

CHAPTER III

THE KUDI

The Muthuvan ^{hamlet} ~~village~~ is called a kudi. So far we have used its nearest possible English equivalent such as hamlet or settlement in referring to the collective Muthuvan dwelling. In this chapter we shall try to see the nature, organization and function of the Muthuvan settlement as a kudi, for, a clear understanding of the kudi is essential in studying Muthuvan social organization. Etymologically, kudi is of Dravidian origin meaning house or hut; it also means a pair as applied to a slave and his wife in speaking of their price. On the Malabar Coast, where caste heirarchy is more precisely defined than anywhere else in India, the descriptive terms for the houses of different caste groups signify the relative social position of each group. According to this, kudi refers to the house of a Chaliar or weaver, just as mana refers to a Nambutiripadu's house, illam, to a Nambutiri's house and veedu to a Nayar's house. The house lowest in the social scale is the chala which is a Cheruman's (agrestic slave) house. At the present day, kudi refers to the dwellings of many people other than the weavers. Besides, the term is now applied to a collection of

dwellings of socially inferior groups such as the Pulayas, Parayas etc. all the same. A tribal settlement is also called a kudi, and the people of a kudi are referred to as kudikal (which is also the plural for kudi), meaning servants, subjects or slaves. An important land-owning family generally has one or more settlements of agricultural labourers hereditarily attached to its land, and such people are referred to as such-and-such a person's or such-and-such a family's kudikal. It is very much in the same sense that Muthuvans and their villages are spoken of as kudikal. The eastern Muthuvans are kudikal to the Chiefs of Poonjar, and the western Muthuvans to the Karthas of Kodikulom. But this is only a traditional relationship between the respective masters and servants, and not, at the present time at any rate, a functional relationship, because neither the Poonjar Chiefs nor the Kodikulom Karthas exercise any effective control over the hill regions where the tribes live. Nevertheless, Muthuvans consider themselves as kudikal to the respective masters. It is a point of honour, and a matter of some prestige to them to say that they are kudikal to aristocratic landlords; this is especially so with the eastern Muthuvans who are kudikal to the Poonayattu Perumals (Poonjar Chieftains) who are descendants of the ancient Pandyan kings, and were themselves once sovereign

rulers of the hill tracts.

The kudi is very different from the traditional Indian village which is a cross-sectional unit of society consisting of several castes living together in specified degrees of spatial separation, co-operation and ritual relations. On the other hand, the kudi is an aggregation of dwellings of people of the same caste or community. While the Muthuvan kudi answers to this general description of the kudi, it is more than a mere aggregation of dwellings; it has different degrees of membership; its members stand in certain definable kinship relation to each other; it is, in the main, an economically self-sufficient unit; it has important judicial functions; it is a potentially mobile unit, both in respect of membership and territoriality. These are some of the essential factors we shall consider in this chapter.

Ordinarily a tribal kudi in Travancore is an independent unit of society consisting of a few families of the same tribe or clan or other sub-group, and knows no higher judicial authority than its own headman. However, the Muthuvan kudi is different in the sense that it is the unit of a larger social organization characterised by an heirarchical order of authority; in a relative sense it

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1. See pp. 43 et seq ~~there~~ Supra, and Appendix I.

cuts across clan barriers while at the same time maintaining within itself an inter-clan web of kinship; its membership is not a status acquired directly by virtue of birth, but by a combination of other circumstances, and therefore changeable according to changes in any or all of these circumstances; it has a recognised territorial right and a range of operation which is much larger than its immediate precincts, but within this larger spatial range, it is mobile, and transcends location. In order to understand the Muthuvan kudi it might be best to consider it in its various features and functions, namely, its physical characteristics, its social function, its place in Muthuvan society as a unit of economic co-operation, the manner in which it operates as a conflict-resolving mechanism, its political and judicial function, and lastly, its role as a ritual group.

