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The kinship, marriage and gender experiences of Tamil women in Sri Lanka's tea plantations

Amali Philips

The organisation of labour on tea plantations in Sri Lanka is based on a spatial, functional and ideological integration of kinship, marriage and ritual practices within a capitalist system of plantation production. This article foregrounds the household, kinship, and work experiences of women who constitute one half of the community of plantation workers of south Indian origin, to provide a balanced perspective to the discourse on south Indian kinship systems and practices. Its focus is on the reinforcement of kinship and gender inequalities within households and within the plantation labour organisation. In privileging women's experiences of kinship and marriage, this article adds to recent studies on kinship and gender in India that challenge the more traditional accounts based on androcentric perspectives, geographical generalisations, and the essentialisation of women.

I
Introduction

This article examines the kinship, marriage and gender experiences of the Tamil women of south Indian origin, who work as 'tea pluckers' in Sri Lanka's tea plantations. Beginning from British colonial times, the

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tea plantations in Sri Lanka have been based on a spatial and functional integration of estate living and working as a total system of labour production and reproduction. The experiences of the plantation women in their multiple locations, in the household and on the estate, provide a unique account of the intersections of kinship, marriage, gender and labour. The plantation women's articulation of their experiences also contributes to the development of a gender perspective on kinship and the marital roles of women within a community of workers with little class differentiation among them.

Although women, along with men, have been central characters in structural-functional and structural approaches within kinship studies, the status and roles of women have often been treated as residual considerations deriving from the mediating or connecting role of women and bridewealth transfers in descent (Evans-Pritchard 1951; Fortes 1959, 1972; Gluckman 1950; Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde 1950) and alliance systems of kinship (Dumont 1983; Fox 1967; Leach 1961; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Meillassoux 1981), and within systems of production (i.e., hoe and plough agriculture; Goody 1976, 1990; Gough 1979) and stratification (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Harrell and Dickey 1985). The politico-jural dimensions of kinship rules, domestic structures and affinal principles have been given far more prominence (Comaroff 1980) than the core relations and experiences of gender and kinship (see also Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Howell and Melhus 1993). Karen Sacks's (1979) critique of Social Darwinist influences in early anthropological writings draws attention to the androcentric perspectives of traditional kinship and marriage theorists and the predominance of essentialist views of women and their locations within kinship and marriage (see also Peletz 1993).

Traditionally, South Asian kinship studies have tended to dichotomise women's status along a north/south (Aryan/Dravidian) divide, based on different descent principles and their accompanying institutional arrangements (Karve 1953; Trautmann 1981). Thus, the lower status of north Indian women compared to their southern sisters has been attributed to the patrilineal, hypergamous milieu of north Indian kinship, characterised by asymmetrical and unidirectional gift exchanges and dowries in movable property that are often controlled by affinal families (Sharma 1984; Vatuk 1975). The high status of south Indian and Sri Lankan women and their strong rights in property are associated with bilateral tendencies

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among patrilineal groups, matrilineal traditions, the emphasis on matrilateral relatives (MB/ZC), preferential marriages between classificatory cross-cousins, and elder sister's daughter marriages (eZD).

An equally important tendency has been to insist on the unity of Indian kinship. This is best exemplified in the work of Louis Dumont (1966, 1975, 1983), who emphasises the structural continuities from north to south based on alliance or affinity as the fundamental principle of Indian kinship and marriage (see also Lévi-Strauss 1969; Trautmann 1981; van der Veen 1972). The system of continuous gift exchanges in northern India and the bilateral cross-cousin marriage system of south India (and among the Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka) are variations on the 'orthodox Indian traditions' (Tambiah 1973: 127), of which alliance is an important component. Tambiah (1989: 426) goes further, to posit a similarity in women's status between north and south, and considers even the hypergamous variant of the north Indian alliance system as basically positive for women in terms of women's 'agency', and their role as a 'vehicle and transformer of male social status'. In short, women's agency comes from hypergamous dowry marriages which raise the status of their natal families.

Generalisations on the north/south or Aryan/Dravidian kinship divide, however, are at variance with local and regional patterns, within India and further south in Sri Lanka, in regard to descent reckoning (patrilineal, matrilineal and bilateral), rules of succession and devolution, and marriage rules (see also Mencher and Goldberg 1967; Trautmann 1981). For example, the system of kinship and marriage among the Syrian Christians of Kerala, in south India, parallels in many ways the kinship and marriage systems of north Indian communities, while the supposedly Aryan Sinhalese of Sri Lanka share many of the features of the Dravidian kinship system of the Tamils in south India and Sri Lanka (Guneratne 2002). What is more important, structural-functional and structural views provide very little insight into how women, as gendered persons, experience the rules and practices of descent and alliance systems.

Recent kinship studies are moving away from the hegemony of androcentric, structural-functionalist and structuralist approaches, and are being invigorated by insights from gender studies (Morgan 1989; Mukhopadhyaya and Higgins 1988). Anthropological conceptualisations of kinship and marriage have begun to question the analytical boundaries between kinship and gender (Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Dube 2001), and between gender and other forms of social stratification such as caste

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and class (Kapadia 1995; Menon 1996; Sharma 1985), nationalism and ethnicity (Bagchi 1996; Bannerji 1994; Lakshmi 1990; Ramaswamy 1993), and religion (Basu 1999; Delaney 1995). As Yanagisako and Delaney (1995: 1) persuasively argue, 'differentials of power come already embedded in culture', and are reflected in folk or cultural notions about procreation, sexuality, kinship, marriage, gender and personhood to the extent that they are 'naturalised' and 'essentialised' as religious certainties or biological givens. Feminist anthropologists (Delaney 1995; McKinnon 1995) have also extended Schneider's (1980) cultural analysis of American kinship as a 'cultural', or 'folk', system encompassing 'shared blood' and 'normative conduct', to the area of gender studies by considering the influence of gender inequality on cultural conceptions of kinship. The positions and perceptions of men and women within kinship and marriage configurations are often predicated on 'differences in gender values' that they experience (McKinnon 1995). Further, cultural notions of kinship and gender influence women's own articulation of their kinship experiences (see Abu-Lughod 1993).

Writing on south Indian kinship, Karin Kapadia (1995:14) notes that 'the subordinate status of women relative to the status of men in their own family and social group must be recognised in an analysis of the structures of Tamil kinship'. Kapadia's argument is that, despite bilateral tendencies and isogamous, cross-kin marriages among the non-Brahmin castes of Tamil Nadu, women's experiences of kinship and marriage and their discourses on kinship are markedly different from male kinship experiences and discourses. Gender and kinship also shape women's experiences of class and caste and are in turn influenced by them. The tendency to homogenise women's experiences of kinship and gender has been criticised both at a general level (Abu-Lughod 1993; Hawkesworth 1989) and specifically regarding western feminist theorising about 'third world women' (Mohanty 1997). I would argue that while the differences in women's multiple positioning and experiences within class, caste and kinship structures must be acknowledged and addressed, it should not blind us to the fact that women in south Asia operate within largely restrictive patriarchal kinship ideologies and cultural practices.

Kapadia's study is based on the kinship experiences of south Indian Tamil women of all castes and classes and, contrary to received wisdom on the north/south differences in kinship systems and women's status, her study contributes to a view of Tamil kinship as an inherently unequal system with women assuming a subordinate position relative to men in their families, though in 'differing forms and degrees' (1995: 14).

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The 'isogamy' of south Indian kinship, marriage and even caste that Leach (1969) alluded to is thus restricted to the equality of males, excluding the equality of the genders. This view is confirmed by Menon's (1996) study of the matrilineal Nayars of Kerala, and my own research among the patrilineal Syrian Christians of Kerala (Philips 2003b) and among the patrilineal Tamils on the tea plantations of Sri Lanka (Philips 2001a and 2001b). These communities in south India and Sri Lanka vary along the lines of descent principles, and class and caste status, but their women share similar experiences of gender inequality in kinship and marriage because of their shared gender (see also Uyl 1995).

