INTRODUCTION

Tamil Preferential Marriages

Tamil people are always happy to know that
the groom and bride are related.
—Srinidi, September 2008
Nowadays people marry money to money, BA to BA.
—Kartik, January 2009

For the better part of my fieldwork I lived in a suburb of Madurai, a temple town in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in a cement house with a gated yard and a veranda on the second floor. The veranda looked over a flat terrain of brush and trash where a neighbor had patched together a cow pen with tin, plastic, and canvas. The back door of the house opened onto a railway track and a rocky mountain, abruptly, like a movie set: end of town. The sound of water running over last night's pans entered my sleep every morning. Lying on the mattress on the floor of my blue-painted room, I waited for the milk boy to open the gate and put his *sompu* on the front stairs. Then I was up, standing at the window to peer out at the neighbor's cow stationed under its lurching shelter. How many times did I see this cow lift a banana peel out of the gutter and devour it, with its eyes half closed? By the time the flower man called out "*pūhe! pūhe!*" as he toured the neighborhood with his new supply of fresh jasmine, I was ready for my breakfast of sweet coffee and "milky" biscuits.

The first mornings in that house I could not tell that I was on the outskirts of a busy temple town. The sounds I heard took me back to the village in the northern part of Tamil Nadu where I had lived in 1990–1991: peddlers making their daily rounds, frenzied dogs howling and barking, brass and stainless steel pots being scrubbed on the concrete floor of a neighbor's courtyard. Nor was there much sign that I lived very close to villages, so close indeed that I could walk to the nearest one. From a topographic perspective, you could say that I lived in a strip of land that fell between the rural and the urban.

It was not easy to tell where the city ended and the village started. It was obvious that the folks over there toiled in the fields, following the rhythms of an age-old agrarian way of life, while the folks over here worked in government offices and businesses of all sorts. But on both sides you could see the same processes of change at work, including the destruction of the environment under the press of urbanization, the generalization of schooling, less segregation of the sexes, the commodification of social relations, the formation of classes and the growing gap between them, and the disjuncture between the abilities and expectations of the uneducated and those who had gone to school. Whether rural or urban, society was undergoing profound processes of restructuring and detraditionalization.

My location was ideal for my original ethnographic purpose, which was to study the transformation of marriage practices in Tamil society. Change I did find, as people on both sides of the rural urban continuum were less prone to contract the old preferential marriages of South Indian kinship organization. People still married relatives but less and less the "right" kind, and they increasingly wedded outside the kin group altogether. Although rural society is slower to embrace this change, marriage to cousins, maternal uncles, and nieces was disappearing as a characteristic of Tamil kinship in both town and village and with it a whole language of rules, obligations, and entitlements as well.

Although I went to the field to study matrimonial change, the old preferential marriages are the main focus of this book. In part this is because I spent much of my ethnographic time figuring out how they were contracted and why and what it was like to marry a cousin, an uncle, a niece. Moreover, the culture of "rights" in which they were firmly embedded intrigued me, raising questions such as: What is it like to live in a society in which you have rights, even first rights, to marry someone? What does that kind of entitlement do to people's overall sense of agency? of identity? of authority? of pleasure? What does *equality* mean, what can it mean, in such a context? What are the moral and emotional consequences when matrimonial rights are denied because the rules are not kept or because the rules of life are changing?

This book attempts to answer these questions by offering a cultural and experiential framework for understanding the old pattern of preferential marriages to cousins, uncles, and nieces: "cultural" because it focuses on the meanings I collected in the field; "experiential" because it deploys a case-study approach emphasizing the individual feelings and personal experiences

of my Tamil consultants. Because these marriages have been either misunderstood (or not described at all), this book at its broadest level is an attempt to reinterpret them before they disappear from Tamil Nadu.

The Anthropology of Dravidian Kinship

The marriages described in these pages are peculiar to South India and Sri Lanka. North Indians also marry within a carefully delineated status group, the caste, but except for Muslims they prohibit marriage to anyone known to be a blood relative. As for South Asian Muslims living outside South India or Sri Lanka, their endogamous practices typically lack the characteristic features of South Indian, or what scholars call "Dravidian," kinship.[1]

"Dravidian kinship" was once on par with the potlatch and totemism as one of the great phenomena of anthropological interest. Because the study of kinship is no longer at the core of anthropology,[2] the extensive body of scholarship addressing kinship and its variants, which goes back to Lewis Henry Morgan, W. H. R. Rivers, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Louis Dumont, has become a closed corpus—rather stultifying and of interest only to the very few in modern anthropology who have an inclination for formal and algebraic models of social life (in particular, Thomas Trautmann, Anthony Good, and Margaret Trawick). While this book argues that our discipline's early obsession with Dravidian kinship was misguided from the start, it invites readers to rethink the anthropological demotion of kinship studies (also see McKinnon and Cannel 2012; Sahlins 2013). It also attempts to make South Indian kinship visible again and retheorize its place in modernity.