The Muthuvan kudi is a small community consisting of as few as seven or eight elementary families or as many as twenty or twenty two, seldom less or more. Unlike the traditional Indian family, the Muthuvan family is not a joint family. As soon as the sons and daughters marry, they separate from the parental house and establish households of their own. The unit of the kudi is therefore the family consisting of father, mother and their unmarried children. However, one exception to this is possible; a

FIG. 17

A TYPICAL MUTHUVAN KUDI (HAMLET)
(Note the Hills and Dense Forest in the Background)



married daughter and her husband may live with her parents to constitute a single unit of domestic and economic co-operation, but scarcely does a married son and his wife continue to live with his parents. This is closely linked up with the Muthuvan rules of succession and with clanship and property which are discussed in a later chapter.

The living house is a simple structure of grass and poles, built to last for about a year. Where the traditional pattern of moving the kudi to a new site, year after year, is followed, it is wasteful to build a house strong enough to last for several years; where the kudi remains relatively permanent in one place, the life of the house is lengthened by periodic repairs and replacement of old materials, or by building mud-and-stone walls.

The commonest practice is to build the house with poles and grass which are easy to obtain and to manipulate. First, the lower part of the framework is made with wooden pillars, each about four feet high, at the four corners, and bamboo or junglewood poles tied to the pillars horizontally, about a foot apart. The framework of the roof is made separately with similar materials, and hoisted on top of the lower framework. The two are strongly fastened together with split rattan or some other natural cord. The entire framework, upper and lower, is then covered closely and tightly with bamboo leaves or grass, or both.

Palm leaves, if available, are fastened with poles over the thatching to make the thatching stronger, and as a further protection from wind and rain.

The house is rectangular in shape, with a length of fourteen to eighteen feet, and a breadth of twelve to fourteen feet. The height at the sides is about four feet, and at the centre about eight feet. The total floor space varies from 160 to 250 square feet. There is one entrance in the front measuring about $2\frac{1}{2}'$ X $4'$, and one or two small holes each about six-inch square, on the side walls, for ventilation. Generally there is no partition inside the house, but the houses of the western Muthuvans, which are on the whole cleaner and larger, sometimes have a low mud wall partition within to separate the hearth from the living space.

One of the two inside corners serves as the cooking place, and the other as a storage place for grains, water, cooking utensils, firewood, rice-pounder and grinding stone, and odds and ends. The sleeping place is nearer the entrance and on the same side as the hearth which provides some warmth in the cold season. A goat and kids, a new-born calf, a mongrel, and a hen with her brood of chickens may share with the members of the family the cosy warmth of the house. At a height of three to four feet from the floor, and directly above the hearth, there is a

FIGS. 18 & 19

FIG. 18

SKETCH OF A MUTHUVAN DWELLING HOUSE

(Note the Only Entrance in the Front and the Two Ventilators on the Side)

FIG. 19

SKETCH OF HEARTH AND PARANA

(Drying Platform)

