the sacred
authority of kingship is derived from the rituals associated with them and the practice of it. An
elderly person from one of the palaiyam territory outlines this ritual supremacy of his chief.

You know our Raja (palaiyakkarar) owned and still owns a vast territory of land and
property here. He cannot possibly supervise everything by himself. But what he does is
prayer. Every day he prays to the gods. You know, the temple puja is conducted three
times (morning, mid-day, evening) every day. All resources for the puja are provided by
the palace and borne by the raja. This practice has never stopped except of course for
reasons of mourning. The temple priest brings the prachatham (trans-valued food) to the
palace every day after the puja, whereas people like us have to go to the temple to get the prachatham. So people in the palaiyam territory first respect the raja for his pious nature and believe that he/she has godly powers with them. This belief facilitates easy policing where people fear to steal or lie to the raja. There are instances where thieves from outside came to our territory to steal but they were captured and brought to the raja. When everyone expected the raja to punish him, he instructed his servants to take him to the dining area and feed him, when he finished his meal, he was asked by the raja about his whereabouts. He was then given some money and advised not to attempt stealing again. Do you think anyone will steal after this treatment; this is how our raja is.

The above narration of the village elder sketches the nature of the chief which is directly attributed to the chief’s relation to the sacred. He highlights the pious nature of the chief in not punishing the thief, his material contribution to the daily functioning of the temple, his devotion to the deity in not failing from the daily veneration, in recognition of this the transvalued food is sent to him, all this together talk of his sacred status.

The elder continues on explaining how this sacred status has sacred power,

even if the raja visits his lands every day he cannot cover all his property in one day, so if someone plans to cheat and steal him, the raja will still catch him red handed. Such an incident happened some 40 years ago when the previous raja was there. One day a servant tried to steal some goods thinking that the raja was not scheduled to visit that particular land on that day, but the raja visited exactly the same field out of turn, and the servant was caught. This is what I mean by sacred power, the rajas are blessed by the gods and they will be indicated by god when something goes wrong, no one can cheat them, if you try then you will get caught. But if you go and ask them and tell your needs, they will give more than what you ask. So this is their power and we as their subjects we all knew and we never indulge in any unlawful activity. Once you are found guilty you can never face them and you will ruin yourself and your family
The above response shows that the village elder and possibly many like him believe that the chiefs have sacred power and that this will protect them always for which they participate through submission to kingly dominance. The chief’s relation with gods and regular prayer gives them the sacred power which shields them from their enemies and helps them to maintain the social hierarchy. However, it is not that this sacred power is invulnerable, as remarked by Bell, ‘rituals meant to establish a particular power relationship are not invulnerable to being challenged, inverted, or completely thwarted by counteractions’ (1997: 132). An anecdote stated by one palaiyakkarar will explain this,

In the past generations, until my grandfather’s reign, it was believed and practiced that during droughts a strict fast and prayer at the temple in Thirumurthi hills by the palaiyakkarar would bring rains. The people would be ready in their agricultural land for sowing. It was believed that we as palaiyakkarar had the sacred power to bring rain. During a recent drought the people approached me to perform this ritual but our palace minister (appointed by my grandfather) advised me not to perform the ritual. He feared that if I failed in bringing rain, the long-term faith in our sacred power will be diluted.

So here we see that sacred power is carefully exercised by the power holders taking caution on not risking the power of the sacred. The minister’s advice is given to the young raja as he has not yet given himself to the strict puja commitments and therefore the possibility that he has not yet received sacred power. In the section below four rituals are described through the sequence of the attributes mentioned here. But before going into the rituals, it is useful to look at these rituals through the words of caution given by the Chinese sage Xunzi,

The ancient Chinese sage Xunzi (pronounced Shyun’-dz) quoted in the epigraph (300 BCE), offers three pieces of practical advice for anyone attempting to talk about ritual. In effect, he warns against the temptation to reduce this complex phenomenon to simplistic formulas or strict categories. He also suggests that elaborate theories constructed by means of labyrinthine methodological considerations will only lead one away from reality. Finally, he reminds us that we will never understand ritual if we are apt to look
down on what other people do and view their actions from a position of intellectual or observational superiority. (Bell,1999: xii)

2. Four Rituals: Authenticating Sacred Legitimacy

The four rituals selected for discussion here include the Pattabhisekam or coronation, Ponnunchal or golden swing, Dassara (ten-day) festival and Makaliamman (mother goddess) festival. Of these four rituals the first three will be discussed with respect to its performance in Sankarandampalaiyam of pattakkarar Venadudayar and the fourth ritual with respect to its performance in Uthukuli of palaiyakkarar Kalingarayar.

A. Pattabhisekam (Coronation)

According to their vamsavali (1808) and updated genealogy, the Venadudayar’s have been ruling Thenkarainadu for 34 generations. The recent coronation in 2012, was conducted to install the 35th pattakkarar. The first title holder, Arthanari Venu Udayan served as minister to Kulothunga Chola and subdued the Chetty community of Poompuhar and was thus bestowed the title Chetti Venu Udayan. To acknowledge his service, the king conducted the coronation ceremony and installed him as kani head for two villages, Sivayam and Rathnagiri, and also gifted him with royal emblems and announced him as an independent ruler. He further ordered the 48000 vellala kudi and 500 chetti clans to pay tribute to the chief.

Later in kaliyuga 1100, Pidaran Venu Udayan was coronated by the three monarchs when the Chera king married the Chola king’s daughter, and 8000 vellala clans migrated to Kongu as wedding gift. The clan of Venu Udayan was honoured as the head clan and ruled Poondurai nadu. During one of the visits of the three monarchs to oversee Venu Udayan’s territory and his ruling, Pidaran Venu Udayan’s grandson, sacrificed his own son and received the three kings.
This situation arose out of the customary practice of receiving the monarchs with a sacrificial animal.

On this particular occasion as the sacrificial goat was not brought in time to receive the kings, Pidaran Venu Udayan’s grandson, sacrificed his own son and received the three kings. Taken aback by this act, the three monarchs seated Venu Udayan on a six legged throne (a kingly privilege) and conducted the coronation for him bestowing the title *Pullai* (son) Venu Udayan. The vamsavali gives the different heroic acts of the Venu Udayan genealogy for 27 generations and the various dynasties who bestowed the titles on them. The final episode states that till the time of Mysore king Krishnaraja Woodayar, the Venu Udayan’s had ruled three villages, Sankarandampalaiyam, Anjanallur, Cholamadevi, and enjoyed the *makmai*3 of Tenkarai nadu.

This document was written by the 28th pattakkarar Kumara Rathina Venu Udayan, in the year 1808 and collected by the then Surveyor General of India Colin Mackenzie, for the British East India Company.

There is not much information for three generations, 29, 30 and 31. The 32nd generation of pattakkarar called ‘Kovai Ejamanar’ was respected by the people in the territory and he was popular all over Kongu Nadu. He was approached by all sections of people for judgement in disputes and other material help. The 33rd pattakkarar Periyanna Venadu Udayar, followed his father’s footsteps and retained the status and was very powerful locally as well as at the national level. According to the family members’ accounts, he had interacted with Mahatma Gandhi (the father of our nation) and argued with some of his ideas.

The position of the pattakkarar follows the rule of primogenitor and the eldest son inherits the father’s property, title and other statuses. In the 33rd pattakkarar’s case, he had one daughter and a son, but the son died at a very young age, and the pattakkarar was left with no legal heir. As per

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3. *makmai*, n. < U. *makhama*. 1. Contribution in grain for a temple or chattram, levied from cultivators now given optionally; tax or contribution levied for a religious or charitable purpose bearing a certain definite proportion to the rent payable (R. F.);
custom, the next legal heir is his younger brother’s son and he was announced as the 34th generation title holder. He was the first title holder coronated in the post-independent period of India. Till this period all the title holders were coronated by the greater kings as per the changing regimes. With the 34th title holder, the democracy of India did not offer any legitimate recognition for this position. It is here that members of the clan and people of the erstwhile palaiyam along with other palaiyakkarar of the region, demanded and organized the coronation.

