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Territory, caste and chieftain: An Ethnohistorical study of Kongu Nadu

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Abstract

Ethnographical research the hall mark of social anthropology shares an important complementarity with historical research. The coming together of the methods of history and ethnology is defined as ethnohistory. However, research combining the two remained in nascent for long. Bernard Cohn (1987, 1996), deserves much credit for popularizing the significance of history in anthropological research. With reference to south India, the works of Nicholas Dirks (1987) and Pamela Price (1996) have been significant in bringing this to fruition. This paper is a preliminary attempt in that direction, in using ethnohistory for understanding the formation and recognition of territorial boundaries with reference to the Subregion, Kongu Nadu in present Tamil Nadu state, India.

Keywords: Territory, chieftain, anthropology, Kongu Nadu

Introduction

Ethnographical research the hall mark of social anthropology shares an important complementarity with historical research. The coming together of the methods of history and ethnology is defined as ethnohistory. James Axtell defines ethnohistory as, “essentially the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and causes of change in a culture defined by ethnological concepts and categories” (1979:2). However, research combining the two remained in nascent for long. Bernard Cohn, deserves much credit for popularizing the significance of history in anthropological research. With reference to south India, the works of Nicholas Dirks (1987) [6] and Pamela Price (1996) have been significant in bringing this to fruition. Dirks following Cohn (1968) argues that ethnohistory has many meanings. He states,

It can mean the reconstruction of the history of an area and people who have no written history. ... Ethnohistory can also mean the use of anthropological theory and methods in historical practice; we sometimes call this historical anthropology. As such, ethnohistory unites a concern for the social and cultural forms studied by anthropologists with the multiple contexts and temporal dimensions invoked and identified by historians. Like all hybrid labels, whether in history or in anthropology, it is most useful when it points us to the possibility of a collaborative enterprise which is both open-ended and more than simply the sum of its parts (1987: 10-11).

Bringing history and anthropology together creates possibilities for reflexive analysis, juxtaposing past with present in understanding conformity, continuities and change. This paper is a preliminary attempt in that direction, in using ethnohistory for understanding the formation of territorial boundaries in the recognition of a subregion, kongu nadu in present Tamil Nadu state, India.

In the introduction to ‘Historical Anthropology’ (2007), the editor, Saurabh Dube considers the ‘entire body of Cohn’s work’ (Cohn, 1987, 1996) as offering ‘several signposts and emergent formations of historical anthropology’ (ibid, 2007:37). Besides offering recognition to Cohn’s work towards the formations of historical anthropology, Dube provides four important categories under which research in historical anthropology is represented. These categories include genealogies, communities, empire and nation, and culture and power. Under each of these categories a whole array of research questions has been pursued. I cite here just one example under each category that bears a correlation to this present research.

- With respect to ‘genealogies’, Ravindra Jain’s (2002) ^[8] work on the royal genealogy or *vamsavali* of Bundelkhand is of relevance. Here, the author uses the *vamsavali* ‘to distinguish the political function of clanship and ritual function of caste as idioms of hierarchical social distinctions’ (Dube, 2007: 126).
- In the case of ‘communities’, Cohen’s (1989) work shows how the symbolic nature of the idea of community is expressed in formulations of its boundaries. Here, Dube points to the ‘many meanings of community construed by its members including their symbolization and elaboration of boundaries as providing substance to their differences and identities’ (2007: 41).
- The category ‘empire and nation’ looks at transformations in economic systems and social structures both under the empire or through the process of colonization and under the nation as a result of changing patterns of governance and authority.
- Finally, ‘culture and power’ closely linked to empire and nation, examines the ‘relationships between culture, structure, action, and event’ (Dube, 2007: 47).

In this paper the authors attempt to trace the historical formation and transformation of the territory of Kongu nadu. In doing so the question of territorial identity is explored with respect to the Kongu Vellalar caste. This is approached using the categories of genealogy, community, empire and nation, and culture and power provided by Dube. A full exploration under each of these categories is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the author attempts to highlight certain features under each of these categories.

In the following section, the paper traces the historical evidence in the formation and transformation of Kongu nadu. The paper then focuses on the creation of power structures, the *pattakkarar* and the *palaiyakkarakar*, the chieftains of this historical territory. Both these sections are based on archival sources and are used in the creation of the ‘general history’, to borrow the term used by Susan Vishvanathan (1986) ^[10]. In the third section of the paper, the author tries to construct a ‘people’s history’ by weaving the reflections or narratives of members of Kongu vellalar caste, with those of the local chieftains. These reflections revolve around the transformation and continuity with respect to territorial identity as a consequence of changes in central power structures.