FIG. 18. A MUTHUVAN DWELLING HOUSE

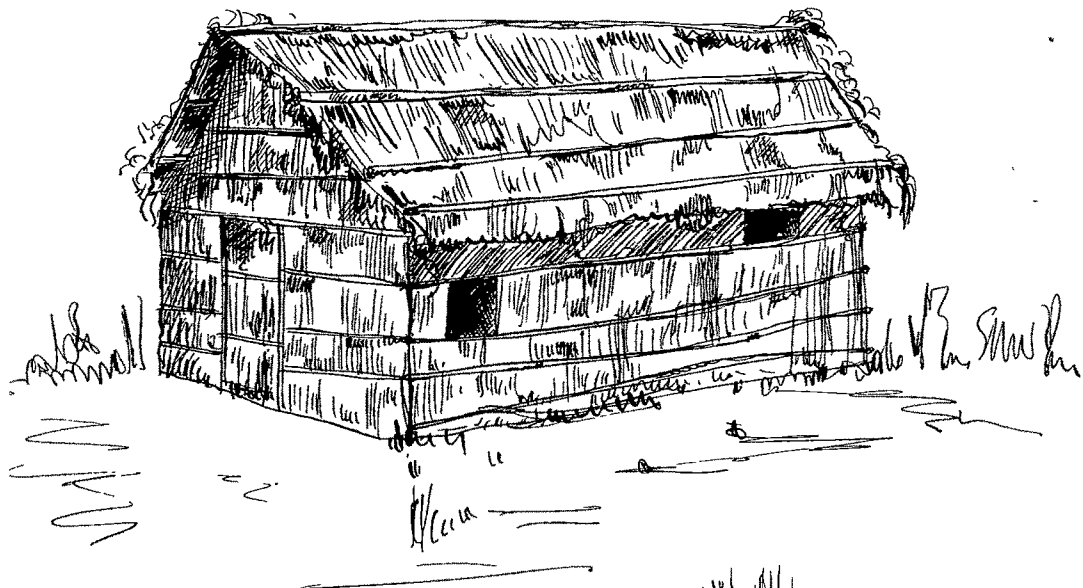
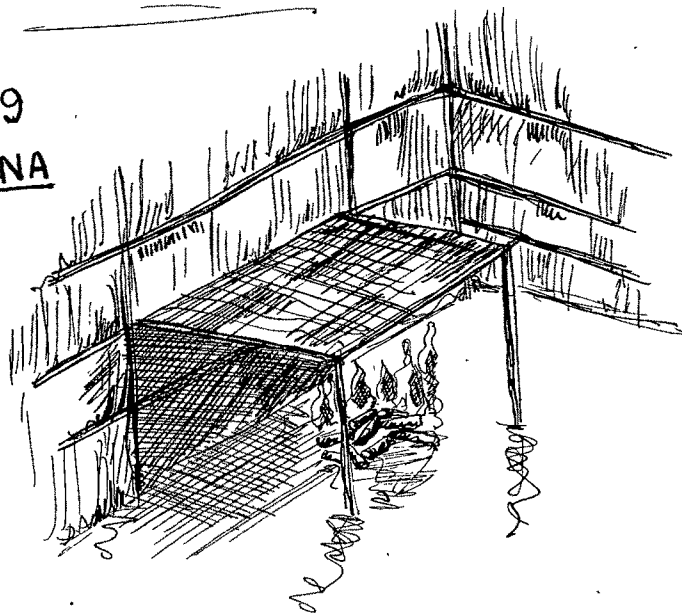


FIG. 19
PARANA



platform of bamboo poles and mats, called parana which serves the purpose of store-room, drying place etc. Wet grain is dried on this when necessary, and at other times it holds the other possessions of the house such as grain sacks, a few copper or brass vessels that are not in daily use, honey bottles and bamboo tubes, rolls of bamboo mats which are unrolled at night to sleep on, bits of old clothing and rags, hoes, hatchets, bill-hooks, rat-traps, blow-guns, baskets, fruit-shells etc. In some houses one may also find an old drum blackened with soot hanging from the rafters. In contrast to all these simple tools and equipments, one sometimes sees a formidable double-barrelled gun leaning against the mud-and-stick wall. Dog fleas, house flies, lice, bugs, cockroaches and mice thrive inside the house with little interference from the inmates. Close by the side of the house is the cattle-pen, if the family owns any cattle at all. The cattle-pen is generally an open place, but sometimes a small porch is made in front of the house, or a shed on one side, in which the animals are tethered in comparative shelter from rain and cold. A common cattle-pen enclosed by a hedge of shrubs or bits of barbed wire may be seen in some kudis.

The only piece of furniture in the house is a small square piece of wood to squat on. A woman's prized possession, other than bead necklaces and glass bangles,

is a brass vessel or two which is the only property she could conveniently pass on to her daughters without offending the conventions of inheritance.

Apart from the dwelling houses, a kudi contains one or two seclusion sheds (muttukudichi or valamappura) in which the women live during their monthly periods and confinements, a temple (kovil) and a bachelor hall (chavadi)

The muttukudichi stands at the edge of the village, as far away from the dwellings as possible, and facing away from the houses. Women in their pollution periods, including confinements, live in this shed out of sight of men. In a small kudi of seven or eight families there may be only one seclusion shed, and in a larger kudi there may be two. These sheds are constructed by the boys of the kudi, and not by the men, because it is too embarrassing for the latter to have anything to do with the shed on account of its association with a woman's intimate biological functions.