The 34th title holder assumed office at very young age and started to abide to his position and the status of the pattakkarar. He continued to hold court at the palace and sort out local issues which were brought to his notice. He had four children, two daughters and two sons, all educated in a private convent at Othagamandalam.

His children did well in their education and equipped themselves for the new democratic state and its economic opportunities. But they chose to stay back in the village and continue the family tradition. They are all into agriculture and related businesses. The 34th title holder continued as pattakkarar till his death. After the demise of the pattakkarar, the clan members, own caste members and other caste members of their erstwhile villages asked the eldest son to take up the position.

Though the eldest son wanted to continue the tradition, he was not ready to assume office as it includes a rigorous set of rules and requires personal sacrifice. If he assumes office his physical mobility outside the palace will be restricted. He will be expected to do Siva puja twice a day, and cannot attend funerals and other such events. He will have to treat everybody equally (irrespective of their caste); in dispute settlements he should give fair justice irrespective of his relationship with the fighting parties. All this requires a great deal of mental and physical balance where one cannot achieve these qualities so easily. Though he knew all these requirements, which he learned while assisting his father, to do it himself he needed some time to decide. Apart from his personal decision making, he needs the approval of his clan and his subjects to conduct
the coronation ceremony. While the clan members and the people in the territory were approaching him to take up the position, he hesitated for the reasons stated above.

The demise of the 34th pattakkarar and no confirmation on the new pattakkarar demoralized the spirits of the palace workers and other subjects of the territory. They feared that the old system and associated practices would come to an end. The pattakkarar’s family too realized that even if they continue to live in the palace (unlike some other pattakkarar who moved away from the native villages and settled in the nearby towns and metropolis), if they do not go through the ritual of coronation they will destroy the entire system and loose their status. On this note, the 35th title holder, Sriman S.K. Balasubramaniya Perianna Venavudayar, agreed for the coronation. He was coronated on 12th March 2012.

In an interview with the current (35th) pattakkarar, he explains under what circumstances he took up the position as pattakkarar and went through the coronation ceremony,

I have an Engineering degree from a reputed college with high grades, I could have gone to abroad, found a job and settled there, but my identity and of others in my territory, and the legacy of my family, might have all lost its value in due course. Initially, I hesitated to take up the position as pattakkarar and the responsibility that comes with it. But then, people from my territory and my clan members insisted that I should take over. Again I hesitated, as I have a strong memory of my father and grandfather in this position; the challenges they confronted in this position and the level of compromise demanded of their personal life.

One has to strictly follow the procedures laid for the pattakkarar. I took some time to change my old habits, but the pressure from my people and clan members of my territory increased, then finally after a year I agreed to take up the post. Their main argument was that, there were no more Kongu Vellala pattakkarar in Kongu Nadu, my father was the last one who had gone through the coronation ritual. The rest of the three pattakkarar families had not conducted this ritual, so theoretically Kongu Nadu did not have any pattakkarar. Given this situation, if I declined the request of the people, then in the whole
of Kongu there will be no pattakkarar. So I agreed, mainly for this reason as I did not want to disappoint the people and the respect they had for my family and the position of pattakkarar. (Interview 12: 3/9/2014)

The above interview gives us some points on the constraints related to the position of the pattakkarar, the situation under which the current pattakkarar has taken up the position and the respect the pattakkarar has among his subjects even today. The respect and submission, the pattakkarar receives from the people, reflects his family legacy and plays an important role for their authority in the territory. The request from people and his concern not to jeopardize the system, led to his coronation as 35th pattakkarar of Tenkarai nadu.

The coronation ceremony of the pattakkarar, an important ritual for kingship, involves the participation and services from his subjects (of various castes of his territory), where each caste has a certain role to play in the ritual. According to the people of different castes, the role played by them in the ritual integrates them into this age-old system and rekindles their memory of the past, renewing their relationship with the pattakkarar.

Though the rest of the Kongu Vellala chiefs are respected by their subjects in their territory without conducting the coronation, the one who underwent the ritual is considered special even by the other chiefs. All the other chiefs unanimously agree that they have abstained from the coronation ritual given the demands of the rules set for the Paṭṭam (title). They further believe and show reverence to the sacred power instilled on the position and fear that any form of casualness can incite the wrath of the sacred power bringing ill fate to their family and the people of their territory.

Paṭṭāpiṣēkam or Coronation ritual sets apart the individual from all his earthly connection and elevates him to a superior position, as pointed by Quigley,

The central issue in the anthropology of kingship is understanding how an individual is extracted from the kinds of economic, political and kinship relations that ‘ordinary’ people also find themselves in, and made into a person (or non-person) who is literally
extraordinary – outside conventional society – by using the cultural device of an installation ritual. (2005:4)

The patabhisekam was a four day ceremony; it started on a Friday evening in March 2012. A large gathering assembled at the palace to initiate this ceremony. The gathering included members of the chiefly clan, other clan members of the chief’s caste (Kongu Vellala) and members of other caste groups of the 32 villages that were traditionally ruled by the Sankarandampalaiyam pattakkarar. The ritual started with the procession (many in motorised vehicles) of the gathering led by the pattakkarar and his wife, the kula guru and his wife and other close members of the pattakkarar family. This procession headed to the Apparameshwar temple.

This temple is situated on the banks of river Amaravathi in Maravapralaiyam village at a distance of two kilometers from the palace. At the temple the traditional musicians (from both Isai vellala and Paraian caste) had assembled to receive the procession. As the procession neared the temple the regalia of music started and the pattakkarar and his wife with kula guru and his wife and all others entered the temple. The main ritual was in front of the sanctum sanctorum of the deity, Apparameshwarar. Here the Sakthi Kumbam was prepared and worship was initiated with the lighting of incense sticks by the pattakkarar’s wife followed by the kula guru’s wife.

The temple priest (belongs to Siva Brahman or Sivachariyar sect, same as kula guru) then takes over the ritual by seating the pattakkarar and his wife along with kula guru and his wife in a row in front of the sakthi kumbam and the deity. For this special occasion a group of Siva Brahmans well versed in Agama rituals were invited from other palaiyams to perform the overall ceremony. The ritual continued in the temple with the chanting of scriptures. At the end of this the sakthi kumbam was handed over to pattakkarar and kula guru and brought to the palace.

The ritual initiated at the Apparameshwarar temple signifies priority to this temple. There are in total seven temples that are given priority in important rituals of the pattakkarar. They include 1. Apparameshwarar /Periya Nayaki Amman temple in Maravapalaiyam; 2. Tenesvarar /Akilandavalliamman in Sankararandampalaiyam; 3. Natathu Eswaran in Velappanpalaiyam; 4. Periya Nachiayamman (clan deity - female) in Korranur; 5. Rathina Moorthy Swami (clan deity
- male) [inside this temple there are other parivara deities like *Athanuramman, Karupparaya Swami, Elu kannimar* (Seven virigin), one of the ancestor Shri Kovai Ejamanar] in Sankararanandampalaiyam; 6. *Kottai Marriyamman* in Sankararanandampalaiyam; and 7.) *Kannimar* in Korranur. All these seven temples are situated on the banks of river Amaravathi.

As per legend these temples mark the migration and territorial authority of the pattakkurar. The Apparemeshwarar is recognized as the Kani temple of not just the Periya clan to which the pattakkurar belongs but also of the Cemputhan clan and two other caste groups namely Chettiyar and Konar.

This is to imply that when the Periya clan received its kani rights, there were other groups who also held kani rights around the temple. Thus the ritual starts with the blessings of Apparemeshwarar. These temples have always received the patronage of the pattakkurar through endowments. As Ludden points out in his ‘Peasant history of south India’, the kings and chiefs had acquired their authority through providing patronage in the form of gifts to local institutions and protecting such institutions as well as the people. He states, ‘Investments by kingly patrons in agricultural development often took the form of gifts to local institutions, particularly temples. … By their protection and patronage of locality institutions, kings and chiefs established their own authority’ (1986: 30).

