

HEREDITY ABANDONED, AND KANNAGI'S COURAGEOUS DECISION TO ACT IN SPECIAL DRAMA

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Abstract : Women artists have performed in the Tamil theatre genre known as Special Drama since the early twentieth century, though they have been highly stigmatized for their participation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Special Drama artists in the early 1990s, I returned in 2014- 2015 to conduct a follow- up study on the subsequent generations of drama family lineages. I became increasingly concerned – largely because this proved a primary concern of the artists themselves – with problems posed by the lack of any established route for the cultural transmission of knowledge of this field. In this essay I document one hereditary acting family lineage in which the stigma on stage actresses has resulted in a silencing of family history. I discuss Special Drama artists' ideas for how to encourage subsequent generations to take up this profession, and how my own presence and support contributed to their efforts to repatriate the artistic tradition. I focus specifically on the courageous decision of one young woman, a member of the fifth generation in the hereditary acting lineage I document, to buck the trend of her generation and become a dramatic Heroine even in the face of the globalizing social and economic climate of contemporary India.

Keywords: Kannagi, hereditary acting lineage, special drama actress, special drama community, fifth generation family, Tamil stage ethnography, Indian cultural anthropology

A chaste woman with only one breast
Stood in the thick shade of the kino
Tree, incandescent in its golden flowers.
— Ilango Adigal, *The Cilappatikaram*

[They] were the ones who had what to lose, the respectable, successful segments of their community that didn't have in its families such a reputable past. In quieter times it had been enough to ignore and deny. When the last of the generation [. . .] had gone silent, when all the plots on their side were full, the descendants waited what they thought was a decent amount of time for an indecent bunch and sealed up the graveyard for good.

— Nathan Englander, *The Ministry of Special Cases*

Return

“Let this line end with me.” A generation ago, this was a repeated refrain in interviews I conducted with *Special Drama* actresses in Tamilnadu, India. Visiting these same women again a full generation later, I see that their wishes have come true: fewer than 5% of those entering this professional theater today are hereditary drama artists, compared with a roughly 60% figure a generation ago.¹ What has made such a dramatic change possible?

The precipitous drop-off in the cultural transmission of this popular vernacular art has multiple causes and many consequences. In this essay I repopulate the statistical-historical record with some of the very real people whose lives are affected by these changes. I focus on professional actresses in Tamil stage drama, as it is the women in this field (as is the case in so many fields, in so many places) who have borne the brunt of a demeaning social gaze. The stigma that attaches to women in this profession figures centrally in their decision NOT to pass their experience on to their children, a decision that in turn shapes the current state of the art of Tamil popular theatre.

I focus here on the courageous decision of one young woman from a hereditary acting family to become a Special Drama actress in twenty-first century India. I call her Kannagi, a pseudonym. As a member of the fifth generation of the family charted in Figure 1, Kannagi played children's roles in Special Drama when young. She is thus already part of what is interchangeably referred to by artists as the *naadaka kudumbam* (the “drama family”), the *naadaka jaathi* (the “drama caste”) and the *naadaka ulakam* (the “drama world”).

Kannagi is, however, the only member of her generation in this lineage to enter the drama field professionally, as an adult, to play adult roles.

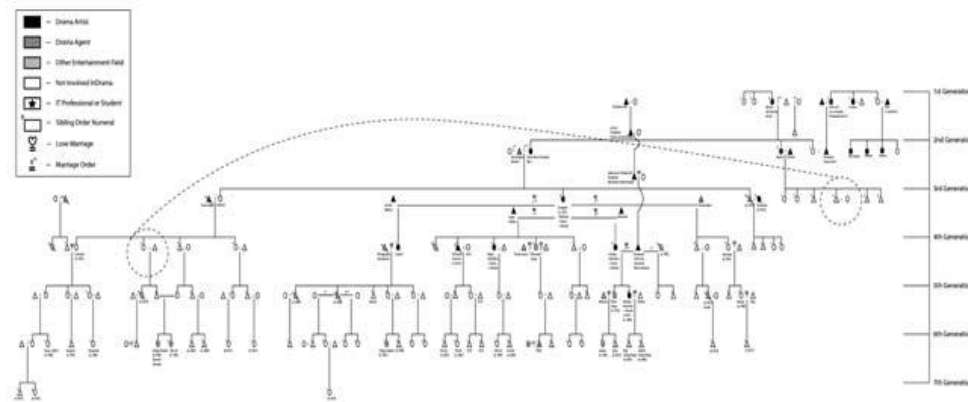


Image 1. Kinship chart spanning seven generations of Kannagi's family (see also appendix - I)

By choosing the name “Kannagi” for the heroine of my story, I mean to invoke the heroine of the ancient Tamil epic poem the *Cilappatikaram* (*The Story of an Anklet*), composed probably in the fifth century CE by Ilango Adigal.² In Adigal's epic poem, chaste wife Kannagi becomes incensed at the unjust sentence meted out to her innocent husband by the King of Madurai. The King believes his corrupt minister when told that Kannagi's husband, Kovalan – now a poor man, having recently reformed after years of debauchery (spending all his money on keeping a dancer as his mistress!), headed out to market to pawn his wife's bejeweled anklet — is the thief who stole the Queen's anklet. Without an investigation, the king orders his soldiers to execute Kovalan. In vengeful, righteous rage at this injustice, Kannagi rips off her right breast and flings it at the city of Madurai, causing it to burst into flame.

My heroine Kannagi's act of taking up the unjustly stigmatized role of stage actress similarly has something of this fiery flair of desperation. Her decision to act again as an adult, at the age of thirty-five, comes after years of financial and marital difficulty. In choosing to act, Kannagi has dared to buck the trend of her generation. The liberalization policies enacted by the Narasimha Rao government in 1991 changed the economic landscape of urban India, and with it the aspirations of a generation of young people. Born between 1980-2000, this generation is made up of those who came of age in, and are now seeking (or are soon to seek) employment in, a nation open to foreign investment and privatization as never before in independent India (Lukose, 2009).