My research on the Sri Lankan tea plantations provides another dimension to current discussions on kinship and gender, namely, the workings of kinship and gender ideologies and practices in sustaining gender inequalities within the household and in the plantation labour system. A consideration of the lived experiences of women in the tea plantations, as opposed to the traditional structural-functional analyses of kinship and marriage principles and rules, provides a far more realistic account of the nature of kinship and marriage in the plantations. As André Béteille (1991: 5) has pointed out, it is necessary to come to grips 'not only with the prevalence of inequality' but also with its 'social reproduction'. Béteille has focused on the role of the middle class Indian family as the primary agent of social reproduction, and the power and privileges associated with middle class status. Béteille's analysis is not gendered and deals with the reproduction of class. This article provides a gendered analysis of how kinship, marriage and gender inequalities are firmly entrenched in the ethnically and socially oppressed and marginalised community of the Estate Tamils[1] who show minimal socioeconomic differentiation in terms of class or property holdings. It also fills a lacuna in the many studies[2] on Sri Lanka's tea plantations which generally do not address the articulation of kinship, marriage and cultural ideologies and practices, on the one hand, and the hierarchical plantation wage labour organisation and production, on the other.

[1] The term 'Estate Tamils' (*Thotta Thamizhar*), used in this article, is a term that the plantation Tamils generally use to describe themselves (see Philips 2001b).

[2] There is a copious body of writings on the Sri Lankan plantations, including historical summaries (Jayawardena 1972; Moldrich 1989; Roberts 1966; Samaraweera 1980; vanden Driesen 1997), political–economic accounts (Bandarage 1983; Corea 1975; Darwood 1980; de Silva 1982; Kurian 1984, 1998 and 2000; Little 1999; Meyer 1992; Snodgrass 1966), and anthropological studies (Daniel 1996; Hollup 1994).

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II
The plantation context

The Sri Lankan plantation system emerged in the 19th century as part of the far-flung network of British colonial plantations, and was based on a capitalist system of agricultural production, involving the expropriation of local lands for the production of crops for foreign markets. Labour was imported from India under a system of indenture, which was a type of fixed-term enforced contract labour. The migrant workers were Hindus from the non-Brahmin castes, the majority of whom belonged to the lower castes and classes of southern India. The plantations were run as 'ethnic enclaves' and 'total institutions' (Goffman 1961), with the entire work force living and working at the same location in highly regimented conditions and isolated from the rest of the Sri Lankans.

In the initial stages, men and women were imported in direct proportion to labour demands, although the migration of women was restricted by the prevailing Victorian and traditional Indian patriarchal values that viewed women as dependants and homemakers (Carter 1996; Tinker 1977). In later years, the migration of women was increased to establish a continuous system of labour reproduction on the plantations, to reduce dependence on seasonal migration, and to increasingly engage women in the specific work of tea plucking on account of their 'nimble fingers' (Kurian 1998: 70) and their cheaper wage rates.

The plantation system was based on a chain of command starting from the manager (*periya dorai*, big lord) and his assistant (*sinna dorai*, little lord), through Indian labour supervisors (*kangan*ies), down to the Indian male and female workers (coolies). This essentially pyramidal structure was also layered by contours pertaining to 'race' (European), ethnicity (Sinhalese, Ceylon Tamil and Indian Tamil), class, caste and gender. The layers in the structure were separated by rigid rules regarding dress, posture, forms of interpersonal respect and distance and, most of all, by the location and type of housing used by European planters, indigenous staff and immigrant workers. The workers' quarters, built by the British, were long, barrack-style buildings, in single or double rows, called 'lines'. Each 'line' was divided into compartments, one compartment per family, each comprising a 10-foot by 12-foot room, a small verandah and a cooking area. The basic structure of the lines has remained to this day, and few additions or improvements have been made over the years despite the growing demand for housing.

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The majority of the immigrant workers belonged to different sub-caste groupings under the Adi-Dravida caste category (i.e. the lower castes of Pallar, Parayar, Chakkiliar, etc.), while the sub-castes of the Kudiyanavar caste category (non-Brahmin upper castes such as Vellalar, Kallar, Agamudiyan, Chettiyar, Naidu, Ambalakaran, Mudali, Konan, Padayachi and Kavundu) occupied the higher level *kangany*, clerical, medical and accountant positions. The male and female field workers were organised as gangs of homogeneous caste groups, each under a group leader (*silarai kangany*) of the same caste or kinship circle (see also Jain [1970] on the organisation of south Indian workers in Malaysia). In the administration of the plantations after independence in 1948, native, mostly Sinhalese, planters replaced the British planters within the same pyramidal structure. The old *kangany* system and the organisation of caste-based labour gangs have been abolished since the 1960s, but the new labour supervisors are still called *kangan*ies and are recruited from both upper and lower castes. There are, however, virtually no female *kangan*ies on the estates. Although women are employed as clerical workers, nurses and mid-wives in the estate administration, these women are invariably Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, or Indian Tamils belonging to the higher caste groups.

Soon after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the Estate Tamils were disenfranchised, which eventually reduced almost a million of them to the rank of stateless persons. Since then, almost half a million Estate Tamils have been expatriated to India under different agreements between the governments of India and Sri Lanka, while over a million have been granted Sri Lankan citizenship. In 1975, the plantations were nationalised, with devastating effects on the workers, who were literally driven out of many estates and later became the targets of periodic ethnic violence. Since 1977, Sri Lanka has gone through a comprehensive economic liberalisation process including a programme of re-privatisation of the plantations. Beginning in 1991, the management of the plantations was given to private companies and their managing agents on a profit-sharing basis. The emphasis of the new management is on maximising short-term yields at the expense of long-term sustainability, and this has direct implications for the workers and the gender division of labour (Philips 2001a). The emphasis on short-term productivity translates into a strong emphasis on tea plucking, which is done by women, with less attention paid to the nursery, pruning and maintenance work done by men. In a number of estates, there is pressure on women workers to do far more plucking without corresponding increases in their compensation, and with little

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consideration for the additional burden of household work that women invariably perform. Women earn more wages than men overall, but this has not translated into women having any control over their earnings or other household resources. Although women workers constitute over 50 per cent of the estate workforce, women are not assigned to supervisory roles, nor are they included in the trade union leadership to represent women's interests and their special needs. Thus, from colonial times to the present, the Estate Tamil women have been relegated to a subordinate status, relative to their male counterparts, in the production and kinship systems of the plantations.

III
Tea-pluckers and homemakers: Women, work and entitlements

Women's wage work and housework in the plantations are ideologically and spatially linked in ways that define women's subordinate positions in both. Gender ideologies can be described as a collection of biases or common-sense knowledge (Comaroff 1994) that animate actions (Thompson 1984) at different stages of a woman's life, as child, wife, mother or widow. They circulate as anecdotes, stereotypes, maxims and sanctions, and assign differential roles, desires, abilities and behaviours to both women and men (Agarwal 1994). In the Sri Lankan tea plantations, gender ideologies underpin the division of labour between women and men on the estates and in the households; they rationalise the differential 'entitlements' of men and women to their household resources, and to respect and recognition within the community; and they are kept alive by the gendering of space and processes of socialisation that include kinship roles and rituals of production and reproduction.

The all-encompassing spatial extent of the estate is captured in the Tamil term *thottam* (garden), a term that is universally used in the plantations, empirically and symbolically, and evocatively as well as derisively. In its evocative form, the *thottam* is gendered as 'mother' and regarded by the Tamil workers as nurturing and life-giving in relation to work and survival. The *thottam* is subliminally divided into female and male spaces. The plucking areas where the majority of the women work and the residential spaces of the estate lines are female spaces, while the factory, nursery and infrastructure areas where men work, and the shops and

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public roads where men congregate, are male spaces. Although both men and women intrude into each others' symbolically gendered spaces (see Ardner 1993), male presence in the plucking fields and the line rooms is associated with their roles as overseers/protectors of women's work and spaces. Women's presence in male spaces (factories, shops, public roads), on the other hand, presupposes male scrutiny consistent with the ideologies of kinship paternalism and protective sexuality. Religious rituals and the worship of deities also entrench gender-role differences and functions within the gendered spaces.

