An Ethnographic Account of Sudalai Cult, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract. *Worshipping of Demon plays a significant role in the folk religious practices of Tamil Nadu, South India. Sudalai – a male folk deity is considered as a chief of all evil spirits by the people in that region and hundreds of temples for Sudalai exist in the southern region of Tamil Nadu. Several rituals, beliefs, customs, oral narratives etc are associated with this religious practice and an annual worshipping festival is celebrated in order to appease the malevolent deity. This descriptive paper is an attempt to document the living folk tradition associated with Sudalai through fieldwork in the natural context in order to understand how oral myths form the rituals and in what way myths are ritualized.*

Key Words: Sudalai- Demon- Ritual- Myth- Possession-Festival

I

Worshipping of *Pey* or *Bhuta* or Demon occupies a significant place in the folk tradition of Southern Tamil Nadu, India. No visitor to the region can fail to notice the numberless truncated, often shapeless, obelisks of brick or plastered mud, which are to be seen almost everywhere on the roadside, on waste grounds, cremation grounds, on mounds standing dry above the paddy fields, in the village lanes and even in the backyards of inhabited houses. Often these pyramids stand in groups or clusters of groups; they are placed as a rule on a pedestal cut into two or three steps. A ferocious human figure may be depicted in colours on one face of the pyramid. Sometimes, all faces are perfectly plain. These symbols are locally called *pudam*. They are called *pey kovil* (temple of devils). It is only an expert or Shaman who can decide what deity each *pudam* in a group represents. In some places, huge human structures with ferocious faces replace the *pudam*s in the out skirts of the village and worshipped. These deities are believed to relish the sacrifice of animals and human blood, failing which they go around the world giving trouble. If not pleased, they inflict disease on men and cattle; they attack lonely women, especially if they are with child; night and midday are the worst times and the blackest days are Tuesday and Friday. The places in which demons are worshipped are known as *pey kovil* or temple of demons. Sudalai, Karuppasamy, Isaki, Neeli, Muni, Sangali Bootham, Peichi, Veeran are some of the significant demon deities in this region. The following are the significant characters of folk religious practices existent in the southern region of Tamil Nadu, India:

> Deities are Malevolent in nature and become benevolent when people worship them; Fear dominates rather than faith; The worship of Spirits of persons who murder or kill (out of fear); Non-Brahmins serve as priests; Worship varies from place to place; Several versions of origin myths of deities are available; No common rules are followed for the construction of temples; Deities appear in clusters; Devotees have intimate relationship and traditional 'rights' with the deities; Worship also reflects the social hierarchy of the particular region; Mythological events are enacted in the worship; Blood Sacrifice, Divination, Spirit possession, healing, black magic are generally practiced; Spirits of deities invoked through the medium of music and recitation of origin myths.; and Annual festival is related to vernacular calendar.

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Among all the demonic deities, Sudalai - a male deity is considered as a chief of all evil spirits. In Tamil literature, there are two meanings for the word Sudalai. One refers to the ground for the burning of corpses—a graveyard and the other refer to a deity whose sanctorum is generally situated near a graveyard. This paper is an attempt to document and understand the functions oral narratives in the formation of rituals associated with Sudalai Cult in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. The primary data have been accumulated through fieldwork in the natural cultural context of ritual performance and through the triangulation research methodology, i.e., observation, interaction and visual documentation.

II

Origin myth of Sudalai

The function of origin myth is very significant in folk religious practices. It explains the origin and nature of the respective deities and it is performed or recited through various traditional forms during the annual worshipping celebration in order to invoke the spirit of the Gods and Goddesses. The origin myth of Sudalai is as follows.

One day, the Hindu God Shiva went around the world to offer food to all the creatures. Parvathi, his wife, wanted to test whether Shiva was actually doing it well. So she captured an ant, put it inside a small box and hid the box in the hem of her sari. No sooner had Shiva come and sat on the throne then Parvathi told him that one creature was still hungry. Shiva replied that he was omniscient and asked her to open the box and look inside. When Parvathi did so, she saw the ant eating some grains.
Shiva asked:

Is there anything hidden in the box that Shiva does not know?
Is there anything hidden in the room that is not known to Shiva?

