

## **Kannagi: Global Symbol of Justice**

by Eric Miller

*The below is a written version of the speech delivered at the **National Seminar on Silappathikaram** at the Government College, Chittur, Palghat (Palakkad), Kerala, on 20 February 2007:*

Dear Professors and Students, Dear People of Chittur and Palghat,

Vannakam! It is a great honor and pleasure to be here today, at the inaugural **National Seminar on the Silappathikaram** -- or, as it is known in English, the *Epic of the Ankle Bracelet*, or just, the *Epic of the Anklet*.

First of all, please permit me to recount the basic story of the *Epic of the Anklet*:

In the great port city of Poompuhar, on ancient south India's East Coast, Kannagi and Kovalan married. Kovalan saw Madhavi the dancer perform at court, and he went off with her. After an extended period, Kovalan returned home. He and Kannagi walked to Madurai, a distance of about 250 km, to start a new life. There Kovalan was falsely accused of stealing the local queen's anklet, and the local ruler, the Pandian king, unjustly put Kovalan to death. Kannagi came to the court and proved that her husband had been innocent of this crime. The king punished himself for the injustice he had done, by simply laying down and dying. Kannagi walked around the city three times, tore off her left breast and threw it against the city wall, and called for the city to burn -- but for good people and animals to be unharmed. Agni, the god of Fire, accomplished this. Kannagi wandered westward to the Mountains, where some people worshipped her.

My words today will fall into five sections:

- 1) Future **Seminars on Silappathikaram**, the Kannagi Statue, and the *Kannagi Walk*.
- 2) Mootans and Mudhuvans Followed Kannagi to This Place, Where She Taught Them How to Live.
- 3) Did the Historical Incident Occur?
- 4) Definition of Epic, and the *Epic of the Anklet* as an Anti-Epic.
- 5) Self-Punishment by Kings Contributes to India's Moral Leadership.

- 1) Future **Seminars on Silappathikaram**, the Kannagi Statue, and the *Kannagi Walk*

I am hoping that in the years to come, the **Seminar on Silappathikaram** might be held in many locations -- including in my original country, the USA. It could even be held at numerous locations simultaneously, and inter-linked via videoconference. In such ways, this National Seminar could become an International Seminar.

A statue of Kannagi is a Statue of Justice. One such statue now stands along the Marina Beach in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. This Statue of Justice should stand not only along that beach, but also in the world's imagination. Let us seek to install a statue of Kannagi there!

Today I am speaking not about Kannagi the wife – for it is questionable whether or not Kannagi set a good example by accepting matters when her husband went off with another woman. Rather, today I am speaking about Kannagi the citizen, the seeker of justice.

In my home town, New York City, we have a pessimistic saying: “You cannot fight City Hall.” But Kannagi proved that you can fight City Hall, and this is the core of her story. The story shows that one person, even a widow – with no money, in a place that was not native to her, with no family in sight – could go before the highest civic authority, and speak, and win her case. That is very inspiring. And that is why Kannagi seems to me to be a global symbol of justice, and of the dignity of the individual!

Three lessons that have been derived from the *Silappathikaram* are: 1) Fate cannot be escaped. 2) A chaste woman is all-powerful. And, 3) An unjust ruler will be struck down by the goddess of Justice. But the story also teaches that in a just society, even one individual citizen can win justice.

In 1989, eighteen years ago, I walked in the footsteps of Kannagi (and Kovalan), from Poompuhar to Madurai. I did this as a way of conducting research about the story. I interviewed people along the way. Shortly thereafter, in Chennai, I self-published a thousand copies of a small book about the experience, entitled, “The *Silappathikaram*, the *Epic of the Anklet*: Ancient Story and Modern Identity.” This was basically a travel journal, describing my thoughts about the story as I walked. I have only one copy left. I am planning to have a second edition printed, but at least until then, the work-in-progress can be found on my webpage -- [www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com](http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com) .

In 2002, thirteen years after I walked the first half of Kannagi’s route, I completed the *Kannagi Walk*, walking from Madurai to the very mountains in which we meet today. This was in preparation for my doctoral fieldwork with Kani tribal people, in a mountainous region of Tamil Nadu’s Kanyakumari district. That research concerned how children’s song and game activities may help them to learn their local spoken language.

My fieldwork area in the Kanyakumari district was at the very southern end of the Western Ghats mountain range. But the *Silappathikaram* is quite well-known there also: in my fieldwork village, one girl was named Manimehali (after the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi).