South Indian ritual culture is well entrenched in the production and reproduction culture of the plantations. The management and staff dismiss the ritual fetishism of the workers as superstitious and irrational, and complain that the ritual excesses of the workers cut into the busy work schedules of the estates. But the estate management actively participates in the rituals and deducts money from workers' wages for the expenses incurred in organising them. Sanskritic deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, Murugan, Vinayagar, Ganesh, Kathiresan, etc., are worshipped along with the popular non-Sanskritic, meat-eating deities. The shrines and stone images of deities are located in every estate, along meandering brooks and in the surrounding forests, near the line rooms, and at the entrances and borders of estates. Religious worship and rituals embody the concerns and anxieties of workers who live and work under adverse conditions. As Masco (1995: 71) notes in the case of the excessive potlatching practices of the Kwakwaka'wakw Indians of the north-west coast of North America, subordinated 'people find orientation in time and space and motivation in everyday life' through symbolic acts and religious rituals that allow them to gain some control over their situations. Participation in religious rituals, worship and festivals (e.g., Kaaman koothu, Deepavali, Pongal, Vael, Shiva Rathiri) might also be viewed as a form of escape from the drudgery of work. For women, it provides a release from the monotony of repetitive picking, and an excuse for socialising outside their work situations (see also Kurian 1998: 79).

The worship and rituals are continuations of ancestral practices brought to the estates by the early immigrant workers. In south India, drought and hardship created the conditions for communal rituals which the Tamil immigrants adapted to suit the new conditions and concerns on the estates. A large part of estate worship and ritual involves non-Sanskritic lineage deities (*kula theivam*), family deities (*kudumpa theivam*) and communal deities (*samuha theivam*) who are responsible for the well-being of

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families, workers and the tea bushes. These deities are treated as named persons with whom the worshippers have a personal relationship without the formal mediation of the priest. Thus, routine rituals are offered daily to the several *thotta sam*ies (estate deities), and elaborate rites are performed seasonally at the beginning of the planting and plucking seasons.

The spatial location of the deities and the rituals honouring them are indicative of the meaning of rituals in the life and work on the plantations, and of their gender-role functions in the community. For instance, male work rituals embody cultural notions of the centrality of males as protectors of the estate (and women), while the work rituals of women reflect the cultural link made between the productivity of the tea bushes and the reproductive functions of the tea plucking women. The male role as 'protectors' of the *thottam* can be seen in the protective role assigned to male guardian deities such as Muniandy, Karuppan, Rodaimuny and Madesamy who are enshrined at the boundaries of the estates (see Hollup 1994). These deities are lower order deities in the Hindu pantheon of gods (see Fuller 1979). Their female counterpart, Mariamman, is a popular temple deity who is responsible for bringing rain and for watching over the general well-being of the estates.

Within the female spaces of the plucking fields, women are identified with the tea bushes, which symbolise the generative power of the female, and with the *kozhuntu* (two leaves and a bud) that they pluck, representing the woman's life-cycle stages. The bud represents the virgin daughter, while the short leaf (*kattai ilai*) and the mature, coarse leaf (*karattai ilai*) represent young and old women respectively (Daniel 1996). The tea bush is worshipped as the *kozhuntu sami* (tea deity), and fertility rituals are performed for the *kozhuntu sami* by auspicious women to make the tea plants fertile. They involve the decoration and garlanding of a tea bush, the offering of auspicious food and objects signifying fertility, and the redistribution of the deity's food leavings to mothers and children. Barren women and menstruating women are considered inauspicious (*dosham*) and impure and are tabooed from participating in these rituals for fear of offending the deity. The fertility rituals on the fields parallel the fertility rites performed by women who go on pilgrimage to the temple at Munneswaram on the island's western coast to pray for the gift of children (*pillai varam*). Women refer to the tea plants as their 'children' since they contribute to the dual image of women as producers (as tea pluckers) and reproducers (of tea and children).

The rituals and offerings that take place in the male spaces of the estates correspond to the work that men do, and are directed towards

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specific male deities—the factory deity (*rotha muni sami*), the nursery deity (*thavarai muni sami*), and the pruning deity (*kavathu muni sami*). Women, with the exception of those who have passed menopause, are not allowed to participate in male rituals. The rituals and shrines to the *thotta sami*s and *lingam* (phallic) idols, in various parts of the estate landscape, are intended to protect the workers from accidents, insect bites and poisonous reptiles, and to ensure the overall well-being of the workers and the estate itself.

Male superiority in estate life is affirmed and reproduced at work and in the household in multiple ways. The work of women as tea pluckers and as tippers (those who maintain the height of the tea bush after its 'first flush' or appearance of shoots) is derided as 'woman's work, soft and silly', and women workers are disparagingly described as 'basket carriers', a reference to the huge baskets of tea leaves strapped around their shoulders. Such belittling ignores the care, precision and timeliness that are part of tea plucking, for overplucking (excessive) and underplucking (plucking of premature leaves) of tea leaves affect both the productivity of the tea bushes and the wages of women (Daniel 1996).

A typical work day of a tea plucker begins long before 7 A.M., at which time she has to report to the muster shed for daily instructions. The management does not tolerate tardiness and women are literally 'chased out' (*viratturathu*) if they are even a few minutes late for the muster. The zero tolerance for lateness overlooks the tight morning schedule women have at home even before they leave for work. The lack of running water and toilet facilities in many of the line-rooms forces the workers, especially women, to rise early and go the bushes and nearby streams for their morning ablutions and washing. Mothers have to accompany their pubescent daughters in the early hours of the morning as young girls cannot be left alone while bathing in open places. In addition, mothers and their daughters clean and sweep the line-rooms, make offerings to the gods and cook for their families before starting their long trek to the tea fields. Plucking women make at least three visits a day to the weighing shed to have their pickings weighed and recorded; very often, they use the lunch break to rush home to prepare lunch for the men and children. The management gives lactating mothers time off for crèche visits to feed their infants, but the crèches are not always located in proximity to plucking areas and the women have to walk some distance to and from the crèches. Although the plucking work ends at 4:30 P.M., the estate women's working day continues long after that in their line-rooms. While ridiculed by men as 'basket carriers', estate women in fact carry the

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double burden of wage work and homemaking. They perform the bulk of the domestic work, including cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood, washing clothes, tending vegetable gardens and cattle, and taking care of the children.

In contrast, men's work on the estates is primarily factory and maintenance work (which is piece-rate work) and they have a shorter work day, from 7 A.M. to 1:30 P.M. All men and many women consider men's work to be 'macho' and physically more demanding than the plucking work done by women. Men's household tasks are generally restricted to grocery shopping, tending the cattle and occasionally collecting firewood and attending to line-room repairs. The arrival of television in the estates has provided a major distraction to some of the working men and male youth who spend their afternoons watching television, while women hurry back from the fields to prepare meals for them. Men are reluctant to help women with domestic chores as these are treated as 'women's work'.

Men assume the position of the household head (*veetu thalaivar*) and enjoy the privileges associated with this position. Although women contribute substantially to household finances, men are assigned the 'provider role' on the ideological premise that it is the man 'who puts rice on the plate' (*soru poduravar*). Women refer to their husbands as being '*oru padi usathi*' (one step higher), or simply consider themselves as their husbands' 'slaves' (*adimaihal*). Male superiority is manifested in the household routine and etiquette. Thus a woman must not refer to her husband by his name; she must tolerate and not reciprocate demeaning forms of address; she must serve her husband's meals and must wait till he finishes eating before she eats; and she must forego the available sleeping cot to her husband and consign herself to the cold floor (Philips 2003a).