Parvathi fell at his feet and begged forgiveness. Then she prayed for a son. Shiva told her that the God Ganapathi and Murugan were her children. She turned deaf to his words and again prayed for a son. Shiva said that her request would be granted and asked her to stand at the gate of heaven and to spread the end of her sari in the lamp. She did exactly as Shiva had told her. At that time a baby without a head was born to her.
Parvathi cried:

I prayed for a boy. But you have given me a grinding stone

Shiva told her "you wanted to test me. That is why I have caused it to happen like this." Then he called for a potter and asked him to shape the child's head. Parvathi raised the child. When the child was three years old he thought to himself:

Breast-feeding will not quench my thirst,
Mother's milk will not enable me to run around.
I will go to earth and eat the corpses.

So one day he started off at dusk with a lantern and a staff in hand and went to the place called Thillaivanam. There he saw a burning corpse.
He removed its intestines and wore them as a garland around his neck.
He plucked out the liver and started munching it as if it were a mango.
He broke the bones and gnashed them as if they were sugarcane.
After he had eaten everything he returned to heaven. He also did the same thing the next day. He thought that Parvathi hadn't noticed what he had done. So he took the remains of the corpse and placed them under his cradle as a footrest. When Parvathi noticed that he was eating the corpses, she told him that he was unfit for heaven and asked him to leave for the earth. He replied that if he must go to earth, he should be honored with a festival lasting eight days. When the festival was over, he said that he would not go unless some further demands were answered.
His demands were:

The sick should be healed with the sprinkling of my ashes.
Chronic illness should vanish with my miraculous power.
The devils should run away from my staff.

His petition was granted and he left Thillaivanam for the earth where he knocked at the door of Bagavathi's house. A voice from inside asked: "who is that?" And he replied that he was Sudalai, the son of Parvathi. To this he added, "If I am a son to Parvathi, I am a son to you also!" She opened the door and said, "If you serve as a watchman for all these seven treasures, I will offer you a human sacrifice at midnight." But while he was performing this job, Pulayan—a famous magician from Kerala—began to disturb him.

Pulayan had only one daughter. He didn't possess any wealth to arrange her marriage ceremony. The magician utilized his power to reveal hidden things. With that power he saw the treasures in the house of Bagavathi. Having seen them, he ordered a thousand evil spirits to bring him the treasures from the store of Bagavathi, saying that if they failed they would be sentenced to death. The spirits went to the store and stole the treasures when Sudalai was asleep. When he awoke he was shocked to find that the treasures were missing. Since he had been born with miraculous power he was able to see Kerala. He told Bagavathi that he would go to Kerala to retrieve the treasures.

Bagavathi pleaded with him not to go there since it was the place of a great magician. But Sudalai paid no heed to her plea. He set out on his way, carrying with him a thousand snakes, one of each species. Upon reaching Kerala he performed a display with the help of the snakes. A damsel who was a friend of the daughter of Pulayan witnessed the performance and praised Sudalai. Pulayan's daughter was herself induced to go out of her house to see the show. When Sudalai noticed her, he picked up a serpent and let it loose among the crowd. The crowd scattered hither and thither. Then Sudalai bore a thiruvodu [begging tray] in his hand and went to Pulayan's house where he begged for water.

Pulayan's daughter replied:

> *There is plenty of water in the river,*
> *There is plenty of water in the channel,*
> *Go there to quench your thirst.*

Sudalai replied:

> *I have not come as a beggar.*
> *But I have come to marry you.*

Then he entered into a dense forest of seven hills. There he met the members of a hill tribe. Sudalai was all the while thinking about how to win Pulayan's daughter. So he took the form of an ant, and crossed the seven hills. When he reached Pulayan's house he took the form of a rose and played with Pulayan's daughter. She embraced the rose and fell asleep. Sudalai made her pregnant. The next day seven men from the hill tribe came to Kerala in search of Sudalai. They asked him for a lamp to destroy the flies in their farm.