A Note on Pseudonyms

All personal names in this essay and on the accompanying family tree are pseudonyms, and this is the first publication in which I am using pseudonyms. Why now? the reader may well ask, since Kannagi is an actress, and thus a public personage. When I first wrote about Special Drama artists, their lives as public performers was indeed my focus. I was primarily concerned with how artists managed the stigma that accrued to them as stage performers, whether they were onstage or off. Everyone I interviewed and wrote about in that first study was a public personage who expected me to use their real names in retelling their stories. For the most part, I kept private lives out of my published writing, including anything artists shared with me “off the record.” Until now I have treated the everyday interactions and conversations about which I did not write quite differently from events of public record. Staged performance existed in the limelight, while everyday life only in its shadows. Now that I have begun to write about the more personal aspects of being a Special Drama actress, however, and the repercussions Kannagi’s decision has had on relations with her extended family, it seems only fitting to use pseudonyms.

I have chosen to use the names of famous fictional characters from literature, plays, myths and epics — both Eastern and Western in origin — to name those whose tale I tell here. I do this in the hope that these names will, in a century where films, plot lines, archetypes (and other types) flow back-and-forth with ease between cultural origins and cultural destinations, carry with them their auras of either dastardly villainous-ness or valorous heroism. I borrow said auras from wherever I find them, as long as they resonate with me. Is this the right way to judge either their affect or their effect? If not, how else should a contemporary writer, steeped in such broadly circulating cultural stories, proceed?

I’ve drawn from an ancient epic in Tamil poetry for naming my heroine *Kannagi*. I’ve used the names Shakespeare gave to Lear’s two ungrateful daughters, *Goneril* and *Regan*, to name the evil step-sisters of my Kannagi’s mother. This is a woman I think of as a combination of *Cordelia* . . . and Cinderella: kind to everyone, somewhat naïve, and sorely mistreated by her cruel stepsisters. Here I call her Cordelia. I also took the names *Edgar* and *Edmund*, again from *King Lear*, to name another complicated pair of good and evil alit in the branches of Kannagi’s family tree. Edgar, the honest son of Shakespeare’s loyal Gloucester, names here too a son who has worked hard to escape trouble in the land, while I have feminized the name of Gloucester’s bastard son to name this honest boy’s grandmother, *Edmunda*, as she has proven most two-faced of all. And I used the playfully palindromic name *Cimmada* to refer to she who took on the *Adamic* role of naming all her aunt’s children.

This polyandrous aunt herself I've called *Draupadi*, hoping to call to mind the heroine of the *Mahabharat*. My Draupadi had four husbands (as she referred to them) and nine children. Cordelia is her seventh child. Cordelia has a husband, the good *Kent*, and two daughters, viduri and our heroine Kannagi. I call her elder daughter *Viduri* to summon to mind vidura, third son of vyasa and narrator of the *Mahabharat*. In this feminized form, viduri narrated to me many of the tales I here shape into this ethnographic text.

Finally, my trust in the aptness of these pseudonyms warrants reflection: to what extent do the stories we already know inform those we think to tell? To a very great extent, I suspect. Indeed, using pseudonyms has helped me not only to shape but also to grasp the contours of the epic drama I see playing out at present over seven generations of this one artistic family. My confidence in their selection is buttressed by the peals of delighted laughter with which my choices have been met by Viduri, my competent confidante, as we cackle on Skype over this wicked brew of east-west-north and an increasingly global south.

A Family Tree and a Theatrical Genre

Born in 1980, Kannagi first entered the field of Special Drama as a child in pre-liberalization India. This was 1989. At nine she played children's roles, just as her parents and her forebears on both her maternal and paternal sides had done in preceding generations.³ But she stopped acting at the onset of puberty, which just happened to coincide with big changes in the surrounding economic terrain of the nation. Madurai, Kannagi's birthplace, is an ancient city that is nevertheless also frequently described as an overgrown village; not nearly as cosmopolitan as the state capital Chennai, Madurai is a fascinating blend of contemporary sensibility and proudly-held traditi on. In Madurai in 2015, Kannagi chose to return to the Special Drama stage as a Heroine. For reasons I hope to make clear in the following pages, her return to the stage was simultaneously a radical move for her generation and a victory for a community that embraced her re- entrance as evidence of the potential for renewal and revitalization of their artistic tradition.

Returning briefly to Figure 1, note that not only is Kannagi the lone stage artist in the fifth generation of her lineage but also that no child in the sixth generation has so far taken up the art either. In prior generations, children of the ages represented here would have begun playing children's roles, as did Kannagi. What are they doing instead? As the little stars inside the outlines of circles and triangles on the chart show, six members of the sixth generation are following the upwardly- mobile career path of "studies" (*padippu*) in

computer science and engineering. I chose a star as the symbol I would use to identify these children to reflect how they are perceived by their families: the stars indicate ascendancy beyond the morass of their hereditary profession, up into an “India rising” in a globalized world where the goal is to land an information technology job, preferably with a foreign company like Google or Amazon.⁴ Instead of a star, a darkened circle indicates that Kannagi is a Special Drama actress. And while some – including many in her extended family – would find this dark spot a fittingly symbolic blemish, and see it as a condemning mark, to me as well as to her village audiences, and to the Special Drama community that has warmly welcomed her on her return to the stage as a Heroine, Kannagi’s entrance deserves celebration: this is her star turn. She comes back in 2015 after nearly 20 years of absence from the stage. A chosen family, her drama family, the community of artists she has now re-joined, rallied around Kannagi at her debut performance in ways that bespoke a unified effort to respond, productively and positively, to an otherwise overwhelming tide of hereditary abandonment.