Estate households own very little property, but the little they have can be seen to be gendered as male goods and female goods with regard to their acquisition, use and ownership. The government-owned line rooms, the small garden plots in front of them, the cattle that some households possess as well as electronic or leisure goods such as radios and television sets are considered male goods. Women typically associate with female goods such as kitchen utensils, 'showcases' (cabinets), sewing machines and jewellery. Women collect jewellery with a passion, and for this purpose they accumulate small amounts of money by contributing to the *cheetu* fund, which is an informal form of saving among kin and neighbours in Sri Lanka.

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Until 1984, men were paid higher wages than women, and women's wages were generally collected by male household heads. Wages are now equal but the practice of men collecting their household women's wages has not stopped altogether. Older women often have little control over the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) that they collect on retirement after having contributed to it throughout their working lives. The collection and control of women's EPF accruals are for the most part in the hands of husbands and sons. The male justification for controlling household finances is that 'women know nothing about money'. On the contrary, it is women who are careful about money and save money for expenses related to their children's education, their daughters' puberty and marriage ceremonies, and for buying jewellery. Men, on the other hand, are notorious for throwing money away on gambling and drinking. Alcoholism among men is a major community problem, and it is always the woman who bears the brunt of its impact on the family.

Women bear their double burden of work at home and in the fields with poignant sarcasm, calling it the 'fulsome boon we have received from the gods' (*ithu engalukku pongi vantha varam*), while men attribute women's burdens to their karma and the 'sin of female birth' (see also Egnor 1980, for similar ideas among south Indian communities). As if to thank the gods for their plight, women are assigned the tasks of praying and performing domestic rituals such as decorating the front step (*kolam*), lighting oil lamps, offering flowers to and garlanding sacred pictures and idols, sanitising the home with cow dung, and offering prayers for their husbands and family members. Prayer and worship are intermingled with domestic tasks. Women pray to the gods for a successful day, and they pray before lighting the hearth, cooking the rice meal, and cleaning the pots and pans at the end of the day.

Male superiority and female subordination are seamlessly carried over from the line-rooms to the tea fields where women workers are infantilised, patronised and even insulted by their male counterparts and supervisors. Male *kangan*ies who supervise gangs of women pluckers are known to wield the baton to intimidate their women charges; they abuse women in obscene language, as well as pursue and proposition any woman whom they fancy whenever she is isolated from her group. Stereotypes of women as irrational, impulsive, emotional and sexually weak are commonplace in the estates, and are used to belittle women's work and abilities, to keep them permanently as tea pluckers and to deny them promotion within the plantation labour hierarchy and leadership roles in the community.

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Murugiah, a *kangany,* described the women pluckers under him as 'brainless, lacking ambition, incapable of responsibility and initiative, and sexually loose'. Muthiah, another male *kangany*, asserted that women can never be supervisors because 'workers will not have respect for a sexually loose woman'. He cited the case of the only woman to be appointed as a *kangany* in an estate. She was appointed to succeed her deceased husband who was a *kangany*. But the woman did not last long as *kangany*; she was fired when she became romantically involved with a younger man. Although she was known to be an excellent worker, her supposedly 'immoral' character destroyed her work record. Women's docility is used to label them unsuitable for supervisory positions, but women who 'question' their male supervisors are viewed as 'aggressive' and as 'trouble-makers'. Women in one of my focus group sessions attested that women workers who 'question' or 'speak up' in front of their supervisors are immediately branded as 'loose women' or 'prostitutes'. One of the estate managers I interviewed told me that he had to fire a female clerical worker because she was 'too aggressive' with her superiors and was a woman of 'loose' morals. I later learnt from my women informants that the dismissed woman had been the victim of physical abuse by a male staff worker over a work-related disagreement, but no action had been taken against the latter.

The management's emphasis on increasing the quantity of tea produced translates into great pressure being put on women pluckers to increase their daily poundage. The daily plucking norm has been increasing over the years (it now ranges between 15 and 25 kg per day in different estates). A plucker must meet the daily norm to qualify for the minimum wage and the management gives a cash incentive to ensure daily attendance by pluckers. Male workers, on the other hand, face reduced working hours and job insecurity in the light of cutbacks in nursery, pruning and maintenance work. This puts even more pressure on women, who are concerned with the loss of income to their families because of management cutbacks. Inadequate maternity, healthcare and childcare facilities, lack of water supply and toilets, tea-field hazards like insects, reptiles and leeches are among the main concerns of women. They are seldom addressed by the management and nor are the women empowered to voice their concerns in the trade unions and before the management.

Women are excluded from leadership positions in cultural and trade union organisations. They are not allowed to serve on the estate temple boards and are given only a token presence in the plantation trade unions, which are dominated by men. Nevertheless, women workers are mobilised

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in full force whenever the trade union leadership decides on a labour demonstration or strike action. There is an organisation for women called the Mathar Sangam (Women's Congress) that is affiliated to the main trade union, but its main responsibilities and duties are an extension of women's traditional subordinate roles at home and at work. During my field research in 2000, the plantation trade unions and management were negotiating their periodical collective agreements over wages and benefits. Women were not represented in the negotiations, nor were they consulted about their work and wages, their special needs, and the lack of facilities on the estates to serve those needs. Women workers with whom I spoke were dissatisfied with the wage increase as it did not fully reflect their increased work loads. Vasantha, a woman organiser on an estate, complained that women's special needs are not addressed in the collective agreements. Some of the male trade union officials whom I interviewed dismissed women's concerns as congenital whining. They insisted that women lacked the education and experience to be included in labour negotiations and that by their 'cultural traditions' women were limited to domestic roles.

IV
Gender mediation in kinship and marriage

The kinship system among the plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka has strong similarities to the kinship system among the non-Brahmin Tamils of south India (Kapadia 1995). Kin-based relationships in the plantations are not grounded in the collective ownership and devolution of lineage-based property. The kinship system derives its sustenance from the organisation of plantation labour, and kin-based relationships are established and manifested through the worship of lineage deities and through reciprocal obligations at life-cycle rituals. More importantly, kinship practices in the estates have created a broad kin-based support system for individuals and families, especially for women who struggle between work and home on a daily basis.

The effective kin on the estates are the patrilineal *pankalikal*, i.e., sharers or co-parceners (see Jain 1970 on Malaysia; Jeyaraman 1975 on Sri Lanka; and Rudner 1990 on south India). The *pankali* unit is of shallow genealogical depth due to the nature of the migration of Estate Tamils from south India (Jeyaraman 1975). Descent is patrilineal and males are the conduit for the transmission of family names and succession to household headship. The idiom of kinship (*sontham*) encompasses all close

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relationships, even extending beyond the patrilineal *pankali* group. The *kudumpam* (family) is the patri-virilocal nuclear and extended family household in which consumption, childcare and all the tasks related to family reproduction are organised. The *kudumpam* also refers to the larger grouping of *sonthakkarar* (kin), comprising kin and affines within and outside individual estates. The term *sonthakkarar* includes a wide range of recognised kin—close, distant, marriageable and un-marriageable—among consanguines and affines, although this distinction, as among other Dravidian kinship groups, is complicated by the system of close marriages that make affines out of consanguines. The Jaffna Tamils in northern Sri Lanka have an identical term which, according to Kenneth David (1973: 533), means 'people of equivalent blood purity'. A similar term, *pavula*, describes the grouping of kindred among the Sinhalese in the North-Central Province of Sri Lanka (Leach 1961), and among the Sinhalese in the central highlands (Yalman 1962).

Kin support has pragmatic uses for estate women who are the main sufferers from the lack of facilities in the plantations catering to their special needs. Kinship mutuality and reciprocity enable related women of different households to exchange resources; share the burden of caring for the children, the elderly and the sick; exchange jewellery, clothing and household goods; and comfort and support one another during domestic disputes. This support extends beyond kin to include non-kin as well. Kinship relations between estate residents are further reinforced through marriage ties that promote a high degree of relatedness among families within the closed confines of the estates. While such relations are beneficial to women in a pragmatic sense, kinship, marriage and related rituals also reinforce women's subordinate status vis-à-vis men in the domestic sphere, and extend it to the organisation of estate labour.