Tracing the territory of Kongu Nadu: Archival evidence

Looking back at territorial identity in Tamil Nadu, one often refers to *Sangam* literature, which is one of the ancient non-sanskritized literature and historical record available. Though the period of this literature corresponds to the beginning of the Common Era, the date of this work has been much disputed but one could safely agree with the date assigned by Vaiyapuripillai, to the later half of the fifth century AD (Sivathamby, 1974) ^[11]. This literature has two thematic classifications called *akam* and *puram*. The earlier one deals with love in both premarital and marital life and the later deals with issues of policing and security. In both thematic one can find mention of five micro-eco zones, or *tinai*, which mainly deals with the behavior pattern of people with respect to love and policing pertinent to that region. The five ecological regions are *kurinci* (hilly backwoods), *palai* (parched areas), *mullai* (pastoral tracts), *marutam* (wetland), and *neital* (the littoral).

From this literature, it is evident that different communities occupied these territories and their occupation was determined by the ecology of the region, as the *Vetar* and *Kuravar* (hunters and shifting cultivators) who inhabited the *kurunci*; the *Maravar* (warriors) the *palai*; the *Itayar* (Idaiyar) (pastoralists) the *mullai*; the *Ulavar* (ploughmen) subsisted on the *marutam*; and the *Paratavar* (fishermen) settled along the *neital*. According to Sivathamby (1974) ^[11], the names of the people of a particular region are coined to reflect their ecological region. Such names are referred as ‘Tinainillaipayar’, names arising out of the *thinai*s. Further, Sivathamby argues that ‘one should not make the mistake of viewing these (names) as grammatical prescriptions. Grammatical recognition only implies the high literary incidence of the concept; and the high literary incidence only shows how deep-rooted these traditions were’ (1974: 34).

But with the expansion of monarchical power, the *thinai* regions were pushed back and new territorial organizations appear in the form of *nadus*. However, this new concept of *nadu* coexisted along with the concept *thinai*. This is because the concept of *nadu* has been used in three senses, ‘one... in the generic sense to denote any big inhabited or cultural area; Secondly, ... a specific sense of the territory of a ruling lineage, ... Chola-*nadu*, the *nadu* or territory of the Chola lineage. ...third ...a micro-level territorial unit’ (Subbarayalu, 2012: 4). Further, with the evidence of Tamil inscriptional data from the sixth to thirteenth century, Subbarayalu (1973) ^[12] shows a list of 550 *nadus* covering most part of Tamil Nadu and the adjoining parts in southern Karnataka and Andhra.

This *Nadu* concept as a micro-level territorial unit occurs first time in the fifth century inscription (ibid, 2012). Later on, *nadu* becomes gradually prominent in the Pallava inscriptions, where a village is usually associated with a *nadu*. Kongu Nadu is one such territorial unit in Tamil Nadu, the others include Chera, Chola, Pandiya, Thondai, Malai, and Naduvil *nadu*. Clear mention of Kongu as a territorial name can be traced from the Sangam literature. Starting with this ancient literature, Kongu is mentioned throughout Tamil literature such as Kurunthogai, Purananuru, Silappadikaram. Apart from these literatures, Kongu has been mentioned in the stone inscriptions starting from 5th century CE in the Pulankuruichi Inscriptions (Pudukkottai District) and in the 7th century CE Velvikudi Copper Plates.

Mentions of Kongu Vellala clan name in epigraphical sources are available from 8th and 9th century CE onwards. The 8th century inscription is found in Salem district, Athur Taluk which says “*Kangaraisaru Sevakan Sakadan Nakkam*”, Sakadan (clan name) Nakkam (person name) the warrior servant of the Ganga king. This inscription states the clan name and the personal name of a Kongu vellala. Another hero stone inscription found in North-Arcot district states that “*kongathu elumathur irunth vazhum sakadach chirran*”, a person called Chirran who belongs to Sakadai clan and lives in the Elumatur of Kongu region. These two inscriptions are the only available ancient recording of the Kongu vellala caste, but many inscriptions on Kongu vellala are available from then till the 20th century.

Interestingly a 17th century literature called *Kongu Mandala Sadagam* clearly indicates the boundary for Kongu Nadu. It also gives the names of 24 sub *nadus* of Kongu Nadu and another literature called *Urthogai* of the same period indicates the number of *Ur* or villages inside these sub-*nadus*.

The borders of Kongu of the seventeenth century are

Northern: Nandigiri (Nandi hills in Kolar and Tumkur dists. of Karnataka located seventy kilometers to the north of today's Bengaluru).

Southern: Varahagiri (Panrimalai mountain in the Palani-Kodaikanal ranges, Panrimalai is referred in its Sanskrit name).