It was Francis Whyte Ellis (1777–1819), a British civil servant in the Madras presidency and a scholar of Tamil and Sanskrit, who first recognized the unity and non-Sanskritic origin of the South Indian languages (Trautmann 2006). His "Dravidian Proof" later incited Bishop Robert Caldwell (1814–1881), an evangelist missionary based in Tinnevelly district of Tamil Nadu, to adopt the term *Dravidian* to separate languages prevalent in South India (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Tulu, and so on) from the Indo-Aryan languages (Hindi, in particular) spoken in North India (1856). Caldwell's comparative study of languages in turn led his contemporary, the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), to compare the Ojibwa and Iroquois kinship terms he had recorded in North America with the kinship terms missionaries sent him from South India. Morgan discerned that, like

these Native American terminologies, Dravidian languages grouped into classes relatives (for example, father and father's brother[s]) who were genealogically distinct from one another.[3]

Morgan's contemporaries and successors eventually discarded the grand evolutionary story he derived from his data (Parkin and Stone 2004: 9), but in spite of criticisms (McLennan 1865; Kroeber 1909; Malinowski 1930) the notion that kinship terminologies encode critical information regarding past and present marriage arrangements and natural facts of procreation profoundly shaped the anthropology of kinship, in general, and of South Indian kinship, in particular. Again and again scholars emphatically made the case that South Indian kinship "classificatory" terminologies reflected marriage preferences, particularly the custom that the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) first labeled "cross-cousin marriage" (1889: 263). As W. H. R. Rivers (1864–1922) explained, there was an obvious correlation between the Tamil practice of calling the mother's brother "father-in-law" and the father's sister "mother-in-law" and the viewing of children of kin traced to parents through opposite-sex or "cross" sibling links as potential spouses (1914: 47–48; see also 1907: 619–621; Emeneau 1941, 1953). That South India provided "a good example of a case in which we can confidently infer the . . . existence of the cross cousin marriage from the terminology of relationship" (Rivers 1914: 49) was not exactly what the French anthropologist Louis Dumont (1911–1998)—the next major surveyor of Dravidian kinship—set out to demonstrate. But as the title of his 1953 essay, "The Dravidian Kinship Terminology as an Expression of Marriage," suggests, Dumont too held fast to the Morganesque view that terminological systems contain principles that organize social relationships in human societies.[4] The difference is that for Dumont these relationships were theoretical constructs used to model social life rather than real or even directly observable.

South Indian languages, Dumont demonstrated, distinguish kin on the basis of four basic characteristics: generation, sex, age, and what he called "distinction of two kinds of relatives inside certain generations" (1953: 34; also see 1983: 229–237). English speakers are familiar with the first two, for we too differentiate grandparents from parents, children, and grandchildren, as well as mothers, aunts, sisters, and daughters from fathers, uncles, brothers, and sons. Unlike Tamils, however, we do not have separate words for elder and younger siblings, or for elder and younger aunts, uncles, and so on.

Nor do we make the fourth distinction which for Dumont was "the most important" as it embodied "a sociological theory of marriage" (1953: 12).

For Rivers the key distinction made by Dravidian terminology was between the marriageable cross cousins (children of kin traced to parents through opposite-sex or "cross" sibling links) and the cousins to whom marriage (and sexual relationship) is forbidden (children of kin traced to parents through same-sex or "parallel" sibling links). But for Dumont it lay somewhere else. "In the father's generation," he wrote, "there are two kinds, and two kinds only of male relatives . . . the father and the mother's brother respectively" (1953: 35), who are linked by a "principle of opposition" that neither "lie[s] in the relation with the Ego" (the child) nor in the relation with (the child's) mother (1953: 35). Here we may note Dumont's elimination of relationships (and emotions) between consanguineous relatives, in preference to the structural differentiation of two classes of kin, affines and consanguines. Even the relation between mother and child is conspicuously absent from his model because he postulated that the mother's brother is related to the child *not* through the mother (a genealogical relation) but through the father (a classificatory relation). As he saw it, in Dravidian kinship, "my mother's brother is essentially my father's affine" (1953: 37).

It is customary to link Dumont's analysis of Dravidian kinship to the alliance theory developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, another French anthropologist, in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969 [1949]). There are grounds for this, as Dumont himself stressed, "the remarkable convergence between Lévi-Strauss' theory of marriage alliance and the emphasis put by [his own] Tamil informants on analogous themes" (1986: 4). The "convergence" in question, however, is uneven. As the noted sociologist Patricia Uberoi suggests, Dumont did not merely apply the structural approach to the South Indian data; he modified the structural vision of kinship in the process (2006: 161).

Dumont's method of analysis was structural in that it consisted in identifying sets of relations between abstract terms, kinship terms, so as to establish how their interaction—or rather opposition—determined the appearance and functioning of a phenomenon such as cross-cousin marriage. His conception of kinship was also structural in that, for him as for Lévi-Strauss, the true place where kinship originates is not in the nuclear family, nor in relations among individuals, but rather in the systematic relations of exchange that link social groups that stand in affinal relationships to one another (Gillison 1987:

167). Finally, both Lévi-Strauss and Dumont took their notion of exchange from Marcel Mauss (1990), but they focused on different elements of matrimonial reciprocity.

Kinship for Lévi-Strauss did not mean the functioning of descent groups or the organization of corporate lineages, as was the case for contemporary British social anthropologists such as Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard. Kinship meant marriage, particularly the marriage rules that determine who is marriageable or not. These rules, Lévi-Strauss argued, vary in form and content, but in every human society certain categories of relations are regarded as too close for marriage, hence the universal "negative" or proscribing rules of marriage known to us as incest taboos. In so-called elementary societies "positive" rules "*prescribe* marriage with a certain type of relative" (1969: ix).