Sudalai asked them:

> *Give me six roosters for sacrifice.*
> *Give me seven goats to sprinkle blood.*
> *Give me eggs together with twenty-one earthen pots and a fiber tray.*

When these things were offered, Sudalai picked them up in his hands, and immediately everything broke into pieces. Sudalai got annoyed and demanded the tribesmen sacrifice Pulayan's pregnant daughter; otherwise he threatened that he would kill them. They went to Pulayan's house and told him about the matter. Pulayan replied that if his daughter were pregnant he would sacrifice her to Sudalai, and went into his home. There he saw that his daughter had already conceived. He was stunned and told her that he would go to the jungle to worship Kali, and he asked her to accompany him. She replied that she was the eldest daughter and born by the gods' grace and she refused to go to the forest. But he did not listen to her words and took her to the forest. There he laid her on a wooden platform and tied her up tightly. She was crying. Sudalai ordered Pulayan to sacrifice her quickly. Thereupon Pulayan became very distressed and requested that Sudalai to kill him but spare his daughter. Finally Sudalai compromised with Pulayan and married his daughter. Pulayan's daughter's name is Isaki.

III

Origin of Sudalai Temples

Every Sudalai temple has its own history of origin. The following two narratives explain the origin of Sudalai temples in Vijayanarayanam and Sivelaperi villages respectively. These oral narratives is embedded in the form of folklore and orally transmitted from generation to generation.

1- In time immemorial two persons named Pachaiappa Thevar and Aandi Chamban from Vijayanarayanam village went to market at Sivelaperi village in order to buy cows. When they started leaving to the market, a person called Pachai Assari gave money to them and requested to buy cows for him also. They packed their food and reached the market. After reaching the market they hanged the food packets on a tree and started bargaining with the cow seller. After negotiations, they fixed up the price for four cows and tied the cows with their ropes and told the seller that they will give money after having their lunch.

While eating, Pachiappa Thevar told Aandi Chamban to ride the cows from that place. After sometime the cow seller asked money to Pachiappa Thevar and he replied that he had already paid money for the cows and also asked, 'without paying how you could allow me to tied the cows with my rope?' Cow seller was shocked and complained to the people who were crowded there. But Pechiappa Thevar did not with draw his position that he has already paid for the cows. Then the cow seller asked him to promise in the Sudalai temple which is situated near to the market. Accordingly Pechiappa Thevar promised in the temple that he had paid for the cows.

Then they started riding the cows from the market. While returning, one cow died suddenly at the time of crossing a river. Then they tied the remaining three cows in a tree and took their food packets to eat. But when they opened the packets they saw that the food is full of blood. They were shocked and threw the packets and went to the tree to ride the cows and saw another cow died. Then they rode the remaining two cows. After some time of riding they reached a village called Cherakulam. There they stopped and tied the cows to a tree and went to a shop to have a cup of tea. After returning from the tea shop they noticed another dead cow. The last cow also died when they reached a place called Kottukati parai. Finally they reached their village with empty hands. Their family members asked them about the cows. They replied that there are no cows available for sale in the market. Then they met the Pachai Assari and returned the money.

Since the day they reached their village, all the young girls and women lost their peace and suffered from several troubles. They went to a fortune teller and asked the reasons for their troubles. The fortune teller told that Sudalai came from Sivelaperi to the village and started its brutal game. In order to satisfy the deity he advised them to construct a temple for Sudalai and worship. Then the two persons realizing their mistake revealed the facts to their relatives. Afterwards they constructed a temple for Sudalai and started worshipping him.

2- Long ago, a man called Sanyasi Konar was pasturing his sheep in the graze lands. The deity Sudalai turned himself into a sage and asked milk from the Sanyasi Konar. He replied that his sheep did not reproduce, so it is no possible to get milk from them. Then the sage asked him to have a trial whether the sheep gives milk or not. Accordingly Sanyasi Konar tried and surprisingly got milk. But the sage was disappeared at that moment and Sanyasi Konar realized that the deity Sudalai visited as a sage and then he conveyed this message to his relatives. After that a temple for Sudalai was constructed in that village and worshipped.

Apart from myths, the following are some other important reasons to construct temple for Sudalai.

- During the annual festival in popular Sudalai temples, devotees who come from different regions expressed their problems to the Shaman or priest and asked for remedies to come out of their problems. The shaman through his prayer gets the answer and told the devotees to build a temple for Sudalai in his village in order to quit their problems. Accordingly they build a temple for Sudalai in their village and started worshipping.
- The spirit of Sudalai goes along with the meat of the sacrificed animal in Sudalai temples and it troubled the devotees on the way back to their home. Therefore, devotees construct a temple for Sudalai and worship.
- The spirit of Sudalai is also goes along with the wood that is brought from the forest and it start disturbing the life of the people. Consequently, people buildup a temple for Sudalai and worship in their village.
- Sudalai appeared in dream of the devotees and asked to construct temple for Him in his village.