Eastern: Kudagu and Vellikundru (Kodagu in the Madikeri dist. of Karnataka and Vellingiri hills near Coimbatore which form the border with Kerala).

Western: Kulithalai (Karur dist. located on the Karur-Tiruchirappalli highway).

Source: Kongu Mandala Sadagam

Referring back to the 17th century evidence of Kongu nadu territorial boundary we find that today this region stretches across the boundaries of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. However, the name Kongu is used only within the territory of Tamil Nadu and even here the territory recognized as Kongu Nadu socio-culturally is administratively split into four districts of the state.

The State and the Central governments of India have contributed significantly in changing the administrative divisions and boundaries of these historic regions. But one should not forget that changes to the boundaries of these regions have been continuous starting with the introduction of the *nadu* concept and its overlap with *thinai*. Just as today, one finds administrative boundaries that include both merging of places from two different eco-cultural regions and splitting places that historically was identified within a single eco-cultural region. The boundaries of Kongu nadu described in the 17th century literature included regions of two *thinai*'s, the *marutham* (wetland) and *mullai* (pastoral tracts). It is important to note here that even in the presence of such divisions, the recognition of Kongunadu as one bounded territory continued to exist.

We need to recollect here that Tamil Nadu has been ruled by various political powers through out the above stated era, which had an impact on the territorial division of Tamil Nadu. However, the change in political powers and structures did not affect the people and they maintain their regional and political identity. This can be best explained from the mention of "Kurunilamannar" (kings of small lands) in *Sangam* literature of Purananuru, where a number of such chieftains are mentioned. They are differentiated in the literature from the three monarchs (chera, chola, pandya) who are referred with the term '*venthars*'. As Sivathamby states, 'a feature of these minor kingdoms is that even when they came under the suzerainty of another ruler or one of the *venthars* their political and regional identity was maintained. This naturally meant the continuity of the social and economic organization of the area. The life of the general mass of the population of the region went on undisturbed. The continuity of the *thinai* concept must have been fostered by such a system of social isolation and political decentralization' (1974: 30).

History of the Kongu Nadu Pattakkarars and Palaiyakkarars

We have seen earlier in the *Sangam* literature that the existence of "Kurunilamannarkal" or kings of small lands coexisted at the same time as the monarchs. This aspect of different political entities existing at the same time is evident throughout the history of Tamil Nadu. Historians trace the presence of such local chieftains in Tamil Nadu as far as

1004 CE, during the reign of Chola king Rajaraja I. Following Rajaraja Chola's death, a new epoch began in Kongu history as the erstwhile rule of one man yielded place to the rule of chieftains. These chieftains became the administrative heads of small units into which the whole of Karnataka and Kongu became divided until the middle of the 12th century (Arokiaswami: 1956).

According to Vellalar Puranam, copper plate evidences and the *vamsavalis* (genealogies) of the local chieftains, the kongu vellala's were migrants from Thondai nadu. This is justified with the story that the daughter of Chola king married the Chera king, and as a gift she asked her father to give 8000 vellala kuti ^[1]. Kongu vellalas claim this as a starting point and *vamsavalis* of the *pattakkarars* and *palaiyakkarars* (chieftains- holder of a title) states this clearly. When the kongu vellala migrated from Thondai nadu to Chola nadu and then to Kongu region, the great poet Kambar divided Kongu nadu into 24 sub-nadus and assigned this land to each clan of the Kongu vellala caste along with a *kula deivam* (clan deity), *kula guru* (clan ritual head), and *kaani* land (clan land). Further, he ascribed recitals as the *Yerelupathu* (cultivation methods), *Thirukai vazhakam* (discipline), *kambar vazhi* (praise), and *mangala vazhthu* (marital life), for kongu vellalas.

These recitals stated the norms to be followed by the people, thereby conditioning the culture and social organization. Though the three former recitals are not commonly heard today, the *mangala vazhthu*, prominently features in every Kongu vellala marriage till date. The Kongu vellala clans still identify themselves with their *kula deivam* temple, the *kula guru* and *kaani* land, all linked spatially to the temple and identify each other with this reference. Yearly festival is still practiced and celebrated in this location and the clan attached to this *kaani* takes responsibility for the organization of these rituals. All these points show the symbolic representation of Kongu vellala identity and their attachment to the territory.