In claiming that men have a particular interest in rules of exogamy, particularly in the prescriptions that require them to marry a cross cousin, Lévi-Strauss stressed the calculative reason inherent in marriage exchanges. By "giving up" their sisters and daughters as potential marriage partners, men obtain other women in return. Meanwhile, the long-term consequences of particular kinds of marriage matter even more than the initial exchange, and there are three ways that stressing cross-cousin marriage shapes future exchange possibilities, as he cleverly demonstrated. Cross-cousin marriage permits three prescriptive or preferential modalities: (1) marriage (from a man's point of view) to the patrilateral female cousin, the father's sister's daughter; (2) marriage (again from a man's point of view) to the matrilateral female cousin, the mother's brother's daughter; and (3) bilateral marriage to either the patrilateral or matrilateral cousin. For Lévi-Strauss, the first two variants of cross-cousin marriage allowed "generalized" exchange between multiple groups and had the potential to integrate indefinite numbers of groups. As for bilateral cross-cousin marriage, its distinctive mode of exchange, and sociological reality, was "restricted" and much less integrative. In particular, he concluded, only matrilateral cross-cousin marriage was compatible with "long cycles" of exchange and durable sociological integration.[5]

In keeping with Morgan and Rivers's earlier analysis of Dravidian kinship, Dumont gave priority not to the logic of marriage rules but to kinship terminology. Moreover, he stressed the "vertical dimension" (1953: 38) of the relationship between "consanguines" and "affines" rather than its socially integrative power (or its lack thereof) as Lévi-Strauss did. To him, affinal roles

and concomitant ceremonial obligations were inherited from parent (father in particular) to child (son) without being transformed into blood relations. And it was the function of the cross-cousin marriage and concomitant gift-giving relationships—Dumont took this much from Marcel Mauss—to perpetuate the alliance relationship that he found in the nomenclature and reaffirm it generation after generation. But, as against Mauss's rich view of animated exchanges, Dumont's vision of social life was devoid of any spiritual or political element. In his model, giving and thus relatedness was a matter of automatic differentiation between *specific* social categories. It did not pose any kind of existential problems, but did at least impose the stringent requirement to reciprocate, as it did in Mauss's famous essay on gift giving.

The Ethnography of Dravidian Kinship

Although I will soon show that there is more to Dumont's analysis than what I just made it out to be, in a nutshell, his alliance theory, more precisely his account of the inheritance of affinal alliance, came to define Dravidian kinship up until the early 1990s. This view prevailed despite the fact that newer ethnography challenged his theoretical model on many fronts.

Dumont himself worked from the basic premise that a phenomenon like marriage is best explicated by a structural model that (amazingly, we might add) remains independent from the real, and thus from actual, marriage patterns. In this respect, his perspective differed from that of Morgan, for whom kinship terminology reflected "real" social arrangements, particularly marriage rules. Hence Dumont's method could claim to be immune to empirical testing and refutation. As Alan Barnard and Anthony Good point out, for Dumont "there is in fact *no* necessary correspondence between the structure of a society's relationship terminology, and the structure of the alliance relationships among its social groupings" (1984: 12, emphasis theirs). The particular structure that was the focus of Dumont's interest, Dravidian terminology, was to be understood as implicating the entire culture, the manifestation of a collective consciousness informing the institutions (in particular marriage and ceremonial gift giving) of the society at large. But it did not determine concrete expressions of a social order or empirically given kinship conventions. As the French anthropologist stated: "Kinship terminologies have not as their function to register groups" (1964: 78).

A brilliant ethnographer, Dumont (1986) was well aware that around the time of his fieldwork in 1949–1950 various matrimonial rules prevailed in the Ramnad, Madurai, and Tinnevelly districts of Tamil Nadu. Among the Pramalai Kaḷḷars (one of the most numerous endogamous subcastes of the Kaḷḷars) living on the outskirts to the west of the town of Madurai, for example, "the sister's son should marry the brother's daughter" (1986: 206). It was the reverse among the Maṟavars irregularly spread out between the vicinity of Ramnad and the western boundary of the Tinnevelly district: They had a preference for the patrilateral cousin (1983: 58). As for the Naṅgudi Veḷḷāḷar located in the Tinnevelly district, they too favored the father's sister's daughter (1983: 55).[6] Dumont introduced such demographic and socioeconomic variables as migration, land tenure, ceremonies and prestations, rules of succession, and residence of a group to account for these different unilateral norms. But the "attitudes and institutions" that correlated with either the patrilateral or matrilateral application of cross-cousin marriage did not challenge his formal model of the logical or terminological structure of Dravidian kinship. The anthropologist Nur Yalman (1967), who more or less directly applied Dumont's analysis to Sinhalese kinship, went further when he stated:

> Marriage rules as we find them in South India and Ceylon are not related to any economic or group features of special communities . . . the principles are a language of organization and exist in themselves . . . it is the categories themselves, inherent in language, that determine marriage rules, and not exogamous lineages or the organization of kin that determines the terminology of kinship. (1967: 9)

Neither Dumont nor Yalman discarded ethnography as a basis of anthropological knowledge, but they kept the social facts they observed in the field—for example, the preference to marry on one side rather than another—separate from or, as in the case of Yalman, subordinate to the relationships (in particular, the opposition of father to mother's brother) they inferred from their structural analysis of Dravidian kinship terminology.

The British anthropologist Anthony Good (1981) was perhaps the first to empirically test how the linguistic categories of Tamil kinship terminology and local marriage rules or preferences interacted at the level of practice.[7] His data showed that, among the Koṇṭaiyaṅkōṭṭai Maṟavars of Tamil Nadu, "there is . . . no evidence of any behavioral bias toward the genealogical relative specified by the . . . rules" (1981: 119). That is, although this particular caste

group favored marriage to the father's sister's daughter, its members married their mother's brother's daughter just as frequently.[8] Good interpreted his data to mean "that the symmetric prescription [encoded in their bilateral terminology] plays a greater part in regulating behavior than the asymmetric preference" (1981: 125). Yet he went on to show that other local subcastes (*ācāri* or carpenters) either observed the asymmetric rule to maximum extent permitted by the exigencies of demography or flouted it completely. Hence Good concluded that there was no "congruence" or "consistency" (1981: 109) among the model, the norms, and practice. As he put it: "One can never predict the situation at one level from the observations at either or both other levels" (1981: 127).