Pidimun eduthal

It is very important to note how the spirit of Sudalai is carrying from one temple to other places in order to build a new temple. Devotees who are willing to construct a temple for Sudalai at their village, brings clay pot to an existing Sudalai temple in that region and took some mud at the bottom of the statue or altar. Then they give this pot to the priest or Shaman. The Shaman prays and asked the deity whether he is willing to go to this devotee's village or not. If he gets positive answer, he hands over the pot to the devotee and asks them to

construct a temple and worship. Thereafter the devotees brings the clay pot to their village, select a suitable place, made a small pit and kept a cock alive together with some eggs into that pit, kept the clay pot and construct an altar upon it and worship. This method of bringing the Spirit is known as *pidimun eduthal*.

IV

Kodai: An Annual worshipping festival

The malevolent deities are turned as benevolent if people worship and pleased them. Therefore annual worshipping celebration which is locally known as *kodai* or *pongal* or *thiruvizha* is celebrated once in a year or once in two or three years in order to please the evil spirits. *Kodai* is generally celebrated for three days based on vernacular calendar, with a Friday or Tuesday as the central day. It can occur once a year, once in every two or three years depending upon the financial situation of the devotees. The annual festival consists of a series of vows, rituals, divination, offerings, sacrifice, music and recitation etc.

The expenditure of the annual festival is borne by all the villagers associated with that temple. After having fixed the date the temple administrators collect a tax from the village people. Usually the tax is collected from all the villagers, but if the temple belongs exclusively to a particular community the tax is collected from that community only. The amount of tax to be collected is based on an estimate of the approximate expense necessary for the kodai divided by the total number of family heads. This amount is known locally as *vari*. Every married man is counted as a family head and is called *thalai kattu*, with taxes being collected from each one. In some places the married women of a village are counted as half *thalai kattu*, and fifty percent of the tax is collected from them. If an individual family owns a temple, the family members assume the entire expense. Apart from this taxation, donations are also collected from the traders and landlords in the region. For the purpose of collecting the tax and donations the temple administrators set up an organizing committee, which normally consists of youngsters and temple administrators. After having collected the designated amount they give an advance of one hundred and one rupees to each of the teams responsible for the decorations and the performance of dance and music, and to the ritual performers, in order to reserve their services on the day of kodai. It is a custom in Tamil culture to give an amount of rupees ending with the number one—as in 101 rupees, 501 rupees, or 1001 rupees—as a gift on the occasion of marriages or other auspicious events. The reason why the amount has to end with the number one is not known to the people; they told me that it is simply "our custom."

The Shaman

The men of the Kaniyan community play a significant role in the annual festival of many Sudalai temples. A team of Kaniyan men performs *koothu* in order to invoke the spirit of Sudalai, and a shaman who also belongs to the Kaniyan community performs the core rituals of *kaappu kathuthal* (wearing a sacred thread cord), *Kaniyan kaivettu* (sacrificing blood by tearing his hand), *vetaiku pothal* ("hunting" at the graveyard), and *theralai koduthal* (food offering at the graveyard) during the annual celebration. The following origin myth of Kaniyan community explains the reason for which they perform rituals in Sudalai worship.

The origin myth of Kaniyan

The Kaniyan proudly claim them as *Deiva* Kaniyan, that is, "divine Kaniyan." The following origin myth supports this claim: One day Shiva, Parvathi, and other Hindu gods were dancing in the heavenly place called Kailasam. While dancing, Parvathi fell down and two bells from her anklet came off. The god Tirumal took these bells and from them created two children, which he named Kaniyan and Kambar. After some days Parvathi found it difficult to identify Lord Shiva and God Brahma because both of them had five heads. So she complained to Shiva about her problem. On hearing this, Shiva cut off the middle head of Lord Brahma and made him four headed. But the head which was cut off stayed in the hands of Shiva, causing him to suffer from Brahmahathi tosham. To cure this tosham, Tirumal asked Kaniyan to cut his hand and sacrifice his blood. Kaniyan did so, and this cured the Shiva's condition of Brahmahathi tosham. Then Tirumal took the crown from the severed head of Brahma, and from it he made a *makudam* (drum) and a *mani* (bell). Then he gave the drum to Kaniyan and the bell to Kambar, and asked them to do *pooja* (priestly service) in the temple of Sudalai. They did as they were asked, with Kambar acting as priest while Kaniyan performed the rituals of Sudalai.