We have seen earlier Kongu Nadu has been divided into 24 sub-nadus. Each of this nadus has a *pattakkarar*, who is responsible for the socio-political affairs of their respective *nadus*. This position of authority is inherited on the patrilineal line by the primogeniture. Today, there are four titled families of *pattakkarars* who are widely recognized by the people and they belong to kongu vellala caste. They are 1. Kangeyam Pallavarayar 2. Korrnur Venadudaiyar 3. Pazhayakottai Sarkarai Manradiyar 4. Kadaiyur Kangeya Manradiyar. In her 1972 work, Brenda Beck briefly discusses the origin, presence and authority of these chieftains. She basis her discussion on information collected of these families through oral history from the people. The family history or genealogies of these four *pattakkarars* have also been recorded earlier by Mackenzie, the then Surveyor General of India, in 1805. These records are available in the Government Oriental Manuscript Library at Madras University.

The *pattakkarar* system went through changes when the central power changed. These political heads were changed into *palaiyakkarars* in the Nayaka period in the 16th century. When the British took over in the beginning of 18th century, they abolished the *palaiyam* system and changed it to Zamindari. After independence this zamindari system was also abolished. *Palaiyakkarars*, or Poligars, have played a very important role in South Indian history and polity.

¹ Domestic segments

Though their role and status in Tamil society has undergone much changes since 17th century, the *palaiyakkarar* have not only retained their title but continue to command respect in their respective localities and, when represented in the media (newspaper, television and online), their former importance is recognized.

Before I examine the present status and current representations *palaiyakkarars* have of themselves as a specific social class in contemporary Tamil Nadu, I will give you a brief sketch of their place in the history of this region.

Etymologically, the term *Palaiyakkarars* [*Palaiyakkarar* (Tamil) or *Palegaadu* (Telugu) or *Paaleyagaara* (Kannada)] refers to the term *palaiyam* that is a *village or group of villages of a feudal chieftain held originally on condition of rendering military service whenever required by his suzerain* (Tamil Lexicon,). Each *Palaiyam* consisted of villages, personal land of the *Palaiyakkarar*, public and temple lands, and so *Palaiyakkarar* means quite simply the holder of a *Palaiyam*.

As Rajaayan states, ‘the seventeenth to eighteenth century was the age of the *palaiyakkarars* in south India. There was three tier system in this period; the rulers who considered defense and revenue as their responsibility, example, the Carnatic Nawab, Hyderabad Nizam and Thanjavur Rajas, the *Palaiyakkarars* are responsible for law and order, and the third tier included the village community which took care of social welfare and local administration’ (1974: v). Further Rajaayan adds that there was a ‘fourfold process which helped the *Palaiyakkarar*’s rise. 1) descent from royal houses; 2) assertion of authority in command of armed followers – in these cases the chieftains obtained the recognition of the sovereign; 3) acknowledgement granted for a distinguished public service and 4) the need to protect the public interests. It is important to see how the system functioned and satisfied both the sovereign and the public, which in turn helped them to flourish’ (1974: 7).

Though the *palaiyakkarars* have lost their earlier political power, they are still recognized as power-holders and this is given expression symbolically through certain ritual powers thereby giving recognition and keeping alive the old political power. As a result, the families of kongu *palaiyakkarars* still continue to hold the erstwhile status and respect in their territory. Three instances showing their popularity among the people in their territory is discussed in the next section.

People’s history: weaving the local, genealogical and biographical into the general² (Archival evidence)

Genealogical

The *pattakkarar* and *palaiyakkarars* were given due respect, by the people of their territory by members of their own caste and other castes. Each *palaiyam* has a certain number of villages assigned to it. This number varies from three villages to thirteen villages. For instance, the Samathur *palaiyam* consists of three villages whereas the Uthukuli *palaiyam* has thirteen villages in its jurisdiction. The title of *pattakkarar* and *palaiyakkarars* is inherited patrilineally with preference to the primogenitor. The women of the house have no claim to this inheritance but wield power in the day-to-day decisions of the house besides being consulted for other affairs which include the political. This absence of women in inheritance is visible from the genealogy of all *palaiyakkarar* families in Kongu nadu where women are missing in the recordings of the *vamsavalli*. A similar

situation is reported by Jain (2002) with respect to native kings of Bundelkhand. This *vamsavalli* provides authenticity to the patrilineage of the *pattakkarar* and *palaiyakkarars* creating a social hierarchy within the same caste and clan. This social hierarchy is played out in the terms of reference, *Yjman* (lord) or *samy* (god), used to address the *palaiyakkarar*. This kind of addressing denotes the power and authority of the *palaiyakkarar* in his territory or nadu that continues till date.

Biographical

It is necessary here to understand how the *palaiyakkarars* themselves view their positions of authority with respect to changing political structures. We see through these reflections how economic obligations that come with the authority position receive a set back when patronage from central political powers changes. A reflection on such a situation is provided by *palaiyakkarar* A.