Before the reader infers that in Dravidian kinship anything goes, let me point out that, for Good, action is conceived as either execution or lack of execution of the models elaborated by his predecessors. These models, we recall, were developed without any input on the part of the Tamils—without their own explanations for asymmetric marriage, for example, or their understandings of kinship relations. It is therefore not surprising that ethnographic observation led Good to find no convergence between what his informants did and anthropological representations of Dravidian kinship. Why should Tamil castes conform to models that were constructed from a distant, detached position of theoretical reflection, like Rivers's or Dumont's?

And yet Good's empirical and ethnographic methodology was to deliver a major blow to Dumont's alliance theory. In 1980 he stated loud and clear what others had already said for some time: namely, that among many South Indian castes a man's most "preferential" marriage partner was actually not his "cross cousin" but his elder sister's daughter.[9] That uncle–niece marriage was not merely an upper-caste phenomenon, as Dumont believed, was later borne out by Katherine Hann's (1985) tabulation of the incidence of close-relation marriage, as reported for various South Indian communities in the four southern states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu). Her results showed that "about 10 per cent of the marriages are between an uncle and his niece" (1985: 62). A decade later Good himself updated Hann's chart and again affirmed that "in several cases [marriage of mother's younger brother and elder sister's daughter] is the commonest form of close inter-marriage, while in most others it is comparable in frequency to marriage with either cross cousin" (1996: 6). He rightly emphasized that the statistics on uncle–niece marriage were "striking, because if relative age rules are taken into

account it is to be expected that fewer people will have marriageable relatives of this type than have first cross-cousins" (1996: 6).

The high incidence of uncle–niece marriage led Good to state boldly, "There is *no* such thing as the Dravidian kinship system" (1996: 1, his emphasis). But the British anthropologist somehow shied away from making the obvious point that if there is no Dravidian kinship, the structuralist theory of Dravidian kinship cannot hold. Indeed, uncle–niece marriage challenges two of Dumont's key points. For one thing, when a Tamil man marries his own sister's daughter, genealogical relations (niece, sister) merge with affinal relations (wife, mother-in-law) so that there cannot be any sharp or stable "opposition between kin and affine," the opposition that Dumont argued was characteristic of Dravidian kinship in general (1983: 103). Moreover, the relations of exchange here clearly originate from within a very tight group of consanguines; so tight, in fact, that the category "exchange" cannot function in the broad sense of "alliance" as defined by this or any other French structuralist. It becomes clear thus that uncle–niece marriage forces us to rethink the nature of the social relationships involved in Tamil marriage patterns and to revise their anthropological description and theory—just as this particular marriage is on the verge of disappearing forever.

The Field of My Fieldwork

Although I ended up living about one kilometer away from Pramalai Kaḷḷar country, where Dumont conducted his first ethnographic research in India (1949–1950), I cannot say that I went to the field with the intention of revisiting his theory. Madurai was not even my first ethnographic destination. Because the Fulbright Program had arranged an affiliation with the French Institute in Pondicherry, at first I settled in a village located in the Union Territory of Pondicherry, an area known for its sugar factories, cotton yarns, textile mills, and tourist industry. The village was not a bad place to examine kinship change through the productive lens of age and generation, which was my original focus of ethnographic inquiry. It is true that, when I arrived there in 2008, about 32 percent of the households I surveyed included marriages to close kin,[10] a statistic that shows that even in the more industrialized section of Tamil society Dravidian kinship obligations continue to exert latent influence over marriage, but, as the stories recounted in Chapters 7 and 8 suggest, twenty-first-century youth in South India are forging more independent lives.

It was a combination of advice and luck that sent me five weeks later to Madurai, the so-called heartland of Tamil culture. The scholar Ulrike Niklas recommended that I work with Tēvar castes[11] that are known to be exemplary practitioners of close-kin marriage, and to this end she kindly made available the house she then was renting in Nāgamalai, "the snake hill," a rocky fold reaching a height of 300 meters, a line of boulders, which borders Kaḷḷar country. With this move, the focus of my fieldwork shifted to the idioms of "rules" (*murai*) and "rights" (*urimai*) which, I argue in this book, formulate a sociopolitical theory that, although peculiar to the Kaḷḷars, raises issues pertaining to the sharing, or not sharing, of identity, equality, and closeness that underlie non-Kaḷḷars' (and non-Tēvars') matrimonial practices as well.

The Kaḷḷars, Dumont was right to say on the dedication page of his ethnography, are "sociological geniuses" (1986). They also seem to delight in tutoring anthropologists. Specifically, as Indira Arumugam has also observed, "They take pleasure in talking and thinking about kinship" (2011: 175). But it was often difficult for me to follow their kinship analyses. This was all the more so because, as I document in these pages, anthropological models of cross-cousin marriage do not begin to approximate the many complicated ways in which Kaḷḷars (and the Tēvars in general) intermarry. I needed to visualize the descriptions of their rampant kinship connections and to this end drew anthropological diagrams, which most people could not grasp because, although familiar with the concept of "tree charts," they were not used to *seeing* kinship phenomena (Bouquet 1996). When people offered to draw complicated genealogies, their "charts" sprouted without clear descent or marriage connections, and although I was actively interested in recording such "native" representations I constantly had to revise my decoding system as each individual adopted his or her own idiosyncratic system of genealogical representation.