Women as well as men are extensively socialised for their unequal kinship roles, and the women play out their subordinate roles throughout their life-cycle stages as daughters, wives, mothers and widows. At the same time, informally and individually, women also use kinship and marriage rules and relations to their advantage to define their own sense of self within marriage and the family. Gender socialisation and the preparation of women and men for their respective gender roles are achieved through life-cycle rituals and through the exemplification of the 'ideal woman' in the community discourse, the Tamil media, and the infectiously popular Tamil films from south India. The ideal woman personifies the virtues of wifehood, motherhood, nurturing and sacrifice, and suppresses a woman's supposedly inherent and disruptive sexual urges. Marriage

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rituals project the image of the ideal wife—virtuous, auspicious and the bearer of children—and distract from the painful realities of married life as experienced by many estate women. Women as 'childbearers' are valued and assigned 'feminine' qualities of beauty and completeness. A mother's *azhahu* (beauty), in Tamil discourse, refers not so much to physical attractiveness as to her *niraivu* (completeness). As agents of reproduction, Tamil women's bodies are revered as repositories of 'divinity, sanctity and purity' (Lakshmi 1990: 72). In contrast, widows (*vidavai*) are considered inauspicious and blamed for their husband's demise, while barren (*malati*) women are condemned as unattractive, malevolent and envious demons (*pey*s).

The ritual and ideological constructions of womanhood and the associated attributes of wifehood and motherhood converge in the idea of women as *kudumpa penkal* (family women). The identification of the woman with the home is captured in the literary and common Tamil terms for wife (*illal*, *ahathidayal*, *manaivi*, etc.), all of which are derived from the corresponding terms for a house or home: *il*, *aham* and *manai*. The idealisation of women as *kudumpa penkal* often has ambivalent meanings for women and men. Women use the phrase as a positive reminder of their responsibility for the well-being of the family and the care of the home: '*kudumpa nalangalil urimayum, veetu urimayum pennukku thaan irukku*'. They claim that the prosperity and well-being of the family is due to their own efforts. They save money, invest in jewellery and household goods and support their children's education, even though in many instances women are helpless against alcoholic and/or abusive husbands who spend the family earnings and pawn women's jewellery for drinking and gambling. On the other hand, men, both young and old, generally view women as 'childbearers, homemakers, dependent wives, sisters and mothers', and cast themselves in the cinematographic images of 'heroes, villains, aggressors, fathers, breadwinners, protective brothers, lovers, and husbands' (male focus groups in the present study).

Gender socialisation begins at birth. The birth of a child is welcomed and celebrated on the estates regardless of the newborn's sex, although a higher premium is placed on the birth of a son than on a daughter. The common perception is that a family is 'incomplete' (*niraivu illai*) without a son. A son is the carrier of the descent line, the protector of his sisters and the provider for his parents in their old age (see also Das 1976; Madan 1989; Mandelbaum 1970). My informants also provided another rationale for their son bias. Female babies are believed to have statistically higher birth and survival rates, and for this reason the birth of a boy is

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viewed as 'special', while that of a girl is 'common'. There is no evidence, however, of daughters being despised or viewed as an economic burden among the Estate Tamils. Young girls can be, and usually become, additional income earners for the family by working as tea pluckers, domestic workers (in middle-class Sri Lankan homes and in the Middle East), or as workers in Sri Lanka's textile factories. In many instances, the eldest daughter substitutes as 'mother' to her siblings if the mother is either away working in the Middle East or has died prematurely. Because of their 'domestic usefulness', young girls are pulled out of school for the slimmest of reasons while their male counterparts are encouraged (although not always successfully) to pursue their education. Thus, from an early age, plantation women are trained in their future roles as mothers and homemakers, in addition to being wage earners.

The female rituals of puberty, marriage, reproduction and widowhood reflect and reinforce restrictive ideologies about women's innate nature and gender roles. Female personhood is also defined by marriage, the capacity to bear children and attachment to husbands, and all these are believed to be influenced by planetary constellations. In the south Indian Tamil world view, a woman is incompletely gendered until she menstruates and has children (Kapadia 1995). The puberty rite has thus been described as a symbolic marriage which prepares a menarchal girl for eventual marriage and motherhood (see Good 1991; Kapadia 1995). Karuppiah, whose granddaughter's puberty ceremony I attended, explained to me the significance of the 'coming of age'(*vayasukku varathu*) ceremony among Estate Tamils. He explained that although a girl's menstruation might be an auspicious occasion on account of its association with reproduction, the 'sin of female birth' makes it an inauspicious time for herself and her family, particularly if there are astrological flaws associated with the time of first bleeding. Even in the case of a good menstrual horoscope, a girl's vulnerability to inauspicious planetary influences makes the ritual of *punyadanam* (merit-increasing gifts, given around the 31st day after the first bleeding), and the *sutturadu* (circling) ceremony required to minimise her ritual impurity and to transform her sin of being female into merit-increasing acts for the well-being of the family. Karuppiah's explanation is consistent with non-Brahmin Tamil notions about planetary constellations and the 'blood bond' that exists between a menarchal girl and her extended kin (Kapadia 1995: 70). The person who is most affected by the pubescent girl's planetary co-ordinates is the girl's *tai maaman* (mother's brother and potential father-in-law) who is a central figure and generous gift giver in the ritual of puberty. Karuppiah's insistence

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that 'nothing must be left to chance' also indicates that women are considered to be potentially dangerous persons. The more auspicious the occasion, the more vulnerable are women and their kin to ritual danger (Kapadia 1995).

The 'danger' associated with women, however, has much to do with cultural ideas about women's innate nature and sexuality, and the very real experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation of Estate Tamil women by family members and outsiders (see Winslow 1980 on other Sri Lankan communities). In the plantation gender discourse, the moral imperatives of transcendence from the 'biological' to the 'social' (see Das 1976) place a greater demand on women who, according to Indian gender constructions, are endowed with stronger sexual powers (Narayanan 1990; Reynolds 1980; Wadley 1994). Sithirai, an elderly mother of two married daughters, explained the unbridled sexuality of women as stemming from women's innate 'emotional, spontaneous and irrational' nature. Her daughter Tamarai continued: 'This is also why girls are generally born five days before the expected date, boys are born on the date expected. This is an indication of women's hastiness and lack of reason. Boys think before they act, girls act without thinking.' Hence the Tamil proverb: *penn puthy pinn puthy* (woman's wisdom is belated wisdom). The female tendency to 'hook onto boys' (*sernthu kozhuvirathu*) makes it necessary to control women. Thus, Lourdes Mary, one of my female informants, asserted that 'if there is no control, they will go astray'. Thus, the excessive sexuality of women must be curbed and diverted for the greater good of the family through the unifying, sacrificial and ritual roles of women within marriage, family and kinship (see Egnor 1980). 'Empowerment through deprivation', as Bagchi (1996: 123) has aptly noted, seems to be a common theme underlying female gender constructions and kinship and marriage roles in the plantations. Male sexuality, on the other hand, requires no cultural suppression because it is believed to be part of a normal unfolding of masculinity. Puberty rites express many of these ideas about women. Through these rites a girl is symbolically transferred from an 'asexual world to a sexual one'. Since menstruation is believed to increase body heat (sexual energy), the menarchal girl is cooled through seclusion, appropriate food and avoidance taboos (she must not lay eyes on a man), and gender-role socialisation; and is made ready to be 'transported' to a moral and rule-ordered world defined by marriage, motherhood and control by husbands (see also Reynolds 1980: 40–42).

'Being a family' (*kudumpamaha irikurathu*) is how women describe sexual relations within marriage. Marriage (*kalyanam*) in Sanskrit means

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'auspiciousness' (Narayanan 1990), and it confers on women a social identity and respectability through attachment to their husbands, who have 'chosen' them as their wives. The act of 'choosing' is always the man's right, whether marriages are arranged by elders or contracted by individual choice. The recording of a girl's horoscope (*jathakam*) begins at birth and continues through her first menstruation when a second horoscope is taken to find the ideal spouse. Horoscope matching is intended to ensure the sexual compatibility of spouses and balance their individual personal qualities. Sivapakiam, a retired tea plucker, emphasised the importance of *amaithi* (passivity), *porumai* (patience) and *panivu* (obedience) as ideal qualities for a wife, and suggested that aggressiveness and anger in a man are complementary qualities.