In the years to come, I hope to help bring visitors, both Indians and foreigners, along the *Kannagi Walk* -- from Poompuhar, to Madurai, to these mountains. Most likely, we will come by bus. This could be called cultural tourism, or even devotional tourism. Along the way, there could be lectures and performances relating to the story. For this we will need to translate the spoken Tamil (and Malayalam) into English and other languages. One way I hope to do this is with *Simultaneous Visual Translation*, using a computer and a projector, so that audience members can simultaneously listen to the spoken local language, and read the translation in the language of their choice.

## 2) Mootans and Mudhuvans Followed Kannagi to This Place, Where She Taught Them How to Live.

It is very appropriate that this inaugural **Seminar on *Silappathikaram*** is being held here in Palghat, Kerala, in the Western Ghats mountain range, because it was in these mountains that Kannagi is said to have actually created communities.

As you know, there are numerous ideas about exactly where in these mountains Kannagi came when she left the burning Madurai. It is for this reason that I think of the entire Western Ghats mountain range as the *Kannagi Mountains*.

One idea is that Kannagi came to the Thekkadi-Kumili area, which is approximately 300km south of here. There is an ancient Kannagi shrine in the forest there.

However, there are two very serious reasons to believe that Kannagi came to this area of the Western Ghats. There are not just statues, shrines, or temples in Kannagi's honor in this vicinity. Instead, in this vicinity there are two separate living communities of people who have traditions that their ancestors left the burning Madurai with Kannagi, and accompanied her to this area. I am speaking of the Mootan community that is based in Palghat; and also of the Mudhuvan community, which is based in the forest area near Valparai, a short distance south of here.

Back in 1990, a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology of the University of Madras took me, with the kind permission of the Forest Department, to visit a Mudhuvan settlement in the forest near Valparai. We reached a Mudhuvan settlement by first going to Pollachi, then by going by bus to Valparai and finally to a tea estate. From there, we walked into the forest. In a settlement on the side of a mountain, the headman told us about his people's relationship with Kannagi, and some women showed us the knot in their saris, which they believe Kannagi taught their ancestors how to make, to help them carry their babies in their saris on the walk journey from Madurai.

The Mudhuvans believe that Kannagi also taught them, in the forest near Valparai, how to design their settlements, including such physical details such as how to arrange their huts, and methods of weaving leaves together for roofs, and for other uses. In other words, they believe that Kannagi taught them how to live with each other, and with nature.

I have recently learned that members of the Mootan community in Palghat believe that their ancestors also accompanied Kannagi as she left the burning Madurai. Members of this community in Palghat actively maintain a temple dedicated especially to Kannagi.

Now, the Mootans are known as a trading community. The Mudhuvans are a forest people, classified as Adivasi (Tribal). These are two very different communities. But both of these communities have traditions that their ancestors left the burning Madurai with Kannagi: if both traditions are accurate, ancestors of these two communities would have needed to have had together accompanied Kannagi.

Are there any Mudhuvan people here today? Are there any Mootan people here? Certainly in the years to come, we must invite members of these communities to participate in the ***Seminar on Silappathikaram!***

Ilango Adigal's text does not mention people leaving Madurai with Kannagi, but it does mention that women in these mountains were worshipping Kannagi's image. Had those women been in these mountains before Kannagi arrived, or had they come with her from Madurai? Perhaps we can never know such details -- but it would be interesting to hear Mootan and Mudhuvan peoples' traditional stories on the subject. Learning about such traditions might be a good research project for local students.

### 3) Did the Historical Incident Occur?

Did a woman named Kannagi actually exist? Is the *Silappathikaram* history, or legend?

Let us begin by acknowledging the fact that we have a text of the *Silappathikaram*, attributed to Ilango Adigal, that is linguistically-dated to have been written approximately fourteen-hundred years ago.

The story goes that the Chera ruler, King Shenguttuvan, was traveling in these mountains one day. An ancient South Indian king periodically spent time in the forest wilderness, in order to renew his mystical connection with nature.<sup>1</sup> He came across some women who were worshipping at the shrine of a female figure with a single breast. King Shenguttuvan then asked his younger brother, Ilango Adigal, who was a Jain monk, to write down the story of this figure.

Thus, Ilango Adigal's text is a biography of Kannagi, written in verse. This biography was based on what was told to him by these women. These woman may, or may not, have been eye-witnesses to the events that had occurred in Madurai.

Three kings are mentioned in the text: 1) King Karikala of the Chola land -- who is associated with advanced irrigation and urban water-use systems. 2) King Nedunchezian of the Pandian land. And, 3) King Shenguttuvan of the Chera land -- who is said to have journeyed to the Himalayas and back, to get a stone worthy of being carved in Kannagi's image, defeating the kings along the way.