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Plate 6: Pattakkurar entering the Apparameshware temple  
Plate 7: Pattakkurar’s and Kula guru’s wife are lighting the lamp to initiate the ritual
At the palace the worship continued in the shrine which held the photographs of the ancestors and Hindu gods and ancestral weapons. Offerings of fruits and flower are made to the ancestors, and then the kula guru lit camphor in worship and the sacred ash was offered to all. The pattakkarar’s wife then lights the lamp in the main courtyard of the palace where the rest of the gathering was seated. The pattakkarar and his wife were then seated in front of the lamp where five sakthi kumbam were arranged. The Siva Brahman continued with the chanting of scriptures. Simultaneously the yāka kuṇṭam (sacred pyre) was being prepared by the pandaram caste priest not far from where the pattakkarar was seated. This yaga kundam is kept alive by the sivachariyars till the end of the ritual on the fourth day. The sivachariyars and the pandaram priest are all honoured with gifts of cash and kind for their ritual service. This ends the day one of the ritual.

The day two of the ritual commences on Saturday morning, the 10th of March 2012 at the palace in Sankaranandampalaiyam. During the early morning hours of the day the pattakkarar and his wife along with the kula guru and his wife visit the temple of the tutelary deity Periya Nachiayamman temple in Korranur. At the palace the flow of guests from near and far are received. The guest list remains the same for all days of the rituals which include members of 32 villages, members of neighboring palaiyams and members of the political parties. Food was endlessly being cooked and served to the endless gathering that came and went during this four day ritual. Groceries were continuously replaced with the end of every meal. This challenging service was done by
members of the pandaram caste. In fact the coronation ritual demanded a great deal of planning and organization much ahead of the ritual.

The younger brother of the pattakkarar had taken a lead in this organization. For this he had created an organizing committee that included the members of different castes. He had committees to take charge of printing invitations and distributing them, organizing food, decorating the palace, cleaning the villages and various temples, receiving and accommodating the guests, arranging civa pirāmaṇ (siva bahman) to conduct the ritual and many other committees to take care of every little detail. He had also an army of youth volunteers to assist each of these committees. Besides all this, members of caste groups who offered traditional services were notified of this ritual in advance. These members call this service as mirasu (rights or privileges) they consider it an honour to be attached to the pattakkarar and serve him. They include, to name a few, Kongu vellalar goundar (agriculturist and landlords) pandaram caste (temple priest and cooks), the siva bahman (priest), washer man (torch bearers), Isai vellalar and Paraiah (music players), pulavanars (bards), pallar (agriculture workers) and mathari (leather and agriculture workers). This practice of mirasu displays the social hierarchy of the region. The mirasu holders also have received maniyam (tax-free) land from the pattakkarar. Both the mirasu and maniyam go together and have been given to the respective members many generations ago. As a result a long standing relationship of dominance and submission has been built and followed as a right and honour.

Much of day two of the ritual was spent in receiving and accommodating guests. The team of siva bahmans continued to sing the hymns in front of the sakthi kumbam and the sacred pyre. This continuous recitation and singing of the scriptures was intended to bring sacred power to the contents of the cacti kumpam (sakthi kumbam). There were eleven sakthi kumbam arranged for this purpose each containing water from the different temples listed above. This is symbolic as the water is the medium of anointment and so symbolically it implies the presence of the different deities in anointment of the pattakkarar.

In the evening of the day two the pattakkarar’s wife lights the two lamps around the sakthi kumbam. The pattakkarar again honours the sivachariayars and then they are all seated around
the sakthi kumbam. The main ritual of the day then commences with the tying of the *kaṅkaṇam* (kankanam - turmeric root tied to a thread smeared with its paste) to the hand of the pattakkkarar’s wife by the pattakkkarar. The sivachariya then puts a ring in the pattakkkarar’s finger. This ritual marks the couple’s complete devotion to the coronation and all that it entails. On this day also, both in the morning and evening the ancestors and gods in the palace shrine were worshiped with offerings of fruits and flowers.

Day three of the ritual starts on Sunday morning the 11th of March 2012. During the early morning hours of the day the pattakkkarar and his wife along with the kula guru and his wife visit the other temples listed above. On their return to the palace they start with worship in the palace
shrine and then the pattakkarar’s wife lights the lamp in the courtyard around the sakthi kumbam. The siva brahmans then commence the chanting of mantras and Tamil poems in front of the sakthi kumbam. Many important guests (including political party representatives) arrived and are honoured with shawls by the pattakkarar. A booklet on the family history compiled specially for the ceremony is distributed to all the guests.

Day four of the ritual starts at the early hours (4 am) of Monday, the 12th of March 2012. The ritual commences again at the Apparemeshwarar temple where arrangements are made for the Acharya Abisekam of kula guru. The idols of the main deity, Apparemeshwarar and his consort, Periya Nayaki Amman, are placed on a special closed throne (Chaparam) in the courtyard outside the sanctum sanctorum facing the idol inside. The kula guru and his wife are seated in front of the idols also facing like the idols the sanctum sanctorum. This part of the ritual has four main stages which are executed by the team of Siva Brahmans. It starts with chanting of mantras and the anointment of the kula guru and his wife with the Tīrttam (sacred water) from the sakthi kumbam. This is followed by the sacred preaching and oath delivered to kula guru and his wife by the chief Siva Brahman under the cover of a red silk shawl.

On completion of this stage the chief Siva Brahman lights the 101 wick oil lamp and with it venerates the kula guru and his wife and the idols behind them. The kula guru and his wife then garland the pattakkarar and his wife, who in turn place flower crowns on kula guru and his wife respectively. This formally and ritually legitimates the priestly couple as kula guru of the pattakkarar. With this he takes over the proceedings of the day in the coronation of the pattakkarar. This ritual gives him the authority to bring the idols of Apparemeshwarar and his consort to the palace. It is in the presence of the deities that the coronation proceeds in the palace. The presence of the deities is the most important symbolism in the transfer of sacred power and legitimacy from the deity to the king. To facilitate this, the ritual of Acharya abisekam is constructed so that the kula guru is empowered to escort the deities and act in assistance to the deities in coronating the king.
At the end of the ritual in the temple, the kula guru is seated in a palanquin (which is placed on a tractor\(^4\)) and the deities in the throne are placed on another tractor. All others gathered follow in a procession to the palace with the kula guru in the lead. At the palace, the procession reached at 7.30 am and are received by the family of the pattakkarar. Other royal regalia received as gifts

\(^4\) Members of the Siviayar caste are the traditional palanquin bearers. Their migration to nearby towns for other occupation started 40 years ago leaving none of them in the palaiyappattu territory today. And therefore improvisation of using tractors.
from the past kingly regime become part of the procession and the coronation ceremony. These include the banner and the colourful (*panchavarna*) umbrellas.

The members of the Cempūṭṭan clans bring the kingly sword, while the members of the Antai clan brings the garlands and the flower crown along with the silk cloth used to tie the head gear (*parivattam*). A big stage is erected in the palace grounds and decorated with all finery to facilitate the rest of the ritual. The pattakkarar and his wife after the anointment with sacred water, then dress in the best of silks and jewelry for the next part of the coronation ritual. The deity is now placed on the right end of the stage while the kula guru and his parents (previous
kula guru) are seated on the left end. A wooden throne is placed at the centre for the pattakkarar and his wife and behind them is placed the royal regalia (Banner, Umbrella, etc).

The pattakkarar and his wife are escorted to the stage by the senior members of their clan and members of the Cemputan and Antai clans. Here they venerate the deities and the senior kula guru before taking their place. Once seated on the throne the Siva Brahmans cover them and the kula guru with the red silk shawl. It is under this confinement of the shawl that the kula guru executes the sacred preaching and oath to the pattakkarar and his wife. The royal gifts brought by the Cemputan and Antai clan are then given to the pattakkarar and his wife. Both Cemputan and Antai clan are closely associated with the pattakkarar (Periya clan). Before the pattakkarars arrival to this region, these two clans occupied the territory and at sometime during the regime change in the center, the pattakkarar and their clan have taken the territory under their control. Thus the relationships between these clans have a long history and in every ritual at the pattakkarar’s place, these two clans are given the first honours. The gifting of the flower crown and sword by the two clans symbolises their acknowledgement of the authority of the pattakkarar.