This essay is thus also an effort to map the circumstances that paved way for Kannagi’s re-entry into Tamil Special Drama. These are circumstances in which I am heavily involved, not only as an anthropologist and cultural historian, but also, in a fictive- become- real kin network that has held me close and proven central to my understanding of the Tamil *naadaka ulakam* over the past twenty-five years, as a sister.⁵ The contemporary history of Kannagi’s return to the Special Drama stage is thus partly mine too. I have been a spectator and an actor (a *spectactor*, to use Augusto Boal’s apt coinage for an observer who also engages actively in creating outcomes she desires), a researcher and a patron of this art, and much more participant than quiescent observer in this second round of ‘deep hanging out’ that characterizes my own and well as so many others’ experience of anthropological fieldwork (Boal, 2002).⁶

The Tamil theatrical genre known as “Special Drama” (*Speshal Naadakam* is the hybrid English-Tamil term for this hybridized form of theatre, a specified subset of *Icai Naadakam*, or “Music Drama”) is *speshal* in that it brings individual artists together “specially” for each and every performance. That is, once trained in its repertory of plays, artists are booked individually for any given Special Drama performance: there are no troupes, no directors, and no group rehearsals. Individual artists join together onstage for a full night of performance. A community made up of Special Drama artists has grown up in and through this unusual theatrical practice. The community supports all that is involved in maintaining Special Drama as a profession.

Spread across the south-central region of Tamilnadu, there are nineteen Drama Actors' *Sangams* (associations) throughout the state. Special Drama has been an active part of the theatre world in south India for well over a century, beginning in the 1890s. Women have been a part of this tradition for the majority of that time, though they have been highly stigmatized for their participation. Indeed, the entrance of women onto the popular puranic stage is usually held responsible for the stigma that now clings to the whole theatrical genre (Seizer, 2005).

I carried out my first ethnographic fieldwork with Special Drama artists in the early 1990s (preliminary research in 1989-90 led to a sustained two years from 1991-1993). In 2014-2015 I returned to conduct a follow-up study focused on the subsequent generations in hereditary acting family lineages. In this essay, when I use the phrase "hereditary acting lineage," I am referring to families that contain two or more generations of Special Drama artists. I present here the trajectory of one such multi-generational hereditary acting lineage. The experiences from which I learned in researching this lineage provide a view of the combined forces of stigma and silence that are exerted — even within hereditary acting families — on subsequent generations.

Silence

Silence. Not telling anyone who doesn't already know that you are, or were, an actress. Or that your kin — your mother, your aunt, your grandmother or your great-grandmother — is, or was, an actress. The first time I encountered silence about their hereditary profession in this family was when I learned of the love marriage of Kannagi's cousin Amalya in 2011. Amalya is also a member of the fifth generation of this family lineage. After graduating college, Amalya worked for a brief time at the new department store that had recently opened in the centre of town. This big, bustling department store, open 365 days a year, ushered into the legendary ancient city of Madurai a whole new style of shopping. During her brief employment at the department store, Amalya met a handsome young manager. He was a recent MBA from a wealthy Chettiyar family. She soon left the job at the department store to pursue an MBA correspondence course. She and the manager, however, had begun texting each other . . . and six months later they eloped, much to the chagrin of their families. Family opposition notwithstanding, just three weeks later they had a big wedding reception in Madurai, financed largely by the owner of the department store and attended by many department store co-workers. Here were rituals in the new public sphere standing in for traditions abandoned in the private sphere. The bride's side of the family — Amalya's parents, her aunts and uncles, and her cousins, including

Kannagi– did attend, though only two members of the groom’s family came, his mother and brother. All his other relatives were too angry and disappointed that their smart young man had married a woman so beneath their own class and caste status to attend the reception.

I met the newlyweds just a few weeks after their wedding. They proudly showed me their wedding photo album and we sat and chatted all afternoon, drinking tea. That evening as Amalya, Kannagi and I travelled together in an auto-rickshaw past the very department store where this love story began, Amalya leaned over and whispered to Kannagi “She knows not to tell him, right?” My ears pricked up: not tell him what? I asked what it was I shouldn’t tell. “He doesn’t know anything about drama and all that” came the reply. I was confused; what could they mean by “he doesn’t know?” I had just seen pictures of Kannagi’s mother, Cordelia, and her Aunt Regan in the wedding album, both of whom were quite high-profile Special Drama actresses in Madurai. “Just don’t say anything, ok?”

My mind was going a kilometer a minute in the small back seat of that three-wheeler. I could have blurted out anything at any time earlier that day! Why didn’t anyone tell me this was a secret? And how was it a secret anyway, since the actresses in the family were at the wedding reception; what did the groom make of them? “They’re just my aunts,” said Amalya. Indeed. Meaning, what more is there to say? Nothing. Nothing more is required, unless one were to make the unwise choice of actually telling about them being actresses. Aunts will simply be assumed to be “normal” Tamil women, doing the things that “normal” Tamil women do: cooking, raising a family, sending their kids to school, being a homemaker. Silence is the safer strategy here; why court trouble in a climate already rife with disapproval?

This experience in the back seat of that rickshaw with Kannagi and Amalya started me on this follow-up research. The invisibility it bespoke shook me. I already knew that actresses were concerned to not let the local public in the town or city where they lived know that they performed on stages just beyond the city’s perimeter, and that they belonged to this stigmatized profession; most actresses refuse to perform in any drama that takes place within a ten kilometer radius of where they live. But this was not a matter of keeping one’s professional life from the local public. This, instead, was a matter of keeping one’s family lineage and hereditary profession secret from one’s spouse. I have seen such things on Tv (*The Sopranos*) and in the movies (*The Godfather*): Italian mafia dons whose wives don’t know a thing. But is acting in Special Drama tantamount to being involved in a criminal underworld? For some women it is clearly just as tainting. And not only for the actress

herself, but for her kin too: relatives want to hide the shameful secret of familial involvement with the drama world from outsiders, even those outsiders who are insiders through marriage, one's affines. After encountering Amalya's erasure of her family history I was eager to find out: is silence, as a strategy for managing the stigma on stage artists, used by others?⁷ And if so, by whom and in what contexts?

Stigma

Stage actresses in Tamilnadu have long suffered from the assumption that they are loose women. Such notoriety is written into the Tamil language itself: many of the Tamil terms for actress are also common terms for denoting whore or prostitute. All three Tamil dictionaries of record recognize the words *kooti*, *kootiyaal*, *taasi*, and *deevadiyaal* as having the dual meaning of "dancing girl or prostitute" (Fabricius, 1971, 505), "dancing girl devoted to temple service, commonly a prostitute; harlot, whore" (University of Madras, 1982, 1825), and "mistress; concubine" (Cre-A, 2008, 469). Women who act in Special Drama are, of course, highly aware of the low regard in which their profession is held, and they try to counter assumptions about their being "characterless ladies" with a range of strategies both onstage and off (Seizer, 2000; Weidman, 2003, 198-201).