I am not sure if these three southern kings are mentioned as specific individual humans, or as representatives of their dynasties. Only scholars who are specialists in south Indian history, and who can read Ilango Adigal's sen-Tamil text, can begin to answer such questions. But as a scholar of storytelling, I can say that in a sense it is not important whether or not the incidents of the *Silappathikaram* occurred in history. For -- whether or not these incidents occurred in history -- these incidents occur perpetually in the imaginations of people who know and care about the story. And a story presents people with a model of the past, and a model for the future. That is, people base their characters and actions, their entire worldviews and identities, on the elements of the stories they love.

#### 4) Definition of Epic, and the *Epic of the Anklet* as an Anti-Epic.

The *Silappathikaram* -- literally, the *Anklet Book* -- has come to be known in English as an epic. What then, is the meaning of the term, "epic"?

Epic was originally a Greek classification, referring to a particular category of story. The term was adopted by the Romans, and then by the Europeans. An epic is a long heroic story in which one individual represents a people, and in some cases founds a community, especially a nation. Epic heroes often have encyclopedic adventures -- including military adventures -- experiencing all parts of the land, all levels of society, each aspect of the culture.

Epics often tell of glorious deeds of national heroes, in heroic ages. Such heroic ages have been experienced by many nations, usually at a stage of development in which struggle for a national identity is occurring. This effort, combined with such other conditions as a sophisticated material culture and a sufficiently productive economy, tend to produce a society dominated by a powerful and warlike nobility, occupied with martial activities, whose individual members seek everlasting fame for themselves and for their lineages.

The encyclopedic description applies to Kannagi's story. The *Silappathikaram* does take its heroine, and the reader, through many different activities, social classes, and geographical locales -- including the seashore, agricultural plains, and mountains. We experience both the urban and the rural, and people of all levels of society. She is treated best by fishing people at the beginning of the story (one folk tradition is that fishermen from Poompuhar found Kannagi as an infant in a basket, floating on the ocean), and by tribal people she met both before and after reaching Madurai. The text goes into great detail about Poompuhar's and Madurai's markets and neighborhoods, and about many of the period's cultural activities, including, its classical music, folk songs and dances, and architecture. The story illustrates the unity of all of the region's social classes, and natural environments.

But military exploits -- the leading of armies in war to found a state -- are not central parts of the *Silappathikaram*. Kannagi did found a society in these mountains, but that society was based on love and cooperation, not power and domination.

The *Silappathikaram* is thus different from most stories that are classified as epics in that its main mission is not to glorify a king's and or a state's military power. Rather, this story shows how such power can be unwisely and mistakenly applied, and it portrays the intense misery that can be caused by such inappropriate state violence (the death penalty carried out on Kovalan).

Many of the ancient heroic epics that glorify military victories were originally oral epics. But the *Silappathikaram* is a written epic -- written from a non-violent, religious point of view. Thus, I would describe the *Silappathikaram* as an epic that is also an anti-epic, because it is a critique of state power.

Yes, Ilango Adigal's text does tell about the splendour of Poompuhar and Madurai, and about the military power of King Shenguttuvan. But to me, the story is primarily about the emotional vulnerability, yearning, and poignancy of the human condition -- as experienced by Kannagi, and by the reader who experiences these feelings in empathy with her. The word, "poignancy," refers to the quiet, private emotions of everyday life, such as the emotion of yearning. Yearning for love, yearning for professional achievement and success. Yearning for a fulfilling life, in whatever form we may choose and imagine it. We want a successful life so much, for ourselves and for those are close to us. We make plans to achieve happiness, and we do our very best to carry out those plans. We try, we strive, we seek, we search. When those plans may not always work out, our feelings of frustration and disappointment can be so painful. There may be many reasons why our most cherished dreams may not come true -- including both faults of our own, and external factors that may be beyond our control. And yet, even if things don't work out and we are crushed, we have to pull ourselves together and go on, and make the best of things.

The *Tholkappiam* (the ancient Tamil book of grammar and aesthetics) and A.K. Ramanujan (the modern scholar) both mention the categories of Akam and Puram poetry. Akam poetry pertains to love and romance. It is written in the form of conversations between participants, often voicing participants' thoughts and feelings, with the heroine's female friends and relatives playing supporting roles. No names, places, or dates are mentioned. Puram poetry, on the other hand, pertains to matters of state, primarily war; and here specific historical and geographical references are appropriate. The Akam and the Puram are often mingled in a single poem, as, for example, when a wounded but victorious young man rushing home from a distant battlefield imagines his love waiting for him. This mixing of the internal and external -- of personal matters and matters of state -- is a special talent of south Indian storytelling, and it is done beautifully in the *Silappathikaram*.