Reflection 1-Palaiyakkarar A

During the early 1900’s my grandfather went through an acute economic stress. This is because the British increased the amount of tax to be paid by the *palaiyakkarar* significantly. My grandfather was forced to take a loan of three and half lakh rupees, both to pay tax for the British and for household expenses. My grand father was unable to pay back the loan and was in debt. People who loaned him of course did not demand repayment given my grandfather’s status, a *Zamindar*. But for the same reason the loan had to be repaid. He was very depressed and felt he was unlucky, he feared that all would end with his generation, the so-called power and money, everything would go away. In the last 5, 6 years of his life this situation continued and the structures started to break.

At this time my grandmother went through an economisation and cut down all the expenses, which included the everyday functioning of the family. I have the accounts still; how they used to sell cattle every day, and settled the loan to all of those who gave the loan, and started farming. Previously my grandfather would go to the farm once a year and on that occasion, they will decorate the whole place like a mela. That was his role in farming, somebody else will cultivate his land and pay him his share. But now the family was forced to contribute their labour directly for farming.

As my father used to say, this economization helped them recover from the debt but the bad thing is they cut down too many things, which include everyday practices of the *palaiyam*, one such practice is to provide food for the people, whoever visits the palace. Now we are reviving this tradition, this was in practice before my grandfather ran into debt. In the last eight years we are providing food everyday for all who visit the palace. There is an exclusive kitchen, cook and manager to take care of this. Apart from this we are giving milk for the poor children and providing financial assistance for their education.

Reflection 2- Palaiyakkarar B

Going into debt seemed to have occurred with a few *palaiyakkarars*. In my great grandfather’s time, my family was in a financial crisis. But another *palaiyakkarar* came to our rescue, he paid all our dues and took our family under his protection. With that *palaiyam*’s support we recovered from the crisis. When we recovered and stabilized from our problems, we started doing the same to other *palaiyakkarar* families in trouble. Support extended was not only monetary

² These terms have been adopted from Susan Visvanathan (1986)

but included providing some artifacts which will enable them to retain their status. For instance, we lent our carpet to one palaiyakkarar for their family wedding. I can keep telling instances like this.

With changing political structure and its related patronage, the palaiyakkarar seem to often confront financial strains in maintaining practices of their authority. However, find ways to keep it alive for the recognition of the memory of this authority if not the authority itself. The second reflection in fact, shows how the palaiyakkarar were united as one community through solidarity among themselves in retaining their status.

Local or neighborhood narratives

As stated, earlier boundaries of the Kongu nadu falls under two different eco-cultural region, the *mullai* and *marutham*. This implies that occupational possibilities were different among members of the same caste residing in these two regions. Interestingly, local narratives talk of two divisions called *vada kongu* or north kongu and *ten kongu* or south kongu. This difference was spelt out in a form of hierarchy between north and southern regions linked to wetlands and drylands that these regions comprised of. This sense of hierarchy was further carried into the realm of marital alliance, where daughters from south Kongu were not sent to the north. Soon a sense of purity was woven into this distinction with the Kongu vellala of the south claiming to be purer members of the caste. This is noted till date with the much-recognized kongu dialect that is spoken only in southern Kongu.

Kongu vellalas of the north counter such claims. They reason that lack of preference for marital alliance between south and north kongu does not hold good today and previously it was because of fear of crossing river Cauvery to reach north kongu from the south. In earlier days the river Cauvery was often in floods causing big damages to property and life, so people feared to have alliance between these regions. There is another reason also stated for this, again because of river Cauvery the movement of people in south kongu is limited and as a result the culture was more pristine compared to the north kongu which easily facilitated movement of others from different region. This provided reason for the kongu vellala of the south that the northerners are not pure enough to give their daughter's in marriage to them.

Conclusion

Both archival and ethnographical details of the territory (Kongu nadu), the caste identity (Kongu vellalar) and authority position (*palaiyakkarar*), has been discussed above in attempting to understand continuity and change with reference to time and practice. The territory of Kongu nadu recorded as a distinct administrative territory in the above discussed archival records seized to be an administrative territory with changing political structures. Similarly, the changing political structures also erased positions of authority as the *palaiyakkarar*. However, the status and legacy of the palaiyakkarar continues. This is both through the memory of people and keeping alive the memory by the present generations of palaiyakkarars who by continuing to practice certain norms and reviving others have promoted the memory of their authority giving continuity to their special status and legacy, providing scope for reinvention of authority. The continuity of memory of the territory of Kongu nadu is linked to the caste identity of the Kongu

vellalars who invoke the territorial history in providing legitimacy to their distinct caste identity.

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