The fact that the stigma on actresses is most closely associated with the role of "dancing girl" sheds light on the strategic nature of Kannagi's decision to re-enter the Special Drama stage in the role of a Heroine rather than that of a dancer. *Thaansu* ("Dance") is a comedic role in which the actress plays a flirtatious, naïve, sixteen-year-old girl opposite a male comedic counterpart in the role of *bafoon* ("buffoon"), often played by a much older actor. The *bafoon-thaansu duet*, as artists refer to the scene that opens every Special Drama, has an overall tone that is generally degrading to the girl. Such degradation bleeds over to taint the actress who plays the role (Seizer, 2008). In the duet, the bafoon shows an overt interest in taking advantage of the girl's naïvete. To further appeal to the overwhelmingly male audience present for these opening scenes, the bafoon often affects a conspiratory male-to-male address, replete with repeated verbal asides to the supporting male musicians, to draw the male audience in as his ally (Sedgwick, 1985; Freud, 1960; Seizer, 1997).

The usual career trajectory of a Special Drama actress involves a progression that begins with pre-pubescent "child" roles and moves onto the comedic thaansu role only after a girl has matured. Then, after some years spent learning the repertory ropes as a dancer, actresses capable of holding their own in a leading role graduate to playing queens and goddesses as a *Stri Part* ("Heroine"). This was indeed the trajectory followed by her

forbears preceding Kannagi in Special Drama. Kannagi broke precedent by returning to the stage, after her earlier debut in child's roles, only to play the more prestigious role of dramatic heroine rather than comedic dancer. Skipping past the thaansu role was a canny move, given how closely stigma clings to female dancers in particular, as noted above.

Furthermore, this move gave Kannagi the opportunity to realize one of her stated goals, one she often offered as justification for her return to those who chastised her: to "raise the status of the art" by doing it properly, i.e., by singing the songs and speaking the dialogues that Sankaradas Swamigal wrote. I expand on the renewal of this discourse of raising the status of the art through proper speech acts and proper training below, while addressing the Special Drama community's embrace of Kannagi's return. Kannagi's decision to re- enter as a Heroine also helped her husband, Kovalan, ultimately agree not to hold her back any longer from acting, something she had wanted to do for years.

Having known her since her childhood, I always thought Kannagi's verbal quickness and bold temperament made her well-suited to being a Special Drama actress; there is a good deal of extemporaneous speaking and quick-witted repartee in debate scenes between the Hero and Heroine in Special Drama. Kannagi finally decided to return to the stage in 2015 when I was present, *in situ*, to have a hand in helping her make this happen. My role was one of providing moral support and financial backing. Without these, her re-entry would not have been possible. Even Kannagi's characteristic fearlessness and carefree nature would not have been able to withstand the double-whammy of censure by family members and the financial debt she would have had to incur had she to do this on her own. A Stri part requires four separate custom - made royal- fancy costumes, a palette of stage make-up, hair- extending wigs, costume jewelry galore, a heavy- duty suitcase, travel money, and the means to engage a chaperone to accompany her to dramas. A chaperone both assists her material transformations backstage, and helps an actress stave off unwanted moral advances from her public.

Over the years, and usually in the context of a conversation in which she told me of her troubles, financial or marital or both, I had often asked Kannagi why she didn't entertain a return to the Special Drama stage as a solution. She always replied that her husband would not allow it. Once when I asked her what would happen if she were to act against his will, she informed me that he had threatened to commit suicide if she did. Such threats are all too real; suicide is used in the Indian context as a sign of protest against conditions large – as in political movements for linguistic or national independence (Mitchell, 2009;

Ramaswamy, 1997) – and small, such as domestic troubles — including arguments over whether a wife should work outside the home or not.

Kannagi had begun on her hereditary path to the life of a stage artist as a child, but life intervened. She discontinued school at tenth standard due to illness. She married at nineteen, a love marriage that was not really out of love, but more out of spite: to prove that she wouldn't tolerate untrue gossip about her and a boy she did not know, she married him. He was from another state, and after marriage, he took her to his family home. His was a poor fishing family, and she worked, under the watchful and judgmental eyes of his older sisters, cleaning fish in the pre-dawn hours. For five years she raised her two boys there. Eventually, exhausted and again unwell, she returned to Madurai. Her husband followed shortly thereafter, having landed a low-skilled job that did not pay well. He was again surrounded by Tamil, which he does not enjoy or speak with fluency. Communication being one of her joys, they are a truly mismatched pair. He was unfaithful; she was lonely. She talks on the phone a lot to friends; in 2014 she converted to Christianity for hope. She tried to earn additional money for the family by doing jobs close to home: sewing, pitching in at a nursery school run by a friend, finally clerking at a small health food store in the neighborhood. It was at this point that I arrived, needing assistance.

Kannagi, her mother Cordelia, her sister viduri and their father Kentasami all stayed with me as much as possible in my rented flat. It was our chance to live together again after twenty- odd years. The two sisters had grown up with parents who were often out all night performing. Now that their parents were retired and both girls had families of their own, my research brought the family together again on a daily basis, making up in some small way for that long lost time. I had entered this family's life when the girls were young, and their mother was a leading Special Drama Stri part. Kannagi had seen then, and saw again now, that I appreciated the art form and valued its performers. And my appreciation was valued by others, in other places, in an increasingly globalized world that seemed nevertheless to care about what we did here together.

I began interviewing for the new project. The family resumed their role of assisting me in contacting interviewees and carrying out interviews. Kannagi participated in eight of eleven interviews I conducted in late 2014, occasionally wielding a camera but mostly joining the conversations. Over the course of these interviews, I repeatedly asked artists, "Why haven't you brought your children into this field?" only to hear that they "wanted a better life for their children." Kannagi heard this too, and she grew frustrated. She argued that the general opinion of Special Drama and Special Drama artists was wrong, because

“there is corruption in every field, from police to politicians (especially politicians!). So why should only drama people have a bad name? There are good people and bad people in every profession.” By the fourth interview, Kannagi had begun asserting that the best way to raise the status of popular drama was for artists to respect themselves, and to respect the dialogues and songs of Sankaradas Swamigal by adhering to them more closely. If they did this, stage artists would be respected in turn.