The kovil or village temple is distinguished from the other huts by its location and the neatness of its surroundings. Otherwise it looks very much like any other hut. The kovil is constructed a few yards away from the dwellings and farthest from the seclusion shed. It is generally on a prominent mound at the entrance to the kudi, and is always in a state of good repair,

FIG. 20

A MUTTUKUDICHI OR VALAMAPPURA
(Seclusion Shed for Women in Defilement)

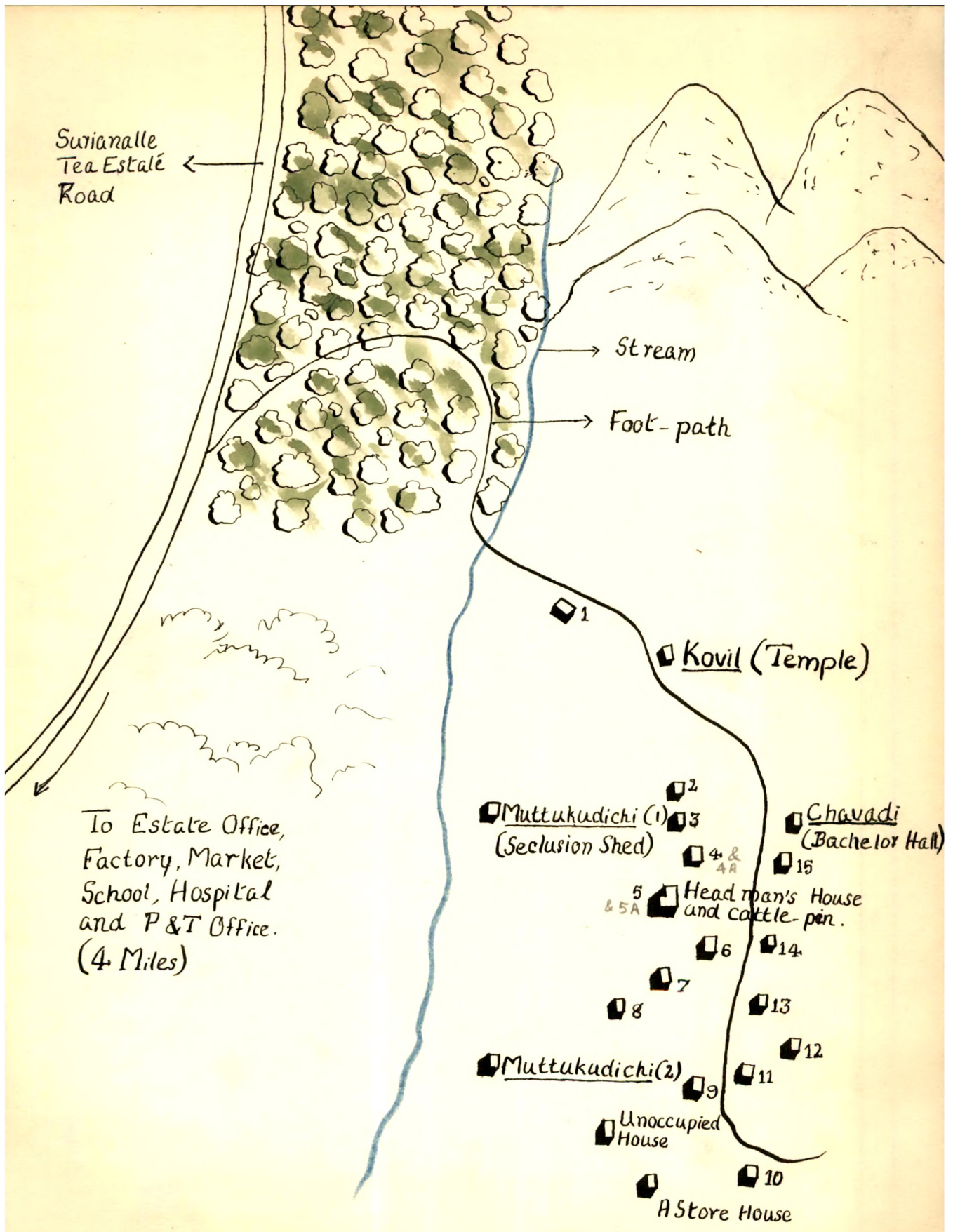


Inside, it is bare of adornments except for a raised bamboo platform on which to keep ritual objects such as rattan sticks, peacock feathers, a tin of sacred ash, a hundi box for votive cash offerings, and pictures of dieties.