The following are the core rituals performed by the men belong to Kaniyan community during the annual festival of Sudalai.

Kaniyan koothu

Kaniyan koothu is performed by a team normally consisting of six Kaniyan men. The team includes a lead singer, an assistant singer, two drummers, and two dancers dressed in female costume. In Kaniyan koothu the performers narrate the myth of Sudalai accompanied by music and dance. The name of the musical instrument, a drum, is *makudam*; therefore the Kaniyan koothu is also known as *makudatam* (*makudam* dance). The lead singer, or *annavi*, is the leader of the entire Kaniyan koothu performance. It is his role to sing and narrate the myth of Sudalai. He stands in front of the deity and cups his left hand behind his left ear, while at the same time extending his right hand towards the deity as he sings the myth. The main function of this performance is to invoke the spirit of Sudalai in order to have it possess a *komarathadigal* or male medium. While the leader sings the myth in a high pitched voice, the *komarathadigal* becomes possessed by the divine spirit and dances vehemently. Another man, the assistant singer, repeats part of each sentence performed by the lead singer. He frequently expresses doubts and asks the *annavi* questions about the myth. He is also responsible for ensuring that the performance continues if anything should happen to interrupt the lead singer.

In Kaniyan koothu, two men perform on the musical drum *makudam*. This drum is a small circular one-headed drum hung from the left shoulder and tapped with the fingers of both hands. The drum is made of *poovarasu* (b.*Thespesia populnea*, or "Portia tree") or neem (b.*Azadirachta indica*) wood. Boards of this wood are bent into circular shape and the skin of a young buffalo is attached to one side of the frame using glue prepared from Tamarind seeds. Based on the sound of the drum, or more specifically its pitch, two types of *makudam* are distinguished: the *vucha makudam* (high pitch drum) and the *mantha makudam* (low pitch drum). Both drums are used in the Kaniyan koothu. The two drummers perform standing adjacent to the lead singer. Finally, to complete a Kaniyan koothu team, two male dancers are costumed as women. Generally these performers grow their hair down to their shoulders and tie and curl it using hairclips. They put flowers around their hair and wear ear studs and bangles. They apply lipstick and perfumed powder on their faces. They dress themselves in blouses and saris. To form breasts they put paper or cloth inside their blouses. They don anklets in the final stage. The anklets are considered sacred because they give rhythm to the dancers' steps, and before donning the anklets the dancers worship the deity. When they have finished putting on their costumes they look so much like females that it is difficult to recognize them as males. These performers dance to the accompaniment of song and music. The narration and singing of this myth in the Kaniyan koothu takes from two to three hours. During this performance the *komarathadigal* (male medium)are possessed by the spirit of Sudalai and dance vehemently. They perform divination and offer sacred ash to the devotees. Generally in Sudalai kodai several people are possessed by the spirit of Sudalai and dance. Traditionally each Sudalai temple has several *komarathadigal* attached to it. It is important to note that in Sudalai worship the koothu performers and the shaman do not have any direct relationship with the devotees who are assembled in the temple for worship. Only the *komarathadigal* have direct contact with the devotees. *Komarathadigal* listen to the problems of the devotees, perform divination, and apply sacred ash to the devotees. The main function of a Kaniyan koothu performance is to invoke the spirit of Sudalai upon the *komarathadigal*, and the function of a shaman is to perform the rituals, which are directly related to divine and evil spirits. Apart from the koothu performers there is a man from the Kaniyan community whose role is to perform rituals such as *kaappu kathuthal* (Wearng of sacred cord for protection), *Kaniyan kaivettu* (sacrificing blood by tearing his hand), *vetaiku pothal* ("hunting" at the graveyard), and *theralai koduthal* (offering food at the graveyard) during a Sudalai kodai. Usually this is an elderly person who has retired from the Kaniyan koothu performance. He works as a shaman and leads the entire ritual component of the *kodai*. The rituals described below are those performed by the shaman.