Shortly thereafter Kannagi accompanied me to an academic conference in Delhi. During our week together, I made up my mind to focus my new research project primarily on her family lineage, realizing that I could tell their story as a microcosm of larger generational change. Meanwhile Kannagi made up her mind to start acting again, this time as a Stri part. Neither of us were under any illusion that any of this would be easy.

Two Responses to Me

With both the stigma on actresses and Kannagi’s determination to return to Special Drama very much in mind, I became increasingly aware of there being two different responses to her and to me. These responses came from within acting lineages. One kind of response came from those who had never had acting careers, and a second from those who had. What follows is a meditation on how members of these different groups contend with and manage social stigma, as well as on how their management strategies directly affected their relationships with me (Goffman, 1963).

These two groups responded in diametrically opposed ways to my continued interest in, and willingness to speak of, the lives of Special Drama artists. And not only did these opposite responses affect me, they implicated me. The first group, the non-artists, responded to my celebration of what they consider a shameful profession with suspicion, jealousy (as in, “Why do you care only about them?”), and eventually, the cold shoulder of silence. This reaction to me and my scholarly endeavors has been clearest (or at least most evident to me) coming from Kannagi’s extended family to the artists themselves, however, I was valued as a herald.

I spoke, for the most part in laudatory terms, of the artists and their art to outsiders — including journalists and scholars in India and abroad — to make the history of Special Drama and the existence of its contemporary artists part of the conversation about Indian theatre history. In my published writings on the art and artists of Special Drama, I value

and celebrate their work; I have always felt the same attitude from artists towards me, and that our pride in each other is mutual.

The response from Non-artists in the Extended Family

From non-artist members of Kannagi's extended family, the response to my open-ended but direct questioning of their attitudes towards Special Drama, and particularly towards their family involvement in it, went from tentative curiosity and frank responses in the first interviews I conducted with members of this group in 2014, to an eventual freeze on all communication with me, beginning in 2015. Individual members of the extended family expressed their negative responses to my curiosity in various ways, all of which reflected the same dominant stigmatizing attitude towards stage actresses that can be found everywhere in Tamilnadu.

Kannagi and I both experienced a withdrawal of good will from her extended family in the form of exclusion. Once it became clear that she was going ahead with her plan to enter the field of Special Drama, a plan realizable largely through my moral and financial support, we were both effectively ex -communicated. Kannagi was no longer invited to any extended family life-stage ritual events, such as the wedding of a cousin that took place in Chennai towards the very end of my stay.⁸ Kannagi's non-actress sister, viduri, was invited while Kannagi was not. In my case, it took the form of cancelled interviews and the discontinuation of casual visits from those extended family members who had previously visited me freely.

All this came about as a result of two things. First, Kannagi and I went together to Chennai. We flew directly there from the conference in Delhi, armed with new resolve about our respective roles in breaking through the stigma and silence that has historically plagued Special Drama. On our first day, I would give a paper about my new research at an academic conference on "Everyday Life in Contemporary India" at the University of Madras. The following day, we would visit and interview the matriarch of the non-acting wing of her extended family, Cimmada. Cimmada (b. 1934), elegant and vibrant at eighty, is a retired schoolteacher. Her aunt (her mother's younger sister) Draupadi (b. 1925-d. 2000), elder to Cimmada by just nine years, was, as noted above, Kannagi's maternal grandmother. While in Cimmada's home, Kannagi and I openly shared our opinions about what we both felt was an unjust stigma on Special Drama and its artists. That is, we began to speak — in a household where silence about the very things we had newly resolved to

do, to speak of, and to write about — had, unbeknownst to us, covered up family history for generations.

Secondly, we passed around a copy of my book on Special Drama. Entitled *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* (2005), the book chronicles the history of the stigmatization of Special Drama and its artists. I date this stigma from the early introduction of women onto the Tamil professional stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precisely when Kannagi's forebears entered the field. In addition to its written text in English, the book contains ten large color Plates of photographs from the early 1990s and fifty-two black & white Figures. These include photographs of artists onstage and off, as well as diagrams of the use of stage space in Special Drama, kinship charts of hereditary acting lineages (not Kannagi's), and a map showing the location of actors' *sangams* across the state. Of most relevance here, the book also contains reproductions of twenty drama *notices* (playbills) from the century 1891 to 1992.⁹ These notices are in Tamil, and contain artists' images and names, making them the most legible pages of the book to the lay Tamil reader.

Both the notices and the plates contain photographs of Kannagi's mother and grandmother in the roles of Thaansu and Stri part. The combination of our talk and this text — which passed from hand-to-hand, its plates closely scrutinized by the multiple generations of family members who had gathered for our visit — burst a bubble of silence that had lasted for several generations in that wing of the family.

In order to properly introduce the scenario of this meeting, I turn again to the kinship chart in Figure One. Above Kannagi in the fourth generation is her mother, Cordelia. Cordelia has had a lifelong involvement with Special Drama. She performed for fifty years, from age seven to fifty-seven. Above Cordelia, in the third generation, is her mother Draupadi, Kannagi's grandmother.

Draupadi was the bold, charismatic and proud matriarch of the Madurai wing of the family until her death in 2000. On the far left of the chart in the fourth generation is Cimmada. I first met Cimmada at the wedding of Draupadi's great-grandson Edgar. This wedding took place in Madurai just after I arrived in 2014. Edgar is this family's "zippie generation" success story: a graduate of the best IT college program in Madurai, he immediately landed a job with Amazon International (Lukose, 2009)¹⁰. His bride studied the same course as he; they met in college. She now works at an IT startup in Chennai, while he spends half his time in Chennai and the other half in the U.S.