The chavadi (bachelor hall) occupies an important position in the kudi. It serves the treble purpose of bachelor hall, guest house and panchayat (village council) meeting place. All boys and unmarried men of the kudi sleep in the chavadi, leaving only the young children to remain at home with the parents. In a large kudi there may be more than one bachelor hall. The unmarried girls also sleep away from their parents, but there is no corresponding 'spinster hall' for them. They sleep in one of the ordinary houses in which the man is absent for watch duty in the field, or in the house of some old widow. The girls are chaperoned by an older woman. They may sleep in a different house every night, "because", the Muthuvans say, "boys are not supposed to know where the girls sleep". The chavadi is also the guest house and panchayat meeting place. A stranger visiting the village, or one who is obliged to seek shelter there, is entertained in the chavadi. Food grain and cooking vessels are sent to the guest who may cook his own food, for Muthuvans neither accept from nor offer cooked food to non-Muthuvans.

FIG. 21

PLAN OF THE MUTHUVAN HAMLET IN SURIANALLE



The kudi is a compact community with all the houses clustered together and the members maintaining close inter-relationships with each other. It is the centre of social life, of informal education, of recreation, and of ritual activities. Communal life is an important factor in Muthuvan society. It is only natural that in a society pursuing a shifting agricultural economy, and a system of moving villages, the group sentiment is highly developed. Co-operation among many individuals is so essential in all agricultural operations, in the process of establishing a new village, and in the performance of ritual functions, that a strong group cohesion must necessarily predominate in Muthuvan society. It is indeed well-nigh impossible for an individual Muthuvan or a family to exist apart from the co-operative life of the kudi. Hence there is much emphasis on communal life and an obvious sub-ordination of individual interests to group interests. Writing on Muthuvan social organization, Mr.L.A.Krishna Iyer says:

Gregariousness has its effect on the external organization of the village, where the individual thinks in terms of the village in all matters, exclusive of his family affairs. Survivals of communal life are found even to this day in their daily life and customs. The joint clearing of the jungle for cultivation, the existence of dormitories of the unmarried

young, the participation of all the village fold in funeral ceremonies, and the existence of a village council hall for the adjudication of village disputes, bear ample evidence of the fact that the Muthuvans still appreciate the advantages of communal life.¹

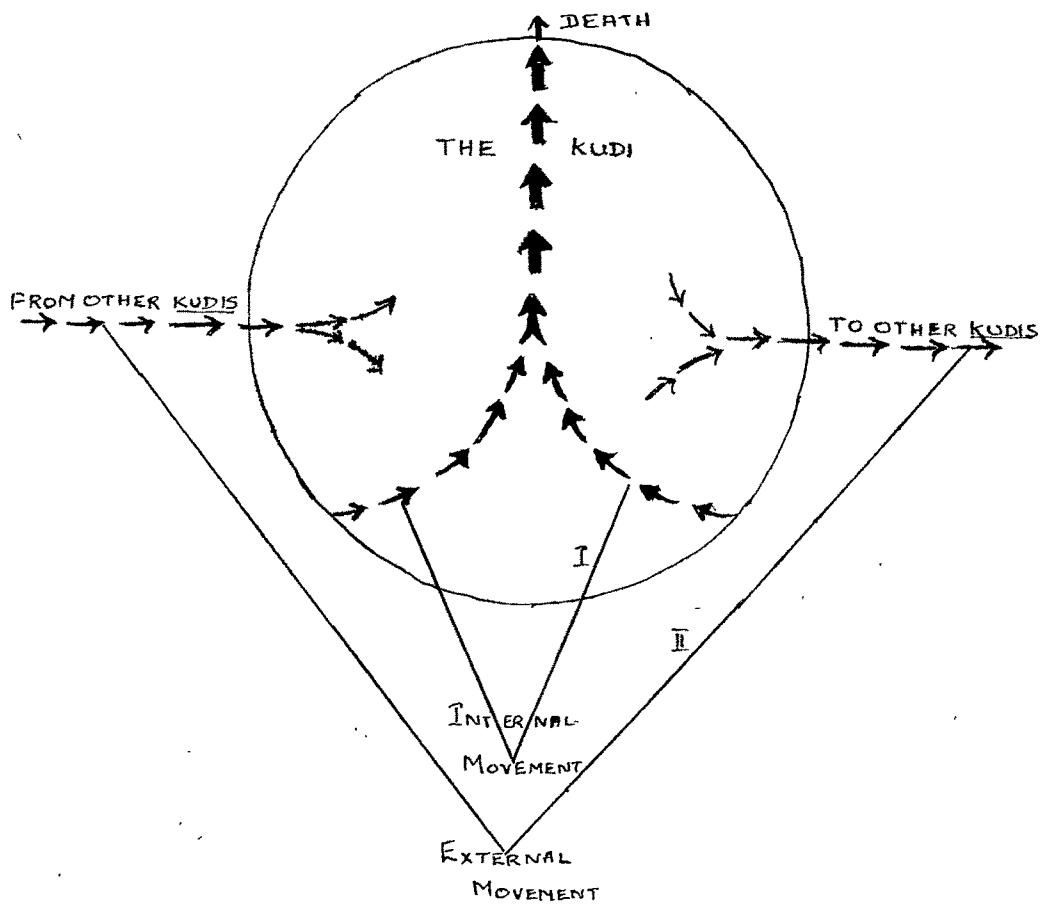
The kudi, we might then say, is the smallest effective functional unit of Muthuvan society. Taken as a unit, it is economically self-sufficient. At the same time, it must be mentioned that the kudi is an unstable unit in terms of its human element or membership. In other words, while the kudi as a social factor, and a system of sentiments, ideas and usages, is a basic element in Muthuvan society, as a collection of individuals, it is unstable and in a perpetual state of flux. There are two ways in which this takes place; first, the internal movement brought about by the death of members and the replacement of the dead by those from within; second, the external movement brought about by the voluntary outgoing of existing members and the in-coming of new members. This may be shown diagrammatically as below. (See next page)