So here the royal couples are adorned with flower garlands and flower crown by the Cemputan clan. Before placing the flower crown on the pattakkarar, the parivattam (head gear) in white silk is tied by the senior member of the Kalingarayar palaiyakkarar family. The Antai clan now gives the sword to the pattakkarar. This marks the end of the coronation ritual and the guests are invited to seek the blessings of the pattakkarar and his wife. Other pattakkarar / palaiyakkarars and their representatives and also office bearers of the present political system are invited to the stage to give their best wishes. The pattakkarar who initiates this is Sriman Rajkumar Nalla Senapathy Sarkarai Uthama Kaminda Mandradiyar of Palayakottai.
In the evening a grand procession is organised for the newly coronated couple and the kula guru. The kula guru leads the procession seated on a palanquin followed by the pattakkarar seated on a poonther (flower chariot) and then his wife seated in another palanquin. All of them were placed in three different tractors. Ahead of the kula guru were the torch bearers and the musicians. The people of the villages walked along with this procession. Fireworks and the sound of the horns and drums announced the procession from the start to the end. The procession visited the villages enroute to the tutelary deity, Periya Nachi Amman’s temple at Korranur. Enroute of the procession the people took blessings of the coronated pattakkarar and the kula guru.
At Periya Nachi Amman’s temple arrangements were made for a special puja. The procession then returns to the palace. The ritual ends in the palace with the last puja, performed to the previous pattakkarar, the father of the present.

Plate 26: Pattakkarar is taken procession in poonther
Plate 27: Pattakkarar’s wife accompanying the procession (inside the palanquin)

Plate 28: Kula guru and his wife in the same procession
Plate 29: After the procession pattakkarar conducting puja for the ancestor

As explained earlier, the coronation ceremony is a performance with constructed meanings of the roles of the many participants. It has been interpreted as a medium of social integration (Shils and Young, 1953), at the same time critiqued as one of compliance to dominance (Lukes, 1975). What is undeniable, however, is the significance of the ritual both with respect to its grandeur
and the sacred symbolism, that has facilitated its survival. Interestingly, Gonda quotes from the text, Manasara, dated between 6th-8th c. A.D.,

four stages are distinguished, the prapta- or pratharna, the mangala-, the vira- and the vijaya-). The abhiseka- proper consists in anointing the king with various auspicious substances. The monarch-whose empire reaches as far as the four oceans-is then adorned with the royal robes, the sacred thread, and various ornaments. He is led to the consecration hall, which is furnished with the emblems of empire, such as the throne, the wish-yielding tree (kalpavrksa), the ornamental arch (torana). After having been garlanded, anointed, and sprinkled with substances of good augury the king mounts an elephant and circumambulates the city amidst acclamations of felicity (1969: 61-62).

The four stages specified in the ancient text can be observed in the coronation of the pattakkarar described above. The prapta- or pratharna, the mangala-, the vira- and the vijaya, can be seen in the anointment through the sacred water, the sacred oath, the garlanding, crowning and sword and finally the procession. These stages provide the authenticity for sacred legitimacy and authority.

B. Poṉ ūñcal (Golden Swing)

Poṉ ūñcal, literally golden swing, is an important ritual for Periya (elder, big) clan members of Kongu vellala govundar (Kongu Vellala) community. It is important for the Thenkarai nadu pattakkarar because the pon unchal was gifted by the Chola king only to his ancestor. This makes the ritual exclusive to the pattakkarar and his clan members. Further, the ritual of the pon unchal, was a symbol of royalty. There are two versions to the gifting of the pon unchal, the vamsavali states that, the pon unchal is part of the gifts given to Pullai venadudayan by the three monarchs (refer to the full episode discussed above) the other version believes that it was gifted to Irumbidar thalaiyar, the maternal uncle of Karikala chola for his service in reclaiming the
The pon unchal has been passed down from Irumbidar thalaiyar, who is considered as an ancestor of the pattakkarar’s clan.

The pon unchal ritual is organized when there are enough (100 – 150) first born daughters of the Periya clan between the ages 4 to 12 or before the attainment of puberty. All Periya clan members who live in Kongu territory have the right for Pon unchal ritual. They believe that their first born girl is an incarnation of their clan deity, Periya Nachiyamman and goddess Periya Nayaki Amman or Parvathi, consort of Siva. The first born girls are named as Nallammal, another name of Periya Nayaki amman. The organization and conduction of the ritual is the responsibility of the pattakkarar of Tenkarai nadu. But to organize the ritual, the pattakkarar must be requested to do so by the clan members or parents of the girls. The ritual is conducted in the month of Markazhi, in the star Thiruvathirai, on a full moon day.

The pattakkarar fixes the auspicious time for the ritual in consultation with the clan preceptor (kula guru). In the past this ritual was conducted once a year, but in the last two decades this interval has increased to two or three years. Once enough requests are received from the clan members the ritual is organized. The pon unchal ritual also provides the pattakkarars with an opportunity to bring members of the other clans of the Kongu Vellala and members of other castes in performing their mirasu\(^5\), and thereby reiterating his royal status and of his clan.

Ponunchal is supported by two tree branches, puńkaṅkāl (Pongamia glabra) is placed on the southern side and puḷiyaṅkāl (Tamarindus indica) is placed on the northern side. Both the pattakkarar’s clan members or paṅkāḷi (parallel cousins) and members of the cemputan clan have special mirasu in this ritual. It is they who provide the important tree branches; the Periya clan bring the puńkaṅkāl and the Cemputan clan bring the puḷiyaṅkāl. The mirasu of the araṇmaṇai puḷavar (palace bard) includes the responsibility of making and dispatching invitations for the ritual to the Periya clan members living in different villages. A special messenger is also sent to the houses of all village heads.

\(^{5}\) A general term originally signifying inheritance, from the late eighteenth century referring to rights of local landholding and, often, government service (dirks 1987: xxiii).
Installing mukūrtakkāl is an important event in any of the functions conducted by the Kongu vellala kavundar. This mukurthakkal is installed the previous evening of the ritual day. The relatives and clan elders of the various clans in the territory go in a procession with a music band and cut the branch of pachan tree (a variety of fig-tree). The skin of this branch is removed leaving some leaves at the top and brought to the palace. Then navatāṉiyam (nine cereals) are put in a piece of cloth, which is dipped in turmeric water and tied to this branch. This sacred branch is then placed at a prominent place in the palace where the ritual is performed. The mukurthakkal mirasu belongs to the Arumaikkarar (ritual head) of Kongu Vellala clans of Nakarasu, Vattamalaipalaiyam, Kullampalaiyam and Mudalipalaiyam villages.

The morning of the ritual, the girls assembled for the ponunchal are taken to the seven gates of the Amaravathi River. At each of these gates the girls take a dip in the river and visit each of the seven respective temples, 1. Tenesvarar, 2. Periya Nachiyamman, 3. Rathina Moorthy Swami, 4. Karupparaya Swami [which is inside the Rathina Moorthi Temple], 5. Kottai Marriyamman, 6. Natathu Eswaran, 7. Apparameshwarar Periya Nayaki Amman. They return to the palace after the sacred bath and temple worship.

At the palace in order to add reality to the metaphor of ‘gold’ swing, a gold smith is invited to engrave a small piece of gold on the seat of the swing. Once this is done the swing is hung on to the wooden shafts in the centre of the front yard. The puliyankal and pungankal are now placed to the north and south of the swing in support of the wooden shafts. The ponunchal is decorated with flowers. The gold smith then venerates the ponunchal by making pongal (sweet rice) for which he is given one padi (less than a kilogram) of rice by the pattakkarar. For this service, he is given a share of the contributions given by the girls family for the ponunchal (see table 8 below). The clan preceptor then performs the Puṇya Archaṇai (purification ritual) for the swing.