The day we visited, Cimmada and her family were graciously hospitable. I enjoyed talking with Cimmada and learning about her early life. Though never an actress herself, Cimmada was close to her aunt Draupadi. As an adolescent student of world literature, Cimmada took on the Adamic role of naming all Draupadi's children, her first cousins. Thirty years separate Cimmada and her youngest cousin, Draupadi's last child: this youngest cousin is now Amalya's mother. I mapped out all these relations and stories under Cimmada's patient direction. What began as an interview quickly became a multi-generational discussion, during which *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* passed from hand to hand throughout the afternoon.



Image 2. Sivakami, the actress pictured on the cover of the U.S. edition of *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, receiving a copy of the book from the author in 2015.



Image 3. Grand-niece Narmada, age nine, perusing the book while her mother inspects Kannagi's *arangetram* costumes.

In the course of this long afternoon of conversation, I learned that apart from Cimmada herself, no one in the Chennai wing of this family knew anything about Special Drama.

Most of the twenty or so family members present - Cimmada's sisters and brothers-in-law, their children, her own children, and all their grandchildren - told me that they had never heard of Special Drama, let alone that their family had anything to do with it. No one but Cimmada had ever seen it performed.

I was astounded.

While Special Drama is not regularly performed anymore in or around Chennai, I nevertheless still expected the family to have known of it. Instead, these nieces and nephews and cousins, these grand-nieces grand-nephews and grand-cousins, knew nothing of their relatives' lives in Madurai. They knew them only as kin who attended their family functions. Here was Amalya's strategy with her husband writ large: in Chennai, whole generations had no knowledge of their own family history.

During the course of the afternoon, one of Cimmada's great- grand-nieces, a college girl fluent in English, picked up the book and started looking at photos. She turned to Cordelia, whom she knew as her cousin-aunt from countless family functions, exclaiming: "Auntie! Why is there a picture of you in this book?"¹¹ Cordelia replied, "Because I am an actress." Pause. Uncomprehending stare. Eyes shift back to the book. "And why have they put the name 'Cordelia' under your photo?" "Because that is my name." Everyone in the Chennai branch of the family called Cordelia *Kuli* ("short one"). But though she stands just four foot nine inches, audiences across the state know her as a songbird of remarkable range.

This visit to Cimmada's household in Chennai gave me a first- hand glimpse of how a whole extended family can live in a cocoon of denial. Over the generations, silence here led to the loss of knowledge of any familial connection to the drama field. Such silences are the handmaidens of shame (Sedgwick, 1995). In this family, silence has led to generations of children who now answer my questions about their not entering the drama field with the words, "We know nothing about this."

Responses from Within the Special Drama Community

Beyond Kannagi's family, the people with whom I interacted most productively while conducting follow-up research were those in the broader community of Special Drama artists, many of whom I had met and worked with in the early 1990s. This community responded enthusiastically to my ongoing interest in their lives and their art. To my profound delight, they used my return as an opportunity to consider - in a series of

meetings, interviews, news articles, conversations and public speaking engagements, both with and without me - how my presence might help feed into their own goal of revitalizing the art form of Special Drama to gain greater social respect for its artists.

It began like this. Upon realizing that hereditary children had largely stopped coming into the field of Special Drama, I travelled to the town of Karaikudi to visit some of the artists I knew from my earlier fieldwork. To these people with whom I felt so comfortable, I posed the direct question: “Why haven’t you brought any of your own children into this field?” My direst question was met with sincere self- interrogation.

We talked about how the decline of Special Drama could only be halted if artists themselves first changed their own attitudes. Learning to value something one had previously thought shameful is more a matter of unlearning than learning. We agreed that involvement in this art - “when done properly and with respect,” a necessary caveat for the artists - is something to celebrate and promote. Onstage, in Special Drama, artists speak Puranic words of wisdom and inhabit characters that include Hindu gods and goddesses as well as historic queens and kings who fought nobly for independence from the British.¹² Why not be as noble and morally confident offstage? Why bow to the stigmatizing gaze with which Tamil society views professional stage artists, when we know that Sankaradas Swamigal’s plays, dialogues and songs are things of beauty, to be revered? Those to whom I had posed my initial question stayed up all night to discuss why they felt shame, rather than pride, about their own profession.

We continued this conversation in a big group the following day. Out of this 24-hour love fest came a double recognition. First, that Special Drama artists from the pre-liberalization period genuinely like each other. They enjoyed acting together then, and they enjoy being together now. And second, the same is not the case in Special Drama today. Here these sentiments are voiced in their own words by several of the artists who spoke with me that day (12/2/14). They remain anonymous here to avoid fomenting unnecessary tensions between previous and current generations of artists.

Senior artist 1: “We respected each other. We went to our elders and sought to learn from them. We trained. But when that practice is abandoned we can’t cope. These people come in without any training and it spoils the whole scene. They just think, “Huh, why do we need all that?” and they just do it, carefree. The way I was brought up was different, there was discipline. It is not there now. That “grip” is not there now.

Senior artist 2: Within our drama caste (“*naadaka jaathi*”) we used to be like a family. But the outsider will look for the original caste of the actor and want that. It’s become “teams.” I don’t like this kind of thing. In the art field I should not be judged by my caste, but by my acting talent. I can’t accept or even digest this fact in the current generation, and it leads to many problems. We can’t digest the culture of today (“*jeernechu pocha mudiyillai*”). As these people are just mushrooming/sprouting up without any proper training, this reduces the quality of the drama.

We agreed that only if artists could recognize their own experience as *valuable* might they begin to feel, and then speak, differently about it. Doing this first for themselves, they could then educate others. I was amazed at how readily artists were onboard with this effort, even to the point of imagining bringing their own children into the field as students. What made this seem possible was the idea of founding a drama training school. This school would not attempt to replace regular schooling but to supplement it. It would be a place to learn the cultural history of Tamil drama and to receive training in *Iyal Isai Nadakam* (“Prose, Music, Drama”) from experts in these fields, generally retired artists. By successfully completing a one-year course of study at the school, a student would earn a certificate that offers its own reward: the sanction and support of the Sangam in entering the drama field, which in practical terms means the booking of performance dates for the trainee.