Before I knew it, I was meeting with some of the most helpful informants—mostly Kaḷḷars men of different backgrounds and ages—on a regular basis in my rented house so as to retrace the kinship scenarios I did not understand. Because the subject of marriage is abstract, impersonal, and objective only for anthropologists, and personal (even intensely personal) for everyone else, it was not unusual for conversations to be interrupted by cases in point. I report these examples not because I strive for an ethnography awash in talk but because I want the reader to hear my south Indian Tamil acquaintances speak for themselves. I am neither a biographer nor a psychologist but an

anthropologist, interested in cultural meanings, group dynamics, emergent phenomena, and social patterns. But it is only when we get to meet our "informants" in depth and get to know what their stories are that we can appreciate that what an individual person thinks or feels plays as much as an important role in shaping life than any social norm or cultural concept.

The Kaḷḷars expressively forbid the uncle–niece marriage—a fact that partly explains why Dumont neglected it in his dense monograph on the social and religious life of this subcaste (1986) and his overall analysis of Dravidian kinship (1983). Not that Kaḷḷar men never marry their elder sisters' daughters—this book shows that some in fact do so—but it was among other castes and in low-income neighborhoods in Madurai itself that I mostly recorded this particular marriage. This was partly due to the fact that once in Madurai I became reacquainted with people I had known since 1989, which was when I spent nine months studying Tamil at the American Institute of Indian Studies located in this city. This reacquaintance process led my former associates to disclose their own personal experiences with the uncle–niece marriage, or marriage with kin in general, and their stories in turn extended my ethnographic practice into the subjective dimension of these kinship practices.

While in Madurai I also sought the company of youth who, like the young women and men I had previously met in the Union Territory of Pondicherry, prove to be more than examples of larger social processes of, say, social change or social conflict. Their experiences, in fact, taught me that, for Tamil youth operating within certain kinds of assumptions about themselves and their world, the relationship between "traditional" and "modern" marriage practices is not necessarily one of substitution or superimposition.

This book thus neither has a tight residential nor a social ethnographic focus. It relies on information I collected in a village near the town of Pondicherry, in Kaḷḷar country, during the morning in seminar-like meetings I held outside the city of Madurai and in low-income households in Madurai itself. My key consultants included young men and women residing in the north and the south of Tamil Nadu, members of the Tēvar castes (especially the Kaḷḷar caste), working-class families and old acquaintances from Madurai hailing from various communities. In my conversations with all these people, I found little support for the academic explanations of South Indian kinship and marriage reviewed in the last section. The Kaḷḷars did not say they marry cross cousins to create an alliance between consanguines and affines. What they did say, by contrast, was that the "right way to marry" was part of an hon-

orific and emotional process: People said they felt loved and respected when they could exercise their traditional matrimonial rights and angry when they could not. My consultants did admit to an opposition between their father's and mother's brothers, but their idea of affinity was mediated by the relationship to their mother, who was intrinsic to their existence. In fact, it was because the mother's brother was related to the mother that he had the paramount "right" to marry his elder sister's daughter. Indeed, they said so many things that contradicted the structural interpretation of the old marriages that at this most general level this book is an invitation to rethink the practices that used to fall under the rubric of Dravidian kinship and their continuing relevance into the present.

The "Right" Marriages

My first argument in this book is that the priority given to the system of categories generated by the terminology has prevented scholars from discerning the critical meanings of social distinction underpinning Tamil kinship. Such meanings begin to surface once we realize that, although at the semantic level the two sides of cross kin (the mother's brother and the father's sister) are equivalent, and although bilateral cross-cousin marriage is ubiquitous in Tamil Nadu, all castes clearly prefer, and sometimes even prescribe, marrying the cousin on *either* the mother's brother's side *or* the father's sister's side. This is not a new observation. As already mentioned, Dumont noted that, among the Kaḷḷars, "The sister's son should marry the brother's daughter" (1986: 206). Likewise Brenda Beck recorded that, in the Koṅku region, the mother's brother's daughter preference is dominant (1972: 238). By contrast, Robert Deliège recorded that the Dalits (Paṟaiyar) of the Ramnad district practice marriage to a patrilateral cross cousin (1987)—or the father's sister's daughter.

In Tamil the preference or obligation to marry a cousin on one "side" (*pakkam*) rather than the other is framed as *muṟai*, a word that has strong connotations of normative suitability. If a young man is from a caste that favors marriage with the mother's brother's daughter, this girl is *muṟai* to him. He can marry the girl on the other "side," as the Tamil put it, but this father's sister's daughter is "not right"—*muṟai illai*. Hence *muṟai* introduces an idea of kinship that is selective and even exclusive.

What is more is the fact that the unilateral rule or preference discriminates among the "right" children themselves. Among the Kaḷḷars, for instance, all

maternal uncles' daughters are "right" girls and all paternal aunts' sons are "right" boys. But, as I will expand in Chapter 2, only the children of the first-born uncles and first-born aunts have the *urimai* or "right" to marry "the right way." Hence *muṟai* establishes distinctions not only between a husband and a wife (as one "side" inevitably prevails) but also between siblings of the same sex (as some are born before the others).