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6 The legend dates the Pon Unchal to the times of the Chola (1st to 4th century CE) and thus the original gold swing has not survived. The present descendents are not sure when the original was replaced.
Once the girls reached the palace, they are seated with their parents and relatives, here the maternal uncle of the girls plays an important role. He is the one who contributes for the ritual expenses besides inviting and bringing his relatives to the palace. The order of seating of the girls is based on the priority list of the villages. The first priority is given to children from the palace, i.e. pattakkarar’s first daughters and his brothers’ first daughters. Then the first daughter of periya clan families in the local villages, Ranga palaiyam, Koilpalaiyam, Kannangkoil. The second priority is given to the first daughter of periya clan families from the villages of Pudupalaiyam, Sella Pillai Kavundan Pudur, Eerukalankattup Pudur.
The third priority is given to the first daughter of periya clan families from the villages of Kullakali Palaiyam. (some time merged with Pudupalaiyam children – second priority). The fourth priority is given to the first daughter of periya clan families from the villages of Velappampalaiyam, Erasanampalaiyam, Vellai Kavundan Pudur, Rasi palaiyam, Karukkampalaiyam, Kalli Medu, Andipalaiyam.

The clan bards sing the hymns praising goddess Periya Nayakiamman as the girls are seated and swung on the ponunchal. The pattakkarar and clan preceptor are present throughout the ritual. The ritual starts at 7 am in the morning and goes on till the afternoon, depending on the number of girl children assembled.

Expenses for the ritual are borne by the maternal uncle of the girl child. Until a few decades ago the contribution for the ritual was made in kind, it included paddy and other cereals, pulses and vegetables. This situation has changed presently and money has replaced contributions in kind. However, certain items in kind are given in the seer thatu which includes, raw rice 15 padi (12kgs), jaggery 15 numbers, 5 coconut, 15 banana, 50 turmeric pieces, 50 betel leaves and areca nut. Expenses are met from the total collection of the contributions. This includes the decoration of the palace and payment for the mirasu holders for their service in the ritual, etc. The total collection is shared by the pattakkarar, clan guru and bards in the ratio of 2/3:1/3, where the pattakkarar receives 2/3 of the total and the later will share the 1/3. From the 2/3 received by the pattakkarar, he redistributes to the other mirasu holders as per the table below.

Besides the exclusivity of the Ponunchal ritual as a symbol of royalty, it also provides the occasion for the pattakkarar to provide an opportunity for the mirasu holders to exercise their rights. In this way he not only provides scope for income generation but more importantly reinstates the significance of occupational skills. The ritual shows the duty of the pattakkarar as an employment generator and redistributor of income.
Table 8: Ritual duties performed by different castes and their share from the contribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Caste name</th>
<th>Title of the ritual performer</th>
<th>Ritual duties and Mirasu (rights)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Kongu vellala</td>
<td>Pattakkarar</td>
<td>primary ritual conductor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Arumaikkarar</td>
<td></td>
<td>initiates the ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Siva Brahman</td>
<td>Kula guru- Punya archanai</td>
<td>primary ritual facilitator also initiates the ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Sivachariyar - Brahman</td>
<td>does the puja at Apparameshwarar temple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Pulavanaar</td>
<td>Aadeena Pulavanar, Bard</td>
<td>sings the hymns of Periya Nachiyamman during the ritual; when the girl children are seated on the golden swing and swung by them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Kongu Barber</td>
<td>Sakara kathi - Navithan</td>
<td>grooming the participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Kongu Doby</td>
<td>Ekali - Vannar</td>
<td>providing the cloth required for the rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kongu Pandaram</td>
<td>Aandi - pandaram priest</td>
<td>temple priests and cook in the palace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kongu Parayan</td>
<td>Thoti</td>
<td>playing drum and horn during the ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mudaliyar</td>
<td>Korranur melathan</td>
<td>playing thavil and nayanam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chakiliyar</td>
<td>Madari</td>
<td>cleaning the palace area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pallar</td>
<td>Errant</td>
<td>cleaning the palace area supplies the plantain leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Potter –</td>
<td>Kuayavan</td>
<td>Providing new pots for making pongal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Thatachari</td>
<td>Gold smith</td>
<td>Engraving gold on the swing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Siviyar</td>
<td>Siviyar (palanquin bearers)</td>
<td>carrying the palanquin – but are not residing in the territory presently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Manikathal</td>
<td>Deva daasi (temple dancer)</td>
<td>fly the whisks to the goddess and girl children in the Unchal not in practice currently</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C. Dasara festival

The dasara festival and its link to royalty or kingly regimes has a long history in India. Archival material and literature have recorded the patronage this festival has received from kingly regimes. The festival is almost synonymous to the identity of kingly power. This identity of the festival with kingship was popularized in south India by the Vijayanagara kingdom. Dirks (1987) writes on the primacy this festival received in Vijayanagara polity. He states,

…the mahadana became the principal ritual performance of Vijayanagara polity, the principal ritual occasion for this and other gifting activity became the Mahanavami, otherwise called Dasara, Durgotsava, or Navaratra (in Tamil, Navarattiri, meaning nine nights). The festival, in all of its many forms, was celebrated on the first nine nights and ten days of the lunar month Asvina, roughly the period from mid September to mid October. As yet another name of the festival, Durgapuja, readily suggests, the ritual occasion consisted basically of the worship of the goddess Durga, although in later and variant forms the worship of other goddesses, often tutelary, also took place (ibid, 38-39).

Further, Dirks argues that the tenth day of the festival was named ‘Vijayadasami, ... the day of victory’, after the kings of Vijayanagara (ibid, 39). Breckenridge (1977) looking at kingship among the Maravar Setupati in Ramnad, discusses the grandiose with which the Dasara was celebrated in 1892. She states that in 1892 the Raja of Ramnad spent rupees one lakh for the dasara celebrations. She argues that the dasara festival was a medium through which the king could construct what and from where his authority consists? This was situated in the context of the Madras Government under the East India Company which converted, ‘local royal figures into Zamindars’ and thereby depriving the kings, ‘of many activities which were illustrative of their kingship’(ibid, 76-77).

She argues that the dasara festival was used in this context to show that the king derived his legitimacy from his ‘special relationship with temple deities’ and not from the ‘raj’. Below are some excerpts of her description from an eye witness source,
Hung over the outer gateway of the Setupati’s palace was… draped a banner bearing the slogan “Long Live Our King”. The occasion was the celebration of Navaratri at Ramnad in the year 1892. During this fourteen-day event, the enduring relationship between the Setupati and the royal family’s tutelary deity, Sri Rajarajisvari, was renewed. Likewise, the Setupati’s generosity was displayed. … thousands of Brahmans and poor people were reported to have been fed daily. And we are told that during the dazzling event “many vedic scholars, pandits, musicians, artists, artisans, and other deserving persons were liberally presented with shawls, Benares clothes, jewels, money gifts and so forth”. … On each of nine nights, the offerer of worship honored a specified Amman. The Setupati honored Goddess Rajarajisvari. In Tamil Nadu at least, this celebration came to be coupled with another event known as ayuta puja, or the honoring of one’s arms, tools, or instruments of trade. For the king, this meant honoring his weapons… Day ten (1 October), known as the victorious tenth or Vijayadasami, … the Setupati paraded to a clearing outside the town for the arrow-shooting ceremony. Among the throngs in attendance at this ceremony were gods and goddesses from various temples in the Samastanam, priests, and other honored guests. … (ibid, 78-86).

In conclusion she states that the, ‘celebration of the royal ritual of Navaratri in 1892 might be interpreted to have been an effort by the recently installed Setupati to revitalize Hindu kingship as it had flourished in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Symptomatic of his kingship was his sponsorship of ritual events which placed him in a direct transactional relationship with temple-deities. It was this relationship which had been the source of royal authority’ (ibid, 105). And it is for this reason that the festival is celebrated dearly by the royal families as a source of revitalization of authority.

On similar lines, more recently, Sundar (2001) argues that ‘the annual Dussehra festival … had the intention (or function) of exalting the king ritually and thereby keeping the state weak in practice’ (20). She further adds that, ‘Dussehra in Bastar has always been a performative act of legitimation. … The central theme of the Dussehra festival, taken generically, is said to be the
worship of the goddess by the king on behalf of the kingdom, in order to ensure its well-being. (27)

This question of the significance of ritual as a medium for revitalizing kingly authority is discussed by Schepel (1995) with reference to Kulke (1978) and Stein (1980) where they are of the view that the two (ritual and kingly authority) come closer together when the ‘actual political power’ fades (159). But this is not the argument of scholars who work on ritual as practice. For them as discussed earlier rituals and political authority cannot be equated and therefore the substitution of one for the other is invalid. Another prominent aspect of dasara is the role of prestations, both Dirks and Raheja argue that they are ‘not simply economic transactions but rituals of incorporation that play a critical role in the establishment and maintenance of dominance and political sovereignty’ (Schepel, 1995: 160).