Senior artist 3: Any professional occupation requires a minimal training period. But here, people just come in and whatever they do is seen as ok. This degrades the quality of the whole enterprise. And those of us who have had training? We find it difficult as we have been set aside. So the first problem is, there is no training school. No *gurukulam*. Second, whoever wants to can come in and do whatever he wants. The newcomers are not familiar with the quality (*tanmai*) of the discipline involved in this. A committee should be established. If someone wants to become a Sangam member, he needs formal training and to earn a certificate. If he doesn’t have these he should be told to get them. All this should happen. So for people like us, who did properly train from our elders, we cannot accept the new low standards. The present day artists don’t have that kind of emotional bond; they just come, act and collect the money, and when they come offstage it’s “*ni yaro naan yaro*,” (“you are whoever you are, I am whoever I am”): we don’t know each other.

The larger aim of the school would be to raise the status of the art by teaching a fresh crop of artists to perform the plays of the Special Drama repertory as Swamigal had intended: singing his songs, speaking his dialogues, and remaining true to his creative syncretic vision. Of course, what the playwright had actually written would be only one or two hours’ worth of material if they were simply read through (his written scripts range from a sparse

sixty to one hundred pages). To extend a Swamigal drama to fill the eight hours from ten p.m. to dawn as Special Drama is now performed requires that the text be stretched and padded with additional songs and dialogues. What becomes most important then is that the content of this necessary padding not be vulgar, and that Swamigal's original songs and dialogues be performed. By unanimous consensus of those engaged in this conversation, such strictures would certainly raise the status of the art. Artists' own changed attitudes would then reflect their confidence in Tamil theatre as a site for the transmission of social and cultural knowledge.

While we spoke, a member of the "liberalization's children" generation - the son of the retired actress hosting this daytime get-together — called up a friend who wrote for the local newspaper. The reporter came and talked with me and several artists briefly, and took a group photo. Even though the resultant short article that appeared in print got everything I said ridiculously wrong and proved more fiction than fact (the title reads "Compared to the West, Tamil is Best"[!]), the image captures something of the closeness and familiarity that characterized that group, that day, and our conversation. That's the thing: being with the Special Drama community feels like family, chosen family. The artists feel this too, and acknowledge it often.

Beside me in the foreground of this family photo (image 4.) are six Special Drama actresses I adore. Backing us up are the men who support and make possible this work: drama agents, husbands, brothers, sons, and Sangam administrators.



Image 4. Dinamalar newspaper, Madurai edition, Jan. 2015: this short article includes a photo of the author surrounded by her chosen family of the Karaikudi Special Drama community.

The inauguration of the first-ever public *Isai Naadakam Payarchi Palliyam* (“Music Drama Training School”) in Tamilnadu, located in the town of Karaikudi, took place at the 2015 annual *guru puja* (“worship of the teacher”) in celebration of playwright Sankaradas Swamigal’s life and work. These annual events conducted by the larger actors’ sangams always involve supportive speeches in praise of the art. In November 2014 I had given one

such speech at the Madurai Sangam guru puja, in which I called for greater respect for Swamigal's work. To build further on this theme, I was invited to speak at the Karaikudi guru puja in February 2015 and inaugurate the Drama Training School. I accepted this honor in the name of victory for the progress and revitalization of Special Drama.

The following month, Kannagi made her debut entrance as a heroine of the Special Drama stage. Her entrance received the resounding support of the community she thereby joined. The performance event was thus itself a classic Austinian performative, in which *saying it makes it so* (Austin, 1962). In this case, speaking and singing the part of a Heroine onstage, before an audience of experienced artists, effectively *made* Kannagi a Special Drama Heroine. But the event itself was more than this: it was a celebration by the community to rejuvenate itself.

Conclusion

Kannagi's debut was a joyous affair. It took place on the temple grounds of a sacred mountain in Madurai, *Tirupalankundram*. Kannagi played Valli in the popular drama "*Valli's Wedding*." After nearly every song she sang, another member of the acting community would come up on stage to bless her. This, I realized, was the real purpose of the *arangetram* ("debut") event: to receive the blessings of those in the community she would join by virtue of her success in this performative performance event.

Senior Artist 4: My father used to say that this is *asirvaatha tozhil*, "blessing work." Receiving the blessings of people in this field, that's when you start growing. your growth depends entirely on the amount of blessings you receive from those elders around you, my father would say.

Kannagi received the blessings of senior artists all night long, as members of the community came on stage one after another to present her with gifts and to shower her with love in the form of flower garlands strung round her neck, new saris draped over her shoulders, and cash overflowing her hands. She beamed, taking it all in. Indeed everyone present basked in the joy of it all.

At the same time, Kannagi does not make light of the tensions present for her in re-entering this field at the contemporary moment, especially as the mother of two athletic, hungry teenage boys. She recognizes that "both pressures exist: to make money and to bring the good values." She is meeting the challenge, working towards victory even as I type these words.

Senior Artist 5: I have faith that this will come full circle, that it will come back to the old values. The audiences are very clear. The audience sees that the drama is no good these days. But if they start to see good artists coming in, they will recognize it. They will avoid those poor performers, and support the good ones, and in this way the art will flourish again.

Kannagi's example is more down to earth and easier to digest:

Kannagi: It's like this: fast foods came in. Now traditional foods are being re-introduced, but in a new way. So the fast foods are going out of fashion. In the same way Special Drama will return to its original values. We just have to make an effort to present the old things in a new way.

Epilogue

In her first adult drama season, from February through September 2015, Kannagi took things slow and let herself get used to the rhythm of Special Drama life again: the long hours standing on stage, being confronted with co-performers who may at any time say unexpected things and make unexpected points to which she, in character, must respond. And the travel: long rides on buses or in vans to out-of-the-way places, and villagers one meets in the night only to take leave of them at dawn. Kannagi spent this first season developing her Heroine chops on small village stages mainly in the Karaikudi district, where her efforts met with praise and acclaim as well as with advice from senior artists on how she might tinker with dialogues, songs, and costumes for her return the following season. A promising beginning, begun.