It is possible that Dumont did not adopt Lévi-Strauss's ideas regarding the forms of "generalized" and "restricted" exchanges produced by unilateral matrimonial rules because he was well aware that exchange in India, and in South India in particular, expresses "difference in social status" (1983: 43). After all, it was Dumont who put forward the theory that the "value" of purity and its counterpart, that of pollution, regulated caste rank along the poles of inferiority and superiority, preventing the pure Brahmins at the top to transact and accept boiled food from other castes, especially the impure Untouchables (who did not then call themselves Dalits) at the bottom. In fact, in a complex essay called "Hierarchy and Marriage Alliance in South Indian kinship" (1957, 1983) Dumont began relating his ethnography of Kaḷḷar marriage practices (1986) to his overall anthropology of caste society (1980). Noting that sons of "senior" wives did not intermarry with those of "junior" wives or of illegitimate unions (1983: 44), he explained that a notion of "pure descent" barred the former from misalliance with the latter. Hence, Dumont concluded, "There is no absolute difference between what happens inside and outside a caste group" (1983: 37). Dravidian kinship endogamy was of the same order as caste endogamy: It expressed a human logic that was deeply hierarchical. At this juncture, his interpretation of Dravidian kinship becomes very relevant to my argument in this book.

Perhaps because the key essay in which he developed these thoughts was a difficult read, or perhaps because Dumont himself did not pursue his hunch that marriage among the Kaḷḷar provides the context for displaying and establishing an order of precedence, scholars usually do not associate South Indian marriage and kinship with caste hierarchy. If anything, in fact, they resort to the principle of parity to characterize marriage and intracaste relations in South India so that the issues of unequal suitability and privilege raised in this book have taken a counterintuitive turn in anthropological discussions of South Indian kinship.

The egalitarian interpretation of South Indian kinship developed in the 1950s and 1960s, when anthropologists began making the case (albeit not al-

ways successfully) that the Sanskritic notion of marriage as the "gift of a virgin" (*kaṇṇikā-tāṇam*), a gift that comes with material presents and jewels to express her father's inferiority to the family that accepts the bride as wife and daughter (Gough 1956), was not a Dravidian conception. Far from turning daughters into "gifts" or commodities, it was shown, South Indian kinship structures allowed women superior freedom and access to material resources than in the North, where close-kin marriage was strictly prohibited (Karve 1953; Gough 1956; Dyson and Moore 1983; Kapadia 1985; Agarwal 1994). This was borne out by the fact that whatever the newly married Tamil daughter received from her parents at marriage was not "dowry" in the usual sense of this word because the gifts of money, gold, land, and household items remained for her exclusive possession, enjoyment, and dominion, even going to her own daughter(s) after her death (Agarwal 1994). This Dravidian difference was also indicated by the name of these Tamil wedding gifts: *cītaṇam* (a Tamil corruption of the Sanskrit compound *strī-dhana*, which means "woman's wealth"). Hence, marriage gifts and payments in the South did not create inequality of status between bride givers and bride takers as they did in the Sanskritized, northern part of India.[12] Such reciprocal exchanges sharply contrasted with the hypergamous practices of the North, where wife givers could not be wife takers, and vice versa, and where women were treated as "tribute" (Kolenda 1984). In short, unlike the North, marriage in South India was associated with egalitarianism between wife takers and wife givers, and that difference, as I will expand later in a later chapter, worked in favor of the "Dravidian" woman (Conklin 1973: 55).

Although this book enters the debate regarding kinship, equality, and hierarchy from the twin perspective that the Sanskrit concept of the "gift of a virgin" is not operative in Tamil marriage rules and that the "right" marriages do indeed sanction a sharing of identity, equality, and closeness between the brother and the sister who arrange them, it also suggests that the comparative analysis of North and South India marriage has obfuscated a critical aspect of Tamil endogamy. While the families who do intermarry see themselves as being on par, some are "righter" or more preferential—that is, more equal—than others. In this way endogamy establishes not merely sameness but also distinction, distance, and separation between kin.

Chapter 1 suggests that the Pramalai Kaḷḷar society was not exactly the best exemplar of the "gift-giving" economy imagined by French structuralists. It is true that marriage in this subcaste constitutes a network of alliances,

or more simply of relationships, representing a heritage of commitments and debts of honor as well as a capital of rights and duties that can be called on not merely in extraordinary situations but in daily routine. It is also true that the Pramalai Kaḷḷars are wholly committed to an economy of ceremonial giving. But this first chapter suggests that Kaḷḷar practical economy is grounded in agonistic and aggressive practices that are anything but reciprocal in spirit (see also Arumugam 2011). It also puts forward the notion that Kaḷḷar ceremonial exchanges function to establish distinctions of rank, especially honors, which themselves are constitutive of superior status and authoritative rights. While Chapter 2 argues that the concern for social equality is very much at the heart of the Kaḷḷar "prescriptive law of marriage" (kaliyāṇam muṟai), it also chronicles the conflicts over matrimonial first honors and authoritative rights that make "force" (vaṉmuṟai) and "law" (muṟai) not opposed principles of social life but coexistent levels of a single reality. Although my discussion is anchored in Kaḷḷar ethnography, my argument that matrimonial rights are a source of constant conflict and violence that can damage kinship ideals and relationships extends to Tamil society in general.

The two life stories recounted in Chapter 3 illustrate how the normative discourse of Tamil matrimonial rules interact with the inner landscape of individual emotions and desires. These stories show how a language of rights and privileges creates such entitlements and expectations that when a "right" marriage does not take place the missed opportunity can deeply, and negatively, affect one's sense of self.