Kaappu katuthal: wearing a sacred cord

On the central day of the *kodai*, that is, on a Friday or Tuesday, the shaman ties a *kaappu* around the wrists of the *komarathadigal* (spirit-possessed persons). In Tamil, *kaappu* means "to protect" or "to prevent." Here, *kaappu* refers to a yellow cord with several items attached to it. A small iron ring is fastened to its center, while a piece of turmeric is tied to one end of the cord and some betel leaves to the other. The whole is called *kaappu*. The *kaappu* is placed into a tray together with a coconut, incense sticks, saffron, vermillion, betel leaves, and areca nuts, and all of this is given to the shaman. The priest or the temple administrators put twenty-one rupees on the

tray as an offering to the shaman. The shaman receives this tray and ties the *kaappu* around the wrists of the *komarathadigal*. This ritual is known as *kaappukatuthal*, or "tying the sacred chord." *Komarathadigal* believe that the *kaappu* will protect them from evil spirits, because the iron piece they use in making the *kaappu* serves as a protective device. The *kaappu* will be removed by the shaman at the end of the *kodai*.

Kaniyan kaivettu: Blood sacrificing by Kaniyan

The most important ritual in the *kodai* for Sudalai is the sacrificing of blood by the shaman. This ritual is known as *Kaniyan kaivettu*, which means that the shaman cuts his own hand. It too is performed on the central day of *kodai* following the *kaappu katuthal*. The shaman puts bananas, betel leaves, a coconut, incense sticks, and a mask made of clay or fiber representing the evil spirit into a tray and offers it all to the deity. He walks three times around a stone mortar used to make flour, finally stepping up onto and standing upon the stone for a time while wearing the mask on his face. He rubs his left hand, the one he is going to cut, with the coconut and circles it three times with the coconut. Then he ties his left arm tightly with a cord and cuts the upper part of his wrist with a small sharp knife until blood begins to flow. He clenches his hand tightly and pours the blood on some plantain leaves, which are spread out in front of the *komarathadigal*. The shaman often sprinkles water on the wound to keep the blood from clotting. The blood sacrificed by the shaman is mixed with bananas and eaten by the *komarathadigal*. Devotees believe that only those whom the spirit of the deity has entered can eat the blood. After sacrificing his blood, the shaman removes the cord from his arm and covers the wound with it. By doing this, the shaman told me, the wound will quickly heal without the use of other medicine. In a similar kind of ritual known as *Kaniyan naakuvettu*, blood is again sacrificed, but this time by cutting the Kaniyan shaman's tongue. The shaman bites his tongue tightly, then looks into a small mirror held in his left hand while cutting his tongue with a sharp knife until blood begins to flow. Then he pours his blood on plantain leaves and has it eaten by the *komarathadigal*.

Vetaiku pothal: "hunting" in the graveyard

At midnight on the day of the kodai another ritual known as *vetaiku pothal* (going to the graveyard) is performed. Several *komarathadigal* are active at this time. They wear black knee-length pants decorated with red borders and a bell attached at the bottom. They also wear a crown made of black cloth and decorated with red borders. They hold a *pantham* (a torch) in one hand and a big sword in the other. All *komarathadigal* dance ferociously and vigorously. A Kaniyan koothu is performed energetically in order to keep the *komarathadigal* in a state of possession. At midnight, both the shaman and the Kaniyan koothu performers start leaving the temple and head to the graveyard along with the *komarathadigal*. Only the shaman, the Kaniyan koothu performers, and the *komarathadigal* are allowed to go to the graveyard during this time. These are moments filled with fear and terror. While engaged in this hunt, no one should cross the path of the spirit-possessed hunters, for devotees believe that the deity will beat and kill anyone who does. On the way to the graveyard, the hunting party is led by the shaman, who holds a clay pot on his head or shoulder. Along the way the shaman throws eggs in all directions. This is known as *thisai pali* (offering to all directions). The *komarathadigal*, shaman, and devotees in general believe that through an offering of eggs they will protect themselves from the evil spirits. Because eggs are thrown the evil spirits will not cross the path of the hunters and disturb them. After reaching the graveyard, all the *komarathadigal* dance vehemently and start searching for corpses. Sometimes they bite a human bone obtained from the graveyard or nearby and dance. My informants told me that formerly the *komarathadigal* searched for an actual corpse and ate it, but that nowadays this is no longer practiced.