There have been many cinema and television versions of the *Silappathikaram*. One of my favorites is the 1941 film, *Kannagi*, with dialogue by Ilangovan, and with the title role played by Kannamba, who was originally from Andhra Pradesh. One thing that really stands out in Kannamba's portrayal is Kannagi's fury against the king. Kannamba's Kannagi expresses in her words, tone of voice, and body language, utter disdain for this king who has gone wrong. The Kannagi character does not care about hierarchy or politics. This is sometimes a quality of someone who is soon to die, to return to their divine state, or to be exiled to the wilderness. For it is very difficult to continue to live in mainstream society, once one has exhibited such disdain for institutional authority.

The final part of the Kannagi story -- the part of the story that occurs in the Western Ghats -- presents a utopian vision of society, with people living in close harmony with nature, and treating each other fairly. In this society, respect is given to all, not just to those who have obtained or inherited commanding positions. Kannagi's society recognises not military, financial, nor institutional power, but only moral power. And this moral power has nothing to do with any ideology other than treating people fairly.

Some people here in Kerala might say, "Yes, the *Silappathikaram* was written by a native of the Chera land, which has now become Kerala, but really Kannagi is a Tamil character, she is not a Kerala character, and the story is a Tamil story, not a Kerala story." This is a wrong point of view, I feel. This character and this story belongs to Tamil Nadu *and* to Kerala. Kannagi belongs to all India. She belongs to all of the world. The story points out the secondary nature of institutions, political or otherwise. Kannagi did not care if one was Tamil or not. She did not care if one was an Indian or not. She did not care if one was a king or not. She only cared if one was a good human being -- and a leading criteria for that is how one treats other human beings.

As humans, we are susceptible to jealousy, to egotism, to groupism. We sometimes believe that we are good, and the others are bad. Often what goes missing is general human empathy, acceptance, and love. Such seems to be the theme of Kannagi's cry to the people of Madurai, upon finding her husband's body in a street there, --

"Are there women here? ...  
 Are there women who would allow such vileness  
 To be done to their own husbands? ...  
 Are there good people here? ...  
 Is there a god here?"<sup>2</sup>

Ilango Adigal does not tell us how the people of Madurai responded to these questions. As he had not been an eyewitness to the event, he could not really have known.

##### 5) Self-Punishment by Kings Contributes to India's Moral Leadership.

How did the Pandian king respond when he realised that he had had Kovalan killed unjustly? He applied to himself the same punishment he had unjustly inflicted on his subject. The Pandian king thus finally did achieve heroism, and everlasting fame -- but he did so through this act of self-punishment, not through any military victory.

And this is not an isolated incident. Rulers punishing themselves and their family members if they do anything wrong is an ancient south Indian tradition. An other example was the king who punished his son for injuring a calf. This tradition is one reason that India is a moral leader of the world.

There is also a strong south Indian tradition of writers being political leaders -- note the present Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Or -- as in the case of King Shenguttuvan and his younger brother, Ilango Adigal -- of rulers being closely-related to writers. There may be a connection between kings having the ability for self-punishment -- that is, of their having a conscience -- and their being writers, or their being surrounded by writers. After all, writers reflect upon life. They examine life. They help to raise consciousness about what is occurring. Long live this wonderful south Indian tradition of a connection between writers and political leaders!

The concern for morality is a universal human theme. We know, of course, that lip service is often paid to morality, when in fact, in the real world, the ideal may often not be achieved or even approached. The Kannagi story represents the day, the moment, when a test came for a ruler. Such tests of one's fairness, one's justness, can come at any moment. In fact, such tests do come to each of us many times each day -- although tests that are life-and-death for oneself or others may come just once in a while. But the *Silappathikaram* shows what can happen when a ruler is tested, and when a ruler fails such a test.

All of the political leaders of the world should know the *Silappathikaram*, because the story might help them to avoid the Pandian king's mistakes. And all of the citizens of the world should know the *Silappathikaram*, because the story might help them to stand up for themselves and seek justice, like Kannagi.

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Falk, "Wilderness and Kingship in Ancient South India," *History of Religions*, 1973, 13: 1-15.

<sup>2</sup> Lines 67-73, Canto 19, the Book of Madurai. From R. Parthasarathy's translation from the original sen-Tamil into English: *The Cilappatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet*, by Ilanko Atikal, Columbia University Press, 1993.