If the horoscopes match (*jathaka porutham*), a *tali* (marriage pendant) marriage can take place since they are described as having *tali porutham* (*tali* matching). The tying of the *tali* by the groom is the central rite of a Tamil marriage. The *tali*, suspended on a yellow thread or gold chain, represents the rite of passage that marks a woman's transformation from virgin to wife. The *tali* is the woman's 'protective amulet' that signifies the protector role of the husband (Reynolds 1980: 45) and defines her sexual, marital and domestic boundaries. This notion is embodied in the Tamil idiom, '*tali pennukku veli*' (the *tali* is a woman's fence). In marriages without matching horoscopes, there is no *tali* ceremony, only a registration. In such instances, the *tali* ceremony is belatedly held after the first child is born, since childbirth may dispel the ill effects of non-matching horoscopes. As it is the husband who renders a woman *cumangali* (auspicious married woman) by marrying her, it is the duty of the wife to reciprocate the honour through rituals for the well-being and long life of the husband and, by cleansing and worshipping the *tali*, to demonstrate her devotion and fidelity to her husband.

Becoming a mother enhances a woman's position among her affinal kin and strengthens her relationship with her husband. Barrenness is a common excuse for a husband to contract another union. Hence, women regard children as an insurance against abandonment by husbands. Women routinely undertake the pilgrimage to the temple at Munneswaram on the island's western coast to pray for the gift of children (*pillai varam*). Ritual offerings to the goddess Uttarai Kali (the destroyer of female foetuses) are also undertaken as safeguards against non-conception and miscarriages.

Barren women are ridiculed as *malati penn* and penalised through social exclusion and ritual inconspicuousness. They are not allowed to

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participate in the fertility rites to the *kozhuntu sami* (tea deity) and have to take a backseat in family rituals. Krishnaveni (age 23) has been married six years and has not produced a child. Her husband's friends have been urging him to take another wife, although Krishnaveni has been given a clean bill of health by the estate doctor. Krishnaveni's husband has been advised by the doctor to avoid alcohol as he has a low blood count, but her mother-in-law is blaming Krishnaveni and is angry that the daughter-in-law is refusing to go on pilgrimage to Munneswaram. Childless married women use ingenious methods to avoid the social stigma of barrenness. They transfer the responsibility for 'barrenness' from their own bodies onto the bodies of the goddess Uttarai Kali and other malevolent spirits. Feigning pregnancy and miscarriage is another coping tactic since the blame can then be placed on the malevolent goddess. Devakanni, a young tea plucker, has been diagnosed by other women as having 'gone mad' because she claims to have miscarried twice, a claim which her friends say is untrue. Miscarrying is thus preferable to being stigmatised as a *malati penn* (barren woman). But a man's impotence is never in question, nor is he blamed for his wife's childlessness.

Like women without children, women who have lost their husbands become ritually inauspicious and socially inconspicuous. Songs sung at a man's funeral depict the wife as a sinner who longs to join her husband (Sothimalar 1993: 54). Women in one of the focus group discussions remarked that 'a woman has life only when her husband is alive, but once the husband is dead the woman's life is over.' When a woman is widowed, the ritual of *tali* removal takes place sixteen days after her husband's death; in the case of a registered marriage, the cutting of a string attached to a plantain tree signifies the end of her marital state. The widow's jewellery is removed and her bangles are broken to mark her freedom from containment within the boundaries of marriage. The 'freedom' that comes with widowhood adversely affects young widows, who are often the objects of male sexual attention and the subjects of community gossip about their moral character. If the widow has a son, he inherits her *tali* and takes on the role of provider. Lower-caste widows can overcome the negative state of widowhood through remarriage; they are also allowed more freedom in terms of attire. However, upper-caste widows do not have the same privileges. The community does not sanction remarriage and they must adhere to an appropriate code of conduct, attire (wearing white) and adornment (avoiding jewellery and the *pottu* [bindi]) appropriate to the widowed state.

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The kinship system among the Estate Tamils, as among the Sinhalese, indigenous Tamils and Muslims of Sri Lanka, and among other Dravidian Tamil communities in south India, is characterised and sustained by cross-kin marriages. Although marriages are arranged by parents and/or elder kin, marriage by choice (*virumbiya kalyanam*) is not uncommon in the estates. Not all arranged marriages are kin marriages, and not every marriage of choice is a non-kin marriage. Kin and non-kin marriages are terminologically differentiated: a kin marriage of any type—whether involving close (*kitta)* or distant (*thura*) cousins, or uncle and niece—is described as *sontha kalyanam* (marriage with our own), while non-kin marriages are called *pirathiylai seytha kalyanam* (marriage contracted outside the kin circle). There are also other types of unions on the estates, such as the sororate, the levirate, sororal (co-wives being sisters) and associative (unrelated wives) polygynous unions. Polygyny is not generally approved of by the community, and women, in particular, do not favour such unions. Like their colonial predecessors, planters and estate staff typically attribute such marital practices to sexual promiscuity among the estate men and women. However, what is seldom mentioned is that these 'irregular' unions are also influenced by the general monotony of life and the overcrowded living arrangements on the estates.

Kin marriages mostly involve classificatory cross-cousins and, to a lesser extent, uncle–niece marriages. Both the mother's brother's children (MBC) and father's sister's children (FZC) are marriageable (*kalyana murai*) cross-cousins and are equally preferred, while parallel cousins (children of same-sex siblings) are prohibited as marriage partners.[3] '*Sonthathai pahthukakurathu*' (preserving kinship) is the formal explanation given by my older informants for cross-cousin and other kin marriages. But mate selection in both kin and non-kin marriages is influenced more by social, economic and gender constraints and pragmatic considerations than by categorical preferences. Cross-cousin marriages are facilitated by the close living of kin in contiguous lines, while other forms of kin marriages are encouraged by a combination of mutually reinforcing

[3] Bilateral cross-cousin marriages among south Indian and Sri Lankan communities have been variously explained as reflecting bilateral tendencies within patrilineal groups and the maintenance of family property (Goody 1990; Tambiah 1989; Yalman 1967); the unity of cross-sex siblings (Leach 1961; Yalman 1967); alliance and affinity (Dumont 1953); and 'prior considerations of marriageability' based on the sharing or non-sharing of gendered substances (Busby 1995), or the degree of blood links (David 1973; Kapadia 1995).

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factors such as economic immobility, sub-caste endogamy, and small marriage pools. These conditions also promote marriages between parallel cousins, which the estate Tamils describe as *murai mariya kalyanam* (irregular unions), usually the result of marriage by choice, or *virumbiya kalyanam*, in local parlance.

There are also other motives and interests behind close-kin marriages, and women and families use kin marriages in instrumental ways to pursue those interests. My female informants view close-kin marriages as their insurance against violence, abuse and abandonment by their husbands. Marital violence is a serious problem for the estate women, along with alcoholism and infidelity on the part of their husbands. Women reason that men from their kin group are likely to be more understanding, tolerant and affectionate, as husbands, than men from outside the kin group. As Rajeswari, an 18-year-old who is married to her maternal uncle, explained, 'a woman could more easily secure the affection of her husband if he is kin and not a stranger' (Philips 2003a). Women also expect that, in close-kin marriages, they can rely on family elders to exercise some control over misbehaving husbands.

Older women who are married to non-kin or distant kin use their children's marriages to strengthen consanguineal kinship ties on their side. In such situations, a woman will exercise her formal right to claim her brother's child as a spouse for her own child (see also Yalman 1967 on the Kandyan Sinhalese) and foreclose the opportunity for parallel claims on her husband's side. Married women who suffer domestic violence, or have alcoholic husbands or hostile affines, try to prevent their children marrying on the husband's side. I have met elderly women with health problems who exercised their claim on their nieces to marry their sons because they urgently needed a daughter-in-law to whom to pass on the responsibilities of housekeeping.