The above literature shows the importance of dasara to the status of kingship and therefore its popularity. This popularity is seen even in the present among people with kingly legacy. This is very much the case with the pattakkarar and palaiyakkarar of Kongu Nadu. All the four chieftains studied in this research celebrate dasara for ten days with most of the rituals mentioned in the literature. A newspaper article on the dasara celebrations in Uthukuli Zamin in 1912 reproduced by Vadivelu (1915), gives us a picture of its patronage among the Kongu Vellala chieftains.

The Dasara Festivities of Uttukuli Zamindari commenced on the morning of the 11th October 1912 with installation of the goddess amidst the chanting of vedic hymns and mantras on one side of the Chandrasala, a tastefully decorated and beautifully illuminated Mandapam, the other portion being reserved for the holding of the Durbar by the Zamindar. The Zamindar with his family and children attended the customary worship and a Durbar was held every night. As soon as the Zamindar took his seat in the Durbar Hall, he was presented with prasadams from all the temples and a number of retainers presented arms in semi-military fashion. Then all the tenants of the zamindari paid their respects to the Zamindar. Afterwards a regular programme of music and nautch was gone
through. Every evening there were Kalakshepams by Bhagavathars and others; and numerous people were daily fed. This was continued for nine days and the tenth day ceremony was a very imposing one. After the worship of the goddess in the morning, the Zamindar held a Durbar and was given a dagger and a sword in commemoration of the fact that his ancestors were military chieftains ruling over that part of the country’.

(Madras Mail, dated 23-10-1912)

The following description pertains to the dasara or navarathri celebration in Sankarandampalaiyam palaiyappattu territory. The seven temples of this palaiyappattu (mentioned in the sections above) are an important part of the dasara celebrations, where for all the ten days of the festival special pujas are performed and are attended by the pattakkarar and/or members of his family. On the first day of the ten day festival, the kula guru with the other temple priests initiates the celebration through a puja in the palace shrine. There are two important aspects to the puja, one includes the tying the kankanam and the other is to take the ritual swords to the temples. On the symbolism of the kankanam, Berckenridge (1977) with respect to dasara celebrations of Raja of Ramnad writes, ‘a tying and binding ceremony, known as kappukkattu or kankunapantanam, was performed.

As a marker of his determination to complete and to protect the ensuing nine days of festivities, a saffron-smeared thread was tied around the right wrist of the Setupati by the officiating priests’ (83). The two ritual swords are taken post this puja from the palace shrine to the temples of the tutelary deity Periya Nachi Amman where one sword is placed against the goddess and the other sword is taken to the temple of Periya Nayaki Amman and placed against the goddess. Both these swords are kept with the goddesses for the duration of ten days and on the last or tenth day it is brought back to the palace shrine with the same retinue.

The pattakkarar goes to these two temples either in the morning or in the evening during the ten days of dasara. During his visits to the temples he is accompanied by his own and other Kongu vellala clan members and the villagers. Once he reaches the temple he is received with the music band and taken inside the temple and the retinue follows. The pattakkarar goes around the main temple in clock wise direction and then enters the sanctum where the main deity is situated. Then
the kula guru conducts the puja for the deity with the assistance of the temple priest. At the tutelary deity temple the pandaram has the rights of priesthood while in the Periya Nayaki Amman temple a Siva Brahman has the rights of priesthood.

Then the pattakkarar is honoured with a garland (which is taken from the deity) and the temple priest ties a turban. Finally he is given the *prasatham*, which includes the offerings made to the deity, vipūti (sacred ash), cantaṉam (sandalwood paste), kuṅkumam, pañcāmirtam (mixture of five substances – dates, honey, jaggery, banana and sugar pellets), poṅkal (white or sweet). After the pattakkarar, the clan members of cempūṭṭaṇ and āntai clan are given the honour. This practice continues for all the ten days of the dasara festival.

On the fifth or sixth day, depending on the auspiciousness of the day, a special puja is conducted to goddess Durga called caṇṭi hōmam. The purpose of this puja is to vanquish the enemies, as quoted by Kane from Devipurana,

This is a great and holy *vrata* conferring great *siddhis*, vanquishing all enemies, conferring benefits on all people, especially in great floods; this should be performed by Brahmanas for solemn sacrifices and by ksatriyas for the protection of the people, by
vaisyas for cattle wealth, by Sudras desirous of sons and happiness, by women for blessed wifehood and by rich men who hanker for more wealth. (Kane 1974, 5:156)

All the villagers from the 32 villages of the palaiyappattu are invited for this homam, while some important clan members and affine relatives receive special invitations directly from the pattakkkarar to attend the ritual. Now-a-days the invitation is also circulated in the social media by the pattakkkarar family in order to publicize it to the wider audience. On the ninth day of the festival the Ayutha puja is celebrated, as Dirks points out

The ninth day became known as Ayudha puja, when, in conjunction with the worship of the goddess Sarasvati, one worshipped the implements of one's profession – horses and weapons for warriors, tools for workmen, ploughs for cultivators, books for scholars. (1987: 39)

At pattakkkarar’s palace, puja is conducted for implements, such as, the palanquin, weapons of their ancestors, vehicles (carts and chariots) used by their ancestors, and the vehicles (cars) of the present day pattakkkarar. All these implements are consecrated with vibuthi, sandle paste, kumkum and flowers. Also the musical instruments (kombu, thapatai), used by the Paraiyar caste men, are also worshiped.

Later on the ninth day the palace horses are venerated. The pattakkkarar’s family have horses for many generations, according to the family members, at any given time, they have a minimum of four horses in the palace farm.

There are workers exclusively appointed for the care of the horses and on the ninth day, the horses are washed and decorated and brought to the courtyard of the palace. The pandaram caste pujaari then conducts puja for the horses. The horses legs are applied with turmeric and their back covered with white cloth. Then the pujaari brings the deepa arathanai with sambirani and venerates the horses.
Then the horse maintainers and the washer men are given a goat by the mudaliyar caste members which is sacrificed at the front door of the palace and taken by them. Here again horses are an important symbol of royalty and thus the reverence for them during dassara. This is also discussed by Dirks who referring to the text, *Devimahatmya*, states that, ‘animals figured in the ritual in that kings and others who kept horses were advised to honor horses from the second to the ninth days, in way reminiscent of all but the culminating features of the Vedic horse sacrifice, the asvamedha’ (1987:39).

*Plate 34: Horse puja at the pattakkarar palace*

In the early evening of the ninth day the urchava moorthy of tutelary deity, Periya Nachi Amman, is brought by the pandaram priest in a procession with music to the palace. The deity is received by the pattakkarar and his family and placed in the palace palanquin along with the other weapons of the palace. The goddess is venerated and then given privacy by shuting the main gate and doors of this space. She is not disturbed till the next morning, the tenth day or Vijayadasami.
Ampu servai (shooting arrows)

Ambu servai or shooting arrows is another important part of the dasara and takes place in the evening of the ninth day. The pattakkarar reaches in procession to the Periya Nayaki Amman temple in Maravapalaiyam village. Once the pattakkarar reaches the temple with retinue, the music party welcomes him. Unlike other days, on this day the urcava mūrtti of the main deity is kept ready with full decoration in a canopied wooden frame. Puja is conducted to this deity and carried out of the temple to the vicinity where the arrow shoot is arranged. The Mudaliyar community has the right to carry the idol from the temple to the arrow shooting spot, for which they receive honours in kind from the pattakkarar.
Arrangements are made at arrow shooting spot by the temple priest with the help of the villagers. Four young banana plants are tied to the four poles of the pandal and one more young banana plant is erected at the centre of this structure. The pandal is covered with a white cloth and on the top of the cloth the nochi plants (Vitex Negundo) branches are spread out. The pattakkarar and the deity with the kula guru are escorted to this spot by the temple priest and the villagers. The priest then conducts a puja for the uṟcava mūrtti and distributes deepa arathani and vibuthi to all present. Then he ties the head gear to the Kula guru and gives him the consecrated bow and arrows. The kula guru shoots the arrow at the center banana plant and then from all four directions (north, south, east and west).