The first type of movement is common in all societies and needs no further explanation except to show how the Muthuvan kudi adjusts itself to the situation. The second is characteristic of Muthuvan society, and perhaps also of similar societies elsewhere. The circle in the diagram

1. L.A.Krishna Iyer, op. cit., vol. ii, p. 24

FIG. 22

PATTERN OF MEMBERSHIP MOBILITY IN THE

MUTHUVAN KUDI

above represents the kudi. The upward mobility indicates the usual pattern of internal mobility in any self-contained social group, namely, that when one generation dies out the first descending generation moves higher and fills the places. Muthuvan kudi shows not only this type of movement, but also an external movement, namely, the turn-over in its membership by the in-coming of new members from outside, and the out-going of certain existing members into other kudis. The external movement thus refers to both the in-coming from outside, as well as the out-going into other groups. This movement is not haphazard as it may at first appear, but follows a recognizable pattern. This feature of the Muthuvan kudi is crucial to the understanding of the tribe's social organization.

It has already been stated that the kudi is a unit of society which, in terms of its human element, is unstable. It is unstable also in a spatial sense as it keeps moving from one site to another according as the cultivation site changes. From the point of view of the social function of the kudi, the former phenomenon is important, whereas from the point of view of economy, the latter which has already been considered in the previous chapter is important. We have seen that, in point of fact, the kudi tends to be relatively stable now on account of general changes in the Muthuvan region as a whole. At the moment we are concerned

more with the traditional kudi structure. It may be noted that even though economic factors have tended to make the kudi smaller, and relatively permanent due to infrequency of movement, the essential characteristics of it are as yet practically unchanged.