Meanwhile back in the States I spent those same summer months revisiting all that happened from October 2014 to March 2015, all the transformations I witnessed and the interactions in which I participated. I wrote in English but thought in Tamil, and found my way into uncovering the various logics of the events recounted here. Many things I've left out while others I've drawn in sharp focus. Many more and many different stories might be told of these events, with different arcs and different foci. I have chosen here to tell the story whose arc spans the tensions I experienced between two poles of response to my presence, and to my influence on the family I know best. One pole is silence: omissions that bury, over generations, all past involvement in a stigmatized profession. The other pole is the noisy, eager present. Through speech, song, and other acts of devotion, the drama community creates and recreates itself. My own voice is there in the mix, but much more

prominent are the strong, excited and experienced voices of the drama community. It is their incandescence this essay aspires to reflect.

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There are too many people in the Special Drama community to whom I am grateful and with whom I am enamored to name them individually. I will however single out Mr. P. L. Gandhi for his commitment to the art of special drama, and Mrs. R. M. Tamil Selvi and family for hosting me in the most gracious manner. Finally, to my two Tamil tangaichigal, my Annan and dearest Anni: all is possible through love.

NOTES

1 I derived these percentages from the following data: of the 351 members of the *Tamilnadu Nadaka Nadikar Sangam* (“Tamilnadu Drama Actors Association”), Madurai, in 1992, the descendents of only seventeen members continue to participate in Special Drama. As of July 2015 the Sangam had 430 members. Seventeen hereditary artists in a total 430 members means a less than 4% involvement of hereditary artists in the Special

Drama field in Madurai today. I unfortunately do not have directly comparable statistical data for how many of the 351 members of the Madurai Sangam in 1992 were themselves hereditary artists. Instead what I do have from that period are data concerning the percentage of artists who came from hereditary acting families among seventy artists with whom I conducted interviews between 1991-1993. These seventy artists worked out of Madurai as well as out of other cities across the state, including Dindigal, Karur, Tanjavur, Pudukkottai, Karaikudi and Chennai. They ranged in age from eleven to seventy-eight, and included members of every Hindu caste, from Adi Dravida to Brahmin, and three religions, Hindu, Christian and Muslim. Their levels of formal education ranged from second standard to completion of SSLC (10th Standard). Among this varied sample of Special Drama artists, 62% were hereditary drama artists and 38% were first generation newcomers. Based on these data I conclude that the field of Special Drama was largely populated by hereditary artists in the early 1990s while this was not the case in 2015.

2 By thus dating the text I am following R. Parthasarathy (1993), who writes in his introduction to his translation that “The Cilappatikaram is a poem . . . composed probably in the 5th century C. E. “ To which a footnote offers the following clarification: “No objective evidence in the form of archaeological or epigraphical records has survived on the basis of which to establish the dates. All dates are, therefore, only conjectural. In dating the texts, I have followed Zvelebil, Tamil Literature (1975).”

3 The Child roles of the boy prince Pulandiran in “Pavalakkodi Naadakam” (“The Play of the Coral Queen”), and Logidasan, the son of an honest king tried by a malicious sage in “Arichandra Naadakam” (“The Drama of Harischandra”), are the most famous works of playwright Sankaradas Swamigal containing child roles frequently performed in the Special Drama repertory. These roles are played equally by girls and boys.

4 For more on the twenty-first century discourse of “India rising,” see Lukose, 2009 and Parameswaran, 2015. There are so many examples of South Asian men who have made this move successfully. A Ny Times article names the chain of South Asian men who helped hire each other and all worked together for Google: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/technology/reinventing-google-for-a-mobile-world.html?_r=0].

5 A newspaper article that appeared in *The Hindu* December 14, 2014, describes my relations with this family as *Amerikka Akka* (American Older Sister) (K. K. Magesh, 2014).

6 The phrase “deep hanging out” was first used to describe the *modus operandi* of ethnographic fieldwork by Renato Rosaldo in a presentation given at the 1994 *Anthropology and the Field* conference at Stanford University organized by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. The phrase was subsequently made familiar by James Clifford (1997, 56, 351).

7 The history of the view that stage art is an inherently perverse profession has been well documented for the Western world by Jonas Barish in his masterful study, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Barish, 1981). In the South Asian context any such historical tracing would involve close attention to ideological shifts ferried on waves of colonial occupation.

8 The kinds of life-stage ceremonies I refer to here include births, ear-piercing ceremonies, coming-of-age rituals, marriages, sixtieth anniversaries, and deaths.

9 The older drama notice are reprinted courtesy of the Roja Muttiah Research Library collection in Chennai, India.

10 Anthropologist Ritty Lukose argues in *Liberalization's Children* (2009), her astute study of college students in Kerala at the turn of the twenty-first century, that among the changes brought on by liberalization for this generation are their awareness of a global consumer marketplace for goods and services, and the concomitant middle-class desires and aspirations that have arisen with it. Lukose shows us that these changes in south Indian youth's outlook on and experience of the public sphere now affect even those young people who reside on the margins of globalization's dominant articulations. *Generation Z* (as defined by *Outlook Magazine*, and as cited by Lukose 2009, 2-3) is the “Zippie” generation that has succeeded Gens X & Y: having grown up in post-liberalization India, their goal is to get an education in computer science or engineering and land a career in IT, preferably in a foreign company such as Amazon, Google, or Microsoft. “Liberalization's children” are thus a generation that see themselves as part of global flows of information technology. In this essay I argue that unfortunately this gain in global sensibility too often comes at the expense of local knowledge, affecting local expressive traditions such as Special Drama that are effectively hidden from the consciousness of this generation, buried in the rush towards newness that fuels their lives in contemporary India.

11 In American kinship we call this relation cousin, but in Dravidian kinship a cousin of one's own mother would also be an aunt.

12 The repertory of Special Drama includes thirty-three plays, many of which are no longer in active rotation, a result of the problem I speak of here: that newcomers are not receiving thorough training in the art. The majority of plays in the Special Drama repertoire were written by Sankaradas Swamigal, whom the artists revere as their guru. The most popular play in the Madurai district, *Valli Tirumanam* (valli's Wedding), retells the story of Lord Murugan's marriage to the goddess-disguised-as-huntress valli. Other popular dramas retell historic stories such as that of *Veerapandiya Kattabomman* ("Brave Chieftain Kattabomman" b. 1760- d. 1799), who fought the British and was executed by them in 1799.

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