Theralai koduthal: offering food at the graveyard

The clay pot, which is held by the shaman, contains food that had been offered to the deity in the temple. It consists of boiled rice, meat curry, vegetable curry, boiled eggs, curd, and ghee. After reaching the graveyard, the shaman spreads a plantain leaf on the ground and puts bananas, incense sticks, sacred ash, vermillion, sandal paste, betel leaves, areca nuts, and camphor on it as an offering to the deity. He sacrifices a young lamb, a pig, and a cock and pours their blood into the clay pot. He cuts his hand with a sharp knife and offers his blood as a sacrifice, pouring it into the pot and mixing it with the animal blood. He then shapes the food into several balls and places one in each of the four cardinal directions on the plantain leaf. Finally, he takes some of the balls of food into his hand and throws them in all directions. By throwing the balls of food, the shaman and the *komarathadigal* believe that the deity will partake of the food along with the shaman. Therefore, in order to protect the shaman from evil spirits a *komarathadi* holds the shaman tightly in his grasp while the shaman throws the balls of food in all directions. They believe that the thrown food will not come down to the earth. In the

vernacular these balls of food are called *theralai* and the ritual of throwing them is known as *theralai koduthal*, which means "offering balls of food." After the completion of this ritual the shaman takes some eggs in his hand and circles them three times around the head of each of the *komarathadigal* and Kaniyan koothu performers in order to protect them from the evil eye. Finally, he throws the eggs away and begins to leave the graveyard. The main function of this ritual of *theralai koduthal* is to keep the deity in the graveyard and prevent him from entering the village.

The ritual performers believed that on the way to the graveyard they are possessed by the deity's spirit, but they return as ordinary people. After the ritual they come back to the temple. The next day, the Kaniyan remove the *kaappu* from the *komarathadigal's* hands. This marks the end of the *kodai*. All these myths and rituals are traditionally transmitted from generation to generation. Most of the people claimed not to know the reason and meaning of several of the rituals performed in the temple, saying that they were merely following the example of their ancestors. There are mythological antecedents for the rituals performed in Sudalai worship and for the role of the Kaniyan community in these rituals. The mythical account explains that Sudalai is very fond of eating corpses, and because of this is considered to be the chief of all evil spirits. That is why temples worshipping Sudalai are erected near graveyards. In order to be protected from all evil spirits people celebrate kodai and sacrifice animal and human blood. Rituals such as Kaniyan kaivettu, Kaniyan naakuvettu, vetaiku pothal, and theralai koduthal are all related to blood. People in this region, or more specifically devotees of Sudalai, believe that these blood offerings will satisfy Sudalai so that he will not disturb their lives. Sudalai temples are also famous for divination, black magic and healing practices. The sacred ash available at a Sudalai temple is considered to be very powerful for driving away evil spirits and for healing illness. Drawing on myth, people believe that Sudalai derives his power from his parents, Lord Shiva and Parvathi.

Animal sacrifice

Devotees sacrificed Lambs and Pigs to Sudalai in order to please Him and protect them from the evil spirits. The nurtured animals are purified with water, wear garland around its neck and apply sacred ash and vermillion on its fore head and brought to the temple for sacrifice. In most of the temples there are separate altar and also a separate person to animal sacrifice. These altars are called *paran*. It's made of black stone or palm wood. There is a peculiar technique to sacrifice the animals. Those animals are not sacrificed by cutting head. Before sacrificing they sprinkle some water on the animals head and wait for few seconds. If the animal nodded its head they believe that the deity give permission for sacrificing, if it's does not node its head they wait for some more time and sprinkle some more water until its node. Then they laid the animal upward and punch a lengthy sharp knife at the chest of the animal. They punch the knife exactly on the liver portion in order to take the liver separately to be offered to the deity. When the blood streams from the animal the komarathadi put a banana on upon it and eat the banana together with blood. Sometimes they drink the blood directly from the animal. This ritual is known as *vuthiram sapiduthal* (eating blood).