The Most Privileged Marriage

My second argument in this book is that we need to decenter the brother–sister relation from South Indian kinship. I will show that mothers and daughters, and same-sex kin in general, can be just as deeply involved and invested in endogamous matrimonial arrangements as the brothers and sisters who form the classical "atom" of Dravidian kinship. This argument leads me to take issue with a study of Tamil marriage that came out some forty years after that of Dumont.

For reasons that I will not spell out here, in the 1980s the anthropological study of kinship lost its momentum and appeal. Kinship gave way to the study of gender, with contributions from feminist anthropologists still interested in birth, marriage, and domestic life but from a rather different theoretical

perspective (Collier and Yanagisako 1987). Likewise, the anthropology of kinship in India eventually shifted its analytical focus away from social institutions and their civilizational and textual sources to specific problems of the social construction of gender, personhood, and procreation (Östör et al. 1983; Busby 1995; 2000; Raheja and Gold 1994; Böck and Rao 2000). At the same time scholars began to look at marriage no longer from "the center," but both from "the margins"—as Lindsey Harlan and Paul Courtright (1995) put it—as well as from the "inside" perspective of the actor's experience. This notion of kinship as a locus of interiority is precisely what Margaret Trawick's ethnographic study of Tamil kinship (1990) puzzles over. I now turn to this fascinating study, which also has the merit of zeroing on emotion and fantasy as compared to the usual "dry" structuralist topics: gifts, marriage payments, economic cooperation, and reciprocity (particularly male reciprocity).

Trawick argues that emotions are crucial to understanding the "lived reality" of South Indian kinship, basing her claims on her intimate association with a South Indian landowning extended family of twenty members in a village outside Chennai, as well as on interviews with over 150 people from various castes near the town of Madurai. Of particular interest is her insight that the Tamil feeling called *aṉpu*, which she translates as "love," camouflages tensions within the four principal dyadic relationships of the nuclear family (mother–daughter, father–son, husband–wife and brother–sister). Suggesting that post-Freudian perspectives are suited to account for the Tamil affective investments in the family, she adopts a Lacanian language of insatiable desire to propose that fathers want continuity via their sons, but sons long for independence. Meanwhile, mothers devalue daughters, while daughters seek to retain a close bond with their mother.

To Trawick the intense attachment between brother and sister is the key to the Tamil preferential marriage with cross cousins.[13] Forbidden to act on their childhood sexual feelings—particularly the mutual transference of their "intense erotic love" (1990: 172) for the mother—Trawick suggests that brothers and sisters seek to realize their union in the next generation. As she writes:

> Never being fulfilled, the brother and sister's desire for each other will never be spent. It will remain chaste and eternal, but pervaded by pain. Each will feel sacrificed—the one a martyred protector, the other a martyred innocent. In quest of a cultural ideal . . . each will seek to recover the other. But only in death, out of time and beyond the code, will they find this recovery possible. (1990: 172; also see 170–178; 187–204)

Trawick's argument, then, is that "the continuation of a particular institution such as cross-cousin marriage may be posited, not upon its fulfillment of some function or set of functions, but upon the fact that it creates longings that can *never* be fulfilled" (1990: 152; her emphasis).

Despite her quite different analytic approach to kinship and interpretation of Tamil cross-cousin marriage, Trawick actually follows in Dumont's footsteps. She too recognizes the importance of kinship terminologies in principle, and she too excludes marriages that do not appear to have their source in such classifications, in particular the marriage to the elder sister's daughter. The problem is that this particular and most preferred marriage invalidates Trawick's post-Freudian vision of South Indian kinship. Quite simply, the sister is too old for the specific kinds of incestuous dynamics she invokes. Usually (but not always), by the time her brother is on his "first erotic partnership . . . with a sibling" (1990: 170), his *akkā* (elder sister) is already married and out of the house.

More damaging to Trawick's overall argument is that in my field experience the critical pair in arranging a marriage to an elder sister's daughter is not the brother–sister pair but the mother–daughter pair: The mother marries her son to her daughter's daughter, hence the groom is the bride's maternal uncle. This is not the only case of a filial bond turning affinal, and I must mention a marriage that, though admittedly rare (especially nowadays), is perfectly "correct" (*muṟai*) from a Tamil normative perspective. In some castes (Maṟavar, for example), a daughter can propose that her widowed (or, in the past, polygynous) father marry her daughter. In this way she becomes her father's mother-in-law. This is not exactly a new observation. As early as 1934, the South Indian anthropologist A. Aiyyappan noted instances of grandfather–granddaughter marriage (1934:282).[14]

While I show that the brother–sister bond remains a distinct and privileged one, as Trawick rightly emphasizes (1990), in my argument the "love" that implicates the ideal of marriage to elder sister's daughter is not interpreted within a psychoanalytic frame. Ultimately, I aim to question the associations that have set endogamous marriages alongside (or even within) the Oedipal complex, with its secularism and European-derived metapsychology, and to relocate close kin marriage in Tamil notions of devotion and sacrifice, particularly male sacrifice. Hence Chapter 4 shows that in the exegeses I recorded there is a constant theme: The younger brother, who is in the junior position vis-à-vis the woman who becomes his mother-in-law, namely