Then the temple priest does the same. The temple priest then ties a head gear to the pattakkarar and hands over the bow and arrows. The pattakkarar shoots five arrows one at the center and four at the different directions. After the pattakkarar, the clan members of the pattakkarar and the Cempūttan clan members and the Periya Veetukkarar (headmen) of the Mudaliyar community are given their turn. Then the temple priest calls on all other right holders to shoot the arrows. After this ritual the gathering moves back to the temple in the same order of precedence where they are all served pracatam (transvalued food).

Dirks, mentions the symbolism of the arrow shooting as, ‘signifying the victory of the gods over the asuras and, more specifically, Durga's defeat of the buffalo demon, Mahisasura’ (1987: 40).
Brekrenridge addresses this ritual as ‘victory celebrations’ in which ‘royal prowess’ is displayed (1977: 86).

The last or tenth day of the festival is celebrated as Vijayadasami. In both the temples of Periya Nayaki Amman and Periya Nachi Amman special pujas are done in the morning and the two swords from the respective deities are brought back to the palace by the respective temple priests. At this time the gates are opened where the tutelary deity was placed. Pujas are done to the deity and to the swords placed in the palace shrine. The deity is then taken back to the temple. This marks the end of the festivity and lunch is served to all gathered at the palace.

The coming and staying of the tutelary deity in the palace and the two swords consecrated by the deities are believed to infuse ‘cosmic power into the king’ (Dirks, 1987: 39). These two rituals and all other rituals that are part of the dasara celebrations mark the relationship between the deity and the king (pattakkarar). This relationship as stated by Breckenridge is a symbiotic relationship where in this case, the pattakkarar, ‘committed himself to the protection of his relationship with the deity. The deity, reciprocating through the agency of her priests, presented … his royal sword … markers of his kingship’ (1977: 87). This ritual thus revitalizes the authority and sacred legitimacy of the kingship.

**D. Makaliamman festival of Uthukuli Palaiyam**

Makaliamman festival is conducted once a year, on the first week of Tamil month, Panguni (15th to 18th of March). The primary patron of the ritual is the palaiyakkarar of Uthukuli zamin. The festival is celebrated for ten days; each day a special ritual is scheduled. The table below provides the details of this schedule. In 2013, the festival lasted for nineteen days from commencement to end, the extra days are included to avoid the inauspicious days in between.

*Plate 39: Calendar of events for makaliamman festival displayed at the entrance of the zamin territory*
Makaliamman festival starts with the villagers approaching the Raja (palaiyakkarar addressed as king) for an appointment, a month earlier to the actual calendar dates. According to the Raja’s convenience, he will assign a date and time. In the given appointment, the village elders and the village headman, kothukkarar, who is in-charge to conduct the ritual, meet the Raja in his palace and request him to conduct the festival. Once he agrees and gives permission they fix the date with the help of the panchangam (astrology book). Funds for the festival is collected from each household of the village.

**Table 9 - Programme of the Makaliamman festival**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Ritual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19-03-2013</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>7 pm</td>
<td>Makaliamman Sakthi Kumbam Erection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-03-2013</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>7 pm</td>
<td>Temple Poovodu (fire pot)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-03-2013</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>7 pm</td>
<td>Bringing holy water from Kodumudi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-03-2013</td>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>7 pm</td>
<td>Bringing holy water from Palani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-03-2013</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>7 pm</td>
<td>Bringing holy water from Nalluthu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-03-2013</td>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>7 pm</td>
<td>Bringing holy water from Koodu thurai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01-04-2013</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>7 pm</td>
<td>Bringing holy water from Theiva kulam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02-04-2013</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>7 am</td>
<td>Opening the kundam (the fire walking trench) - fire is raised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 pm</td>
<td>Poovodu (fire pot) starting from the Vinayagar temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 pm</td>
<td>Bringing holy water for Agathur Amman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9 pm</td>
<td>Raising the Agni (fire) in the kundam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03-04-2013</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>7 am</td>
<td>Disciples walk through the Agni (fire) kundam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 am</td>
<td>Carrying Pongal and Maa vilaku (sweet flour lamps) for the deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05-04-2013</td>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>9 am</td>
<td>Goddess taken in the chariot around the village and the pouring of turmeric water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 pm</td>
<td>Grand Abhisekam, and puja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06-04-2013</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>10 am</td>
<td>Temple income-expenditure; tallying accounts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contributions are both in cash and kind and the quantity is voluntary. Each caste living in the village is automatically assigned to carry out their hereditary duty and right related to the festival. Those who live away from the zamin territory (migrated for work) are informed by their relatives and they return to the village for the festival and carry out their hereditary right. These hereditary rights are considered a honour and are not easily given away unless the concerned family is in a period of mourning. The table below lists these hereditary rights as per the different caste groups.
### Table 10 – Caste and Hereditary rights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No</th>
<th>Person / position</th>
<th>Caste name</th>
<th>Hereditary rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Raja (Palaiyakkarar)</td>
<td>Kongu vellala goundar</td>
<td>Overall control and in-charge of the festival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Kothukkarar</td>
<td>Kongu vellala goundar</td>
<td>Second in responsibility to the Raja. He is a <em>pankali</em> (member of same clan) of the Raja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Chera kula velallar</td>
<td>Carries the holy water from the different river sources on behalf of the palace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Chera kula velallar</td>
<td>Holds the umbrella for the God and the Raja</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Chera kula velallar</td>
<td>In-charge of the treasury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Sakkiliar</td>
<td>Disseminates the information to the villagers with the sound of his drums</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Vannar</td>
<td>Lights the festival by using cloth torches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Barber</td>
<td>Prepares the fire in the kundam (fire walk)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Boyar</td>
<td>Digs the kundam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Iyer</td>
<td>Starts the fire in the kundam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Pandaram</td>
<td>Performs the ritual in the temple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Udayar / pottar</td>
<td>Brings the Kumbam (goddess decorated in earthen pot) from the village common well to the temple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Aasari</td>
<td>Provides the silver thali, sacred thread to the goddess</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Pallar</td>
<td>Provides the poovodu to the disciples</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The festival is initiated with erecting the Sakthi Kumbam, an earthen pot filled with the holy water from the village common well. This sakthi kumbam is placed on a tri-branch of a neem tree which is erected in front of the temple, on the first day in the presence of the raja. On all following days of the festival, the villagers go to the palace and escort the raja to the temple with the music band before the ritual commences. As seen in the programme of the festival above, the second day of the festival (21-03-2013, Thursday), the first Poovodu (literally flower pot, here flower symbolizes the fire) is prepared by the temple priest and brought to the temple from the village common well.

The next five days of the festival, the members of the Chera kula vellalar caste bring the sacred water from the different sacred places for the abhishekam (anointment) of Makaliamman. On all the first seven days of the festival there is only one specific ritual per day. The eighth day (02-04-2013, Tuesday), however, is a full day event with sequential rituals. First, is the preparation of the kundam, trench for fire walking, in view of the main deity in the temple, Makaliamman, this starts at 7am in the morning. This preparation includes the digging of soil for the trench to a depth of 2ft and 10/30ft breadth and length.

Once the trench is prepared it is filled with logs of wood bought from the festival fund and also from individual contributions. This preparation goes on till early evening when the ritual of the Poovodu begins. In the evening the participants of the poovodu go to the common well of Uthukuli village and shower from its waters in preparation for the ritual. Poovodu is an earthen pot made by the village potters and purchased by individuals who offer this prayer. The necessary wood pieces and oil that goes into this pot are brought by the individuals. Sometimes people who take a vow to contribute the wood and oil provide these materials. Once the individual fire pots are arranged with woods and oil the pujari (pandaram caste men) lights the pot with camphor. Once all the pots are lit, they walk in a procession to the palace.