V

Due to modernization and urbanization there are significant changes in Sudalai worship. These changes are occurring both in the structure of temples as well as the rituals. Earlier there were no particular structures for Sudalai temple. It was worshipped in the form of stone and mud. Then it developed in to the form of altars and in course of time, a human face with three horns was drawn at the top of these altars. In the past few decades these altars have been developed in the form of stone statue. The temples which are situated in open air without any roofs and walls have now been changed and modified. Now there are many temples having roofs grills and towers. These developments explain the various stages of changes in terms of structure of the sudalai temple. Due to urbanization, the graveyard deity is now situated in the midst of the urban area. The rituals like animal sacrificing, blood sacrificing by kaniyan, hunting and food offering at Graveyard which are traditionally performed in Sudalai worship have faded away in several temples situated in urban vicinity. There are also some steps towards sanskritization of Sudalai worship. Sudalai - the head of the evil spirit is considered as the *avathar* (incarnation) of lord Shiva and the Sudalai temple which is called as pey kovil (demon temple) is now prefixed with arulmigu (reverend) and suffixed with *aandavar* (lord)and the inaugural ritual *homem* is performed by Brahmin priest in certain temples which reflects the process of standardization.

This paper is concerned with the question of why these rituals have been performed, how myths form the rituals

and in what way myths are ritualized. The folk religious practices of the Sudalai cult consist of several folk narratives, vows, rituals, performances, etc. These folk narratives and rituals are traditionally transmitted from generation to generation, and most of the devotees claim that they do not know the reason and meaning of several rituals performed in the temple, saying that they were merely following the example of their ancestors. It is important to note that the origin myth of the deity is the basis for all the rituals and the emotional state of the people. The origin myth says that the mythical character Sudalai was born to lord Shiva and Parvathi and very much fond of eating corpse and therefore he was asked to leave the heavenly place. In order to leave the heavenly place he obtained several powers and promises from god Shiva. This episode reflects how the mythical character Sudalai derives the supernatural power.

Various mythical events such as eating corpse, spoiling young girls, destruction of the health and wealth of people are episodes that reflect the brutal nature of the character. Finally, in order to please him and stop his destructive activities, the myth says that he should be worshipped and honored with a festival. These mythical characters of the deity are transmitted from generation to generation through traditional performances like Kaniyan koothu and villu paatu, which construct and maintain the emotion of "fear" among the people. The very important character of a myth is that the people believe that the myth once actually happened, and therefore whenever the devotees of Sudalai suffered from bodily or mental illness or problems related to their livestock and other property, they believed that Sudalai was angry at them, and they worship him, celebrate an annual festival and perform several rituals and sacrifices in order to please the God. The main function of the annual celebration is to keep Sudalai in the graveyard and restrict his entry in to the village. Only on the occasion of kodai, the spirit of Sudalai is invoked in temple and satisfied him by offering blood and meat. The ritual of *Theralai koduthal* reflects that at the end of kodai the shaman and the spirit possessed men went to graveyard in the mid night and offer blood and food and leave the spirit there in the graveyard and returned to the temple as ordinary persons. These rituals explain that the deity Sudalai is residing in the graveyard and people do not want him to stay within the village.

The origin myth says that Sudalai derived super natural powers to drive away the evil spirit and cure the illness of the people. And therefore Sudalai temple is famous for divination, black magic and healing practices. The sacred ash available at Sudalai temple is considered to be very powerful for driving away evil spirits and for healing illness.

Similarly, the origin myth of Kaniyan community explains that they were created by God Tirumal from the anklet bells of Parvathi and he was asked to sacrifice Kaniyan's blood in order to cure the illness of God Shiva and then Tirumal asked Kaniyan to do priestly service in the temple of Sudalai. Therefore men folk belonging to the Kaniyan community act as a shaman and perform all the core rituals in Sudalai worship. These narratives and rituals clearly explain that the oral narratives are the central point for all the rituals and in fact oral narratives forms the rituals and are thus ritualized.

List of Informants
Iyammal, Female, Age 100, Agricultural labour, Tiruvenkatanathapuram village, Tirunelveli
S.Madasamy, Male, Age 65, Agricultural labour, Vijayanarayanam village, Tirunelveli district
Iyaathurai, Male, 67, Priest, Vijayanarayanam village, Tirunelveli district
Thangavelu Kaniyan, Male 68 Koothu performer, Aaraikulam village, Tirunelveli district
Murugan Kaniyan, Male 67, Ritual performer, Muneerpallam village, Tirunelveli district