However, close-kin marriages do not always provide the insurance that women hope for. How close-kin marriages turn sour is illustrated by the case of Rita, who married her *machaan* (cross-cousin) on her father's side at the insistence of her *maami* (father's sister), who wanted a daughter-in-law to take over the domestic tasks. As Rita's husband was working on a different estate, she had to leave her own estate and move in with her affines on a new estate. She informed me that although she was somewhat pushed into the marriage, she accepted it for the sake of kin obligations and in the hope that she would also be the beneficiary of kinship ties. Her marital experience quickly turned sour for, soon after she moved into her affinal home, her father-in-law died and Rita was

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blamed for bringing misfortune to the family. Her paternal aunt, and now her mother-in-law, became vicious and abusive to the point of forcing Rita to move back to her natal estate. She was later joined by her husband, who left his own estate and moved into hers. When I met Rita, she was working as a tea plucker in her natal estate and her husband was unemployed because of the restrictive hiring practice under which men who move out of their estates to the wife's estate are not hired immediately by the latter estate.

Kinship ties and women's subordinate status in the kinship system also inform other types of union on the estates, such as a man's marriage to the widow of his deceased brother (levirate), a woman's marriage to the widower of her deceased sister (sororate), as well as multiple unions (additional mates) by men. A levirate marriage might serve as a pragmatic solution to the dreaded state of widowhood. When Navamany (age 49) became a widow, her husband's brother (also her cross-cousin) from another estate began visiting her regularly and developed a relationship with her. The fact that her brother-in-law was a married man did not discourage Navamany, who explained to me that as a *pankali* (partner) her brother-in-law was fulfilling his kinship obligations to care for his brother's children. He eventually left his wife to form a secondary union with Navamany. 'It is difficult to live without a husband', she told me, as if to justify her new union. She did not seem to realise that this was equally true for the wife her brother-in-law had abandoned.

Multiple unions involving both sororal polygyny (with the wife's sister as an additional mate) and associative polygyny (where the second mate is unrelated to the first) are not accepted by the first wives, although they are often constrained to tolerate them for the sake of economic security and peace, and because of the fear of being abandoned altogether. In multiple unions, men tend to neglect their financial responsibilities towards their first wives and children. Pushpavalli, a middle-aged woman whose husband had abandoned her for another woman, is an example of women's ambivalence vis-à-vis their polygamous husbands. The women's dilemma, according to her, is that, on the one hand, 'taking the husband to court is against our custom', while on the other hand, 'women lack both the resources and access to legal services to take their husbands to court even if they wanted to'. Tamarai, whose husband had taken her sister as a second mate, offered a religious explanation for her predicament, noting that 'men asked a *varam* (boon) from the gods that they be allowed to marry a hundred times; but women can marry only once.'

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Sevathi Amma was married in India at the age of twelve and came to Sri Lanka with her husband who is now a retired estate worker. After a year of marriage and no sign of conception, her husband brought his divorced 16-year-old niece to their home as a second wife. Sevathi Amma spent the first few years of her marriage helping her co-wife and the children of that union. She had three children of her own in later years. Her young age and fear of being abandoned without her natal family to support her forced her to remain with her husband. In cases such as this, men use their wives' infertility as the excuse for infidelity, while women are socialised to take responsibility for their perceived reproductive failures and the sexual transgressions of their husbands.

In many cases of extramarital union, men take sexual advantage of their young sisters-in-law while living in matrilocal residence, in overcrowded extended family households. At times the relationship is consensual and develops as a result of shared living space. A woman whose husband had forced himself on her sister tried to mitigate her husband's infraction by alluding to the 'special blood bond' between sisters. What might begin as a 'joking relationship' (Radcliffe-Brown 1977) between a man and his wife's sister, identified in many cultures as a form of platonic flirtation aimed at reducing the implicit sexual tensions between affines (cf. Kolenda 1990), invariably becomes sexual in the confined spaces of the plantations. It could also turn tragic, as has happened on the plantations, when young women have taken their own lives to escape the sexual harassment of their brothers-in-law.

Since wealth differences have not yet emerged as a factor determining marital patterns, arranged marriages primarily operate to preserve subcaste endogamy, matching individual character and attributes and maintaining the traditions of parental, particularly male, mediation in marriage. Sub-caste endogamy is the main consideration in arranged marriages. Caste is patrilineally transmitted and has several implications for women, insofar as they are considered to be more vulnerable to the pollution associated with cross-caste marriages than men. Women carry the caste status of their husbands on their bodies through body adornment and attire, as well as the type of *tali* they wear. The size, shape and design of the *tali* conveys the caste of the husband. Caste endogamy affects high- and low-caste women differently, with greater marital restrictions on high-caste than on low-caste women. High-caste women who marry outside their castes (*saathi mari kalyanam*) are shunned by family and other caste members, while men who marry below their caste status are much less ostracised. Women marrying below their caste or becoming

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friendly with men of an inferior caste are seen to be bringing shame to the family, especially to their male kin who are their protectors. Parameswary, an unmarried tea plucker from the Vellalar sub-caste, explained to me the importance of caste endogamy for her brother's honour and pride: 'If I marry outside our caste, my brother will be ashamed. He will not be able to raise his head. It doesn't matter if I remain single. My brother can hold his head high in the community.' Meenakshi, an elderly mother of four sons and a daughter observed: 'If my daughter strays by marrying outside our caste, people will say that her family has four sons and they allowed their sister to be taken away.' Thus, male vigilance and violence is justified on the grounds of preventing cross-caste unions.

The enforcement of caste endogamy limits the marriage chances of high-caste women since emigration from the estates, repatriation and voluntary migration to India have restricted the already small marriage pool among the higher castes. Where class operates as a divider within caste, the opportunities to find suitable partners within the caste are further restricted. Parameswary (age 45) is the daughter of a *kanakkapillai* (staff accountant), and she blamed her single status on the shortage of eligible men of the right caste and class on the estates. Women in the numerically larger lower castes can find partners within their own sub-castes or among other comparable groups in the community. While lower-caste families gain in status by the hypergamous marriage of their daughters, they do not always welcome such marriages because of the poor treatment extended to their daughters by their in-laws. Among the Estate Tamils, as Kapadia (1995) has noted in the case of non-Brahmin castes in Tamil Nadu, the isogamy implied in intra-caste and close-kin marriages seldom translates into gender equality in the marital relationship, where male superiority always prevails. In all marriages—kin, non-kin, intra-caste or cross-caste—gender hierarchy influences natal, conjugal and affinal relationships.

V

Kinship, marriage and management practices

From British times, management practices have contributed to sustaining the kinship system on the plantations and the attendant subordination of women. The early importation of labour from south India was organised so as to bring clusters of kin and homogeneous castes over together and house them in contiguous lines in the expanding tea estates. The allocation

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of one line-room per family contributed to the nuclearisation of the family, but this process did not go very far because other members of the extended family were all housed in other rooms in the same or adjacent lines. The early residential arrangements continued for many years and can still be seen in some of the estates, though the allocation of living space according to caste and kinship is no longer feasible given the high demand for estate housing. Caste and kinship boundaries are interchangeable in the estates, and Leach's (1969) formulation of caste relationships as kin relationships among the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka can be applied to the estates, where sub-caste endogamy results in a high degree of relatedness within sub-castes. The caste–kinship congruence has historically facilitated labour organisation on the estates according to what Kurian (2000: 9) has called the 'family principle' of establishing homogeneous caste-kin groups as labour gangs. The patriarch of each group has traditionally served as the *silarai kangany* (minor supervisor), exercising authority over his charges while paying obeisance to the superiors above him (Kurian 1998).