The Raja receives them with his son and other family members in the front yard of the palace. The Raja holds a plate full of camphor and as each poovodu bearer comes forward and falls at his feet seeking his blessings he puts one piece of camphor into the poovodu. Once all the people
who carry the fire pot finish their turn, the pujari who carries the goddess (earth moulded as the goddess in a mud pot, see Plate below) stands before the Raja in a state of trance. The raja and his family members prostrate before the goddess carried by the pujari and get her blessings. After this, the procession continues to the temple where the fire pots are left in a corner of the temple yard and the devotees enter the temple and offer their prayers.

The same evening members of the village assemble in the palace to invite the raja and escorts’ him to the temple. Before going to the Makaliamman temple, the raja stops at the Vinayagar temple of the palace and worships the god. Here the devotees who have vowed for fire walking take the blessings of the raja by falling on his feet. The raja then proceeds to Makaliamman temple in a procession with the kingly retinue, where two umbrellas and saamarams (royal flags) are carried by the mudaliar caste members, designated to carry these emblems.

At the temple the raja participates in the puja offered to the main deity. He is then seated in the temple vicinity with his relatives and guests. The villagers who vowed to ‘cāṭṭai pōṭatal’ (beating themselves with a whip) ritual, to relieve them from illness and hardships, perform this act. The raja as the deity, is witness to this ritual. The day ends with lighting the Agni Kundam (fire trench). The fire is started by the temple priest with the fire lit from the deity’s sanctum, the Raja then consecrates the fire with coconut and camphor brought from the palace.

Agni Kundam is left to burn overnight and the next morning those who vowed to the goddess, walk on the fire (see Plates below). On the ninth day with the end of the fire walking women make pongal (boiled rice) in the vicinity of the temple and offer it to the deity along with mā vilakku (sweet flour lamps).

On the tenth day morning the deity is seated in a chariot and taken around the village in a grandiose procession. In the evening of this day a grand abhisekam and puja is offered to the deity and marks the end of the festival. An important feature of the Makaliamman festival with respect to ritual symbolism is the falling on the feet of the raja. This ritual act elevates the raja to
the state of divinity. Specific rituals during the festival mark the relationship building of the raja and the deity.

Plate 40: Kumbam arriving at Makaliamman temple
Plate 41: Palaiyakkarar and his son are blessing the people
Plate 42: Palaiyakkarar and his son are taken in procession to Makaliamman temple
Plate 43: Palaiyakkarar and his son are witness to the 'saatai' vow at the temple vicinity

The ritual of the pujari in a state of trance, carrying the goddess in an earthen pot on his head, and visiting the raja in his palace, is very significant in this context. Here, while all the devotees take their blessings from the raja, the deity comes to the raja last, and he takes her blessing by
falling on her feet. The status of the raja is elevated by the deity, as she comes to his place to pay respects to him. He is overwhelmed and acknowledges her grace by falling on her feet. As mentioned in the previous section, this relationship between the deity and the raja is symbiotic.

Plate 44: Kundam is lighted at Makaliamman temple in the evening

Plate 45: Kundam is ready the next morning at Makaliamman temple

Plate 46: Palaiyakkarar and his son are taken in procession to Makaliamman temple to witness the fire walking

Plate 47: Disciples are walking on fire
Plate 48: Palaiyakkarar and his son are blessing the people

It is interesting to record here, how the raja and the people perceive this act of falling on the feet. Below are excerpts from the interview with the raja on this question,

I keep on chanting goddess Makaliamman name, I believe that people are not falling on my feet but falling on her feet through my body. Once a year they do this ritual thinking that their sins will be removed. They even make young babies fall on our feet. I do not assume that I am great, or that I am a Raja and ruling India or Tamil Nadu. But the people believe we are a form of god and agents of the deity. By falling on our feet they transfer their sins and take the blessings of the deity who uses our body as a medium. We often feel weak after this ritual but the deity takes care of this. By transferring their sins taking our blessings the people believe that for the forthcoming year they will be prosperous and safe and will get what they looked for. In fact not everyone who participates in this ritual are locals, may be 20% are local, the rest are from outside. We are renovating all the temples in our palaiyam, but I will never say that I am doing it; it is the wish of the goddess, she is doing it through me and people also give their support which is important. (Interview 3, 12-3-2013)

Some excerpts from the people,

I used to fall on the raja’s feet from childhood, I was born and married in this village. The raja’s blessings has protected me and brought good fortune, he is blessed and chosen by
the deity (respondent 1- elder lady). I am from this village but married and settled in my husband’s village. But I never fail to attend the festival here and seek the Ejamanar’s (Lord, master, boss) blessings. By falling on his feet all my difficulties come to an end (Respondent 2- young lady). In every way seeking the blessings from the raja is good for me. When the raja blesses you all good fortune comes your way as his blessings prevent the effect of the Tiruṣṭi (evil eye) (respondent 3- young man).

In the above interview, the raja emphasizes that, in the minds of the people he is seen as part of god and therefore the ritual act of obeisance. This perception of transcendence is sacred power.

From the construction of the ritual, and the responses of both the Raja and the people, it is the sacred legitimacy of the king that receives supremacy. In the pre-colonial political system of Tamil Nadu legitimacy and supremacy came to the kings and the sub-ordinate kings through an inseparable religio-political value. This ideological system did not fade away even after changes occurred in the political regime. According to Pamela Price

The segments which constituted the late pre-colonial state ... . Religious and political values and concepts together constituted ideological systems which supported the legitimacy of the head of a domain. … All domain heads engaged in ritual transactions of substances (food, cloth, jewels, etc.) with important gods and their consorts mediated by temple priests. It was through these transactions that the gods shared their ruling authority with human rulers (1996:15).

The analysis of Price where ‘gods shared their ruling authority with human rulers’ holds good to the case of the pattakkarar and palaiyakkarar as seen above in their present day political rituals. All the temples in their territory belong to them and their family, they engage themselves in renovating temples, giving endowments and making sure the worship is not stopped in any way.
The ideological system stated by Price that the practice of the old regime where the king is honored by his people and at the same time the king honors the deity is ritually homologous and underpins the political as well as ritual spheres explained by Dirks in his work on Pudukkottai little kings,

The king is depicted as the principal devotee of the deity with whom he is simultaneously identified. … The honoring of the deity and of the king are ritually homologous. The king is given offerings by his nobles at the same time, and in the same ways, as the king himself gives offerings to the deity. (1987:41)

This chapter has tried to demonstrate through four political rituals of Kongu Vellala chieftains that political authority is engraved in sacred legitimacy. Sacred legitimacy derived from a
symbiotic relationship with divinity is all pervasive and can be broken only by the two, the divinity and the king. The relationship between the two and their symbiosis is focused on the larger people and devotees. A recurrent aspect of the political rituals seen above in authenticating the sacred legitimacy of the king is in the deity coming to the king, to his palace, also the deity’s transvalued food is brought to the king, the swords consecrated by her is brought to the king. He in turn does not fail in his prestations and endowments. Through all this, the sacred power of the divinity is passed on to the king and this meaning is delivered to the people through the display of sacred power in these political rituals and by bestowing mirasu and creating the opportunity through these rituals for the people to exercise their mirasu.

**Works Cited**


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**Biographical Statement**

S. Ponnarasu is a PhD scholar at the department of Anthropology of Pondicherry University. His research interests include legal and political aspects of rural agrarian power structures and caste system. His PhD is titled *AN ETHNOHISTORICAL STUDY OF THE CHIEFTAINS AMONG THE KONGU VELLALA COMMUNITY IN SOUTH INDIA* is submitted to Pondicherry University and awaiting for his VIVA-VOCE. His Ph.D work is funded by the French Institute Pondicherry from March 2011 till February 2014.

He has been coordinating, with Zoe E. Headley (IFP-CNRS) since 2011 several Endangered Archives projects funded by the British library (Arcadia) and hosted by the Social Sciences Department of the French Institute of Pondicherry. The aim of the overall project, titled “Caste, Land and Custom” is to constitute a digital archive of vulnerable documents pertaining to Tamil agrarian history during the colonial period.
Prior to his PhD, S. Ponnarasu has collaborated in several research projects focusing on microfinance, debt bondage, migration and employment. His recent publications include (2012) “Bonded labourers and labour standards. The social fabric of dependence”, with Isabelle Guérin, G. Venkatasubramanian, Sébastien Michiels in Global Labour Journal, volume 3, Issue 1 (January).