his elder sister, takes less. He engages in a sacrificial process that asserts an idea of kinship quite different from that emerging from the "right" marriages. This is the idea that kinship ought to privilege the partaking of possessions, the sharing of sufferings and joys, what Marshall Sahlins in his recent attempt to define the pan-human essence of kinship calls "mutuality of being" (2013: 2). Indeed, in the Tamil world this kinship orientation and its emotional language—one of love, nurture, compassion, and empathy—is preferred over all others. Hence it trumps the norms of "rule" and precedence expressed in the unilateral cross-cousin or "right" marriages. And yet, in the mother's brother's paramount and exclusive "right" to his elder sister's daughter, he comes first before any other man, including the right boys, and we see again how Tamil endogamy has a way of simultaneously abolishing and reifying distinctions of rank. The difference here is that the sphere of social activity predominantly associated with men—coming first in society—is generated from the sphere of activity predominantly associated with the women who arrange this marriage and rank (mothers and elder sisters) above men (younger brothers). Chapter 5 shows that, for all their definite rules about the "right" way to marry, the Tamils engage in what we may call processes of structural superimposition, layering affinal bonds with consanguineal ties in such a way that the problem for them becomes one of sorting out and even undoing the ramifying connections that bind kinfolk to one another. The ambiguities that such rampant connections at times afford with regard to kinship roles generate conflict and shame and, I also suggest, a love that is neither particularly conjugal nor gentle. This book reveals that the emotions at the core of what scholars used to call "Dravidian kinship" are inherently inordinate, even pregnant with violence.

Ethnography, Kinship, and Change

My third and last concern in this book is to grapple with the decline of the Tamil "right" and preferred marriages. When anthropologists look at kinship as a changing field of social practice, they tend to invoke a causally significant, broader context. Two classic studies, for instance, link large-scale historical and institutional changes to the transformation of marriage and family. First, Jack Goody (1983) showed that from the early fourth century onward the Christian Church's interest in channeling wealth away from the family and into its treasury led marriage and family life in Western European society to

undergo a radical reformulation. Quite simply, his argument goes, the Church imposed restrictions on "marrying-in," or endogamous marriages; on concubinage; and on adoption, to make it difficult for lay families to transmit property securely to their heirs. Property that did not go to heirs could go to the Church.[15]

Closer to my own field site, a study by C. J. Fuller (1976) documented the changes in the kinship and marriage patterns among the Nayars of Southwest India (Kerala) over a hundred years. At the close of the nineteenth century, it was usual for the Nayar residential and property-owning group to be a large, joint family. Men visited their wives at night, rather than living with them. However, by the time Fuller arrived in the field in the 1970s, the nuclear family and individually owned property were the new norms. Because Nayar husbands now had to provide for their own sons, economic considerations became a factor in the choice of a marriage partner, and the old claims of status diminished.

My book differs from the two studies just mentioned in that it does not purport to make an "objective evaluation" of the decline of Tamil preferential marriages. Rather than abstracting this historical trend as a fact, unfolding over there in South India, I follow the Weberian tradition of examining change from the viewpoint of actors within the social system (Weber 1949). My principal interest in the breakdown of what used to be called the "Dravidian kinship system" derives from the perspective that historical reality is already meaningful to its participants from a theoretically infinite multiplicity of standpoints, prior to any attempt to construct it as an object of analysis. Hence, my main concern in the last two chapters of this book is not so much to impute causal factors that could explain the waning of cross-cousin and uncle–niece marriages (although I do some of that, too) as to explore young people's understandings and experiences of this historical process.

To document and understand the conceptual world in which people live—before and after they become anthropological subjects—is easier said than done. The ethnographic endeavor, it is now commonplace but still critical to say, is fraught with epistemological problems of context, meaning, and subjectivity, the most critical being that its "data" spring from a highly subjective and contestable realm, including both the informant's and the ethnographer's experiences and their personal interaction. But these problems of inconclusive or at best incomplete results seem to me preferable to the alternative: the current tendency to bypass ethnography and its distinctive data-collection

processes altogether. Such a tendency is detectable in anthropological studies of so-called modernity, many of which circumvent the business of closely attending to the particularities of other people's lives and focus instead on the expert discourses of transnational neoliberal markets and explore the second-order products of globalized forms of consumption, recreation, and entertainment. I do not contest that the human world of the early twenty-first century, as anthropologists suggest, is "cosmopolitan" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1987: 2) or that the world of meaningful goods and human communities is in constant motion. But somehow the mind balks at the strong claim that "circulation" and "flows" are central to, constitutive of, all contemporary expressions of the social imagination, or that the traffic in culture makes for free-floating transformations of local worlds, that "just happen" from the outside as responses to or emulations of neoliberalism and modernity.

Chapters 6 and 7 document that two decades of neoliberalism in India and evolving state policy have contributed to the transformation of Tamil kinship. India in general, and South India in particular, is entering uncharted territory in demographic history. Birthrates have dropped to about two children per couple, and the age of marriage has considerably risen. Many more Tamil youth, including girls, pursue some form of education and are taught that the children of consanguineous relationships are at a greater risk of certain genetic disorders. New forms of salaried employment have contributed to the inflation of marriage payments, and so on. But rather than conceptualizing the breakdown of preferential marriages in a developmental and objective mode and leaving the reader with a compact, well-arranged list of determining factors or "emerging" conditions, such as changes in the life course, the spread of schooling, an increasingly monetized and consumerist economy, and the like, these two chapters focus on the stories of three young people. In forefronting the varieties, complexities, and counterlinearities of this breakdown, they illustrate how circumstantial predicaments, subjective experience, and time-honored assumptions must be as much part of its analysis as the context of historical change in which it occurs. While the three case studies offered in these two chapters document that the old, honorific marriages are no longer preferential or even optional, the Conclusion contends that some of their social and gender meanings extend into the present.