The plantation management uses the system of arranged marriages involving families in different estates to maintain labour mobility in the system as a whole. Women move out of their natal estates more often than men, as out-marrying daughters and in-marrying wives, to live in viri/patrilocal residence. The circulation of women in this way benefits the management companies, as in-marrying women workers replace other women who have married out, retired or died. An in-marrying woman can find employment as a tea plucker in her new estate provided her husband is already on the estate labour force and if she had been working in her natal estate prior to marriage. On the other hand, a matrilocal husband (a man who moves to live in his wife's natal estate) is not immediately given work; he undertakes *kuli* (menial wage) work outside the estate and waits for periods of labour shortage to be hired as an estate worker. This gender discrepancy, apparently favouring women, is really a reflection of the high demand for tea pluckers, given the management's emphasis on maximising production for short-term profits, and the neglect of the maintenance work performed by men. Unemployed matrilocal husbands are assigned a lower status in the community, just as in-marrying husbands are disparaged as *veetodu mappillai* (house-husband) among the south Indian Tamils, and similarly disparaged in the *bina* marriage system of the Kandyan Sinhalese that compensates for the absence of male heirs (Yalman 1967).

Women's employment on the plantations also serves as a surrogate for dowry in their marriages. Traditional dowry demands and transactions,

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an inseparable feature of marriages in other South Asian communities, have not been a major issue on the estates, if only because the estate families do not have much property other than jewellery to give as dowry. In the absence of other forms of dowry, the woman's employment becomes a consideration in marriage transactions. Parents anticipating their daughters' marriages send them to work on the estate as soon as they reach the minimum age of 17. Estate managers show a preference for young women who often learn their plucking skills from their mothers at an early age. If they remain on the estate, they become efficient pluckers who are then put to work on high-yielding tea fields (see Kurian 1998). The efficient pluckers work as 'tippers', another female task that involves trimming the bush after the first shoots appear. A manager with surplus labour on his estate told me that he was more inclined to employ young women than men because it would improve the women's chances of marrying outside and of being re-employed on her husband's estate. From the perspective of a groom, the bride's employment brings in reliable income, enhances their conjugal claim to estate housing, and ensures post-retirement compensation in the form of the wife's Employment Provident Fund (EPF). Young estate men looking for employment opportunities outside the estates expect their wives to stay on the estates as tea pluckers and preserve the family's right to live in estate housing, and eventually claim ownership of it. Young women who had been employed before marriage as domestic workers in urban middle-class households or as factory workers in the towns are brought back to the estates and registered as workers. Since housing is tied to estate employment, families overcome the problem of eviction by ensuring that at least one member of the family is an estate worker.

As discussed earlier, the kinship system benefits women through kin-based support networks that compensate for the lack of amenities on the estates to serve the specific needs of working women with families. At the same time, the plantation managements are spared the costs of providing such amenities, which would otherwise have been unavoidable if only to ensure the social reproduction of the plantation labour. The managements are also known to deny maternity benefits to women who relocate to their husbands' estates after marriage. In one of the estates I studied, newly married women from other estates are forced to undergo a pregnancy test before they are hired as tea pluckers. If they are already pregnant they are not hired and are not entitled to available maternity benefits. In estates with growing labour supply shortages, managers are

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against family planning programmes since these would affect the long-term labour requirements of the estate. Elsewhere, the estate management and medical staff target only the women workers for sterilisation, without regard to age, reproductive stage and individual needs.[4] Sterilisation practices on Sri Lankan estates are thus connected to controlling labour supply and demands. The selective sterilisation of women, often in abusive and degrading ways, is based on stereotypical images of estate women as ignorant, docile and gullible. This perception is shared by managers, staff and midwives generally. On the whole, the estate women are keen to have small families, but resent being forced into sterilisation. Men, on the other hand, refuse even to use condoms, and the burden of limiting family size falls solely on women's shoulders.

The intersections of kinship, marriage, gender and labour that I have described so far have for long been in a state of dynamic equilibrium. This equilibrium is slowly beginning to unravel as a result of changes in the political and economic circumstances of the estates, as well as emerging gender and generational differences in values and outlook within the plantation communities (see Philips 2001b). A new generation on the plantations is keen to explore opportunities outside the estates and break out of the vicious cycle of estate living and working that had been the lot of its parents and grandparents. At the same time, they have emotional and material attachment to the *thottam*, the estate space, in that they view the line-rooms as family property and consider the plantation areas as community territory (ibid.). There is growing emphasis on education, although educational facilities on the estates are still below national standards. Employment opportunities outside the estates fall far short of the expectations of estate youth. For young women, the main opportunities are jobs in the island's export-oriented garment factories and contract recruitment as domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries.

These changes are not without implications for kinship, marriage and gender relations. The preservation of kinship ties through cross-cousin and other close-kin marriages is becoming less compelling. I have heard young women and men raising concerns about the genetic consequences of such marriages. Outside employment and increased cash flow are also causing status differences among estate workers. In the new status cycle,

[4] The men, on the other hand, are spared such ignominy owing to the androcentric cultural emphasis on male sexual virility, and the fear of physical and psychological damage to male potency.

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income from outside sources contributes to the rising status of a family. Upwardly mobile families with alternative incomes stop sending their sisters and daughters to work as tea pluckers, and this in turn creates the need for them to be dowered at marriage both as compensation for the woman's lack of income and as a signifier of the rising family status. These changes do not necessarily translate into greater freedoms for women. Increasing demands for dowry in the absence of rising incomes will place great stress on families who want to have their daughters married. Although women are as capable as men of securing work outside their estates, women face gender restrictions as to where they can work and what work they can do. For example, the community does not favour young, unmarried women working as domestics in the Middle East, and those who do will have difficulties in finding a partner in the estates. These constraints and pressures are illustrated by Jeyamangalam, who has been working in the Middle East for a few years. She is 35 and unmarried, and told me that her main purpose in life is to continue working in the Middle East to collect dowries for her two younger sisters and have them married off. Both sisters are high-school educated and are not working as tea pluckers. Just as young, educated women today favour non-estate workers as husbands, young estate men are quite explicit about what they want in wives: they must be attractive, intelligent, hard-working and obedient. They must also not be estate workers.

VI
Concluding comments

My purpose in this article has been primarily to review the kinship, marriage and gender experiences of Tamil women on Sri Lanka's tea estates and their articulations of these experiences. I will conclude with a few broad observations. The privileging of women's experiences of kinship and marriage is necessary to provide a more balanced perspective on kinship and marriage in India and Sri Lanka. The more traditional approaches have been informed by androcentric assumptions and male perspectives even as they focused on politico-jural dimensions and generalisations based on formal kinship and marriage rules. The interactions of men and women and the experiences of both are essential to understand how kinship works in practice. Estate Tamil women's experiences of kinship and marriage challenge traditional ideas about the higher status of south Indian and Sri Lankan women relative to their north Indian counterparts. On

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the contrary, the kinship and marriage system among the estate communities makes little difference to women's subordinate status.

Sociological analyses of Sri Lanka's plantation system have focused primarily on questions of political economy and colonial and class contradictions. Focusing on the largely neglected areas of kinship and gender throws light on the internal processes that are at work, revealing some of the linkages between social and production relations at a more experiential level, rather than in abstract categories. The new form of plantation production introduced in colonial Sri Lanka made use of pre-existing social and gender relations and practices among the immigrant Tamil workers and their underlying gender ideologies. Over the years, traditional values, kinship practices and production processes have combined in a seamless web to moderate the plantation production system and the life of the working community.

While both men and women are at the bottom of the plantation hierarchy, the gender constructions underlying kinship, marriage and labour place women at a considerably greater disadvantage in the family, the household and the workplace. Contrary to Ester Boserup's (1970) assertion that the women's low status flows from the failure of development processes to integrate women, the status of women in the plantations in Sri Lanka has not improved even though they have been integrated into the production process from the very inception of the plantations. It is not integration per se but the manner of their integration that matters. This article has discussed aspects of that integration and the role of kinship, marriage and gender ideologies and practices in reproducing gender inequalities within plantation production and household reproduction.

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