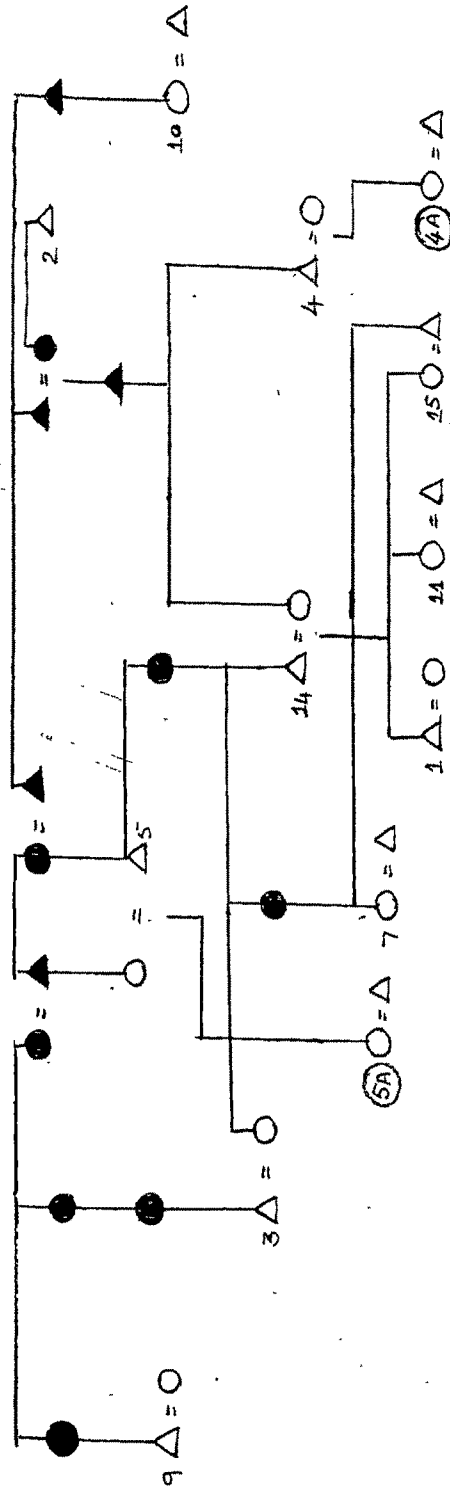
It is perhaps best to consider the kudi as consisting of a series of concentric circles, or at least two circles, mainly, which are the stable inner circle, and the changing outer circle. This may also be expressed as the core and periphery. In any given ^{hamlet} ~~village~~, there is always a core of permanent membership which consists of the headman and his close associates who are usually his matrilineal kinsmen. The periphery also consists mostly of families who can trace affinal kinship with the headman, but this is not an invariable feature; there may be one or two families who are unrelated to the headman or who are only distantly related. It is the inner circle that is the backbone of the kudi; it continues through the generations; its members are referred to as so and so of such and such kudi.

On the other hand, the outer circle is changing. Persons come into it and go out of it for various reasons, such as marriage, or economic and personal considerations. When a man marries, he usually takes up residence in his wife's kudi, in the first instance. Later on, he may

either continue as a permanent member of that kudi or return to his parental kudi. This turn-over in membership goes on all the time. It may be observed that the members involved in this are mostly of the younger generation, that is, those who have married and have not made up their mind yet regarding permanent residence. However, the membership of the kudi being generally so changeable, one notices that even after several years of residence in one kudi a family may move to another for personal or economic reasons.

Although kinship is not mentioned as a necessary condition to qualify for membership of a kudi, in actual practice, all, or nearly all, members of a kudi are related to each other by affinal or consanguinal bonds. The following chart shows the actual kinship relations among members of Pachchappul kudi. (A ^{plan}~~map~~ of this hamlet appears on page 155) No names are given in the kinship chart, only the numbers of houses as given in the diagram. No. 5 is the headman. There are only fifteen households altogether, but the total number of husband-wife pairs is seventeen. This is because a married daughter of No. 4 and a married daughter of No. 5 live with their husbands in the respective houses in addition to the parents. These two families who are members of the kudi but do not have houses of their own are marked in pencil. Thirteen out of the seventeen

FIG.23
KINSHIP AMONG MEMBERS OF A KUDI (SURIANALLE)



Numbers shown in the chart = 1,2,3,4,5, 7,9,10,11,12,13,14,15 of Fig.21

The remaining numbers 6,8,12 and 13 also trace kinship with one or other of the

families in the above network but they are distant kinsmen

Numbers 4A & 5A live with 4 & 5 respectively.

families are close kinsmen to each other. The four who are not marked in the chart are also kinsmen to other members of the kudi, but being more distant kinsmen it is difficult to trace their exact genealogical links.

One other fact which is not indicated in the chart is the clan membership of each family. All the members belong to one or other of two inter-marrying clans. In point of fact, it will be possible to trace kinship ties of varying degrees between all members of inter-marrying clans. Further, it is only members of inter-marrying clans who generally co-reside in a kudi. In any such group, therefore, it is possible to trace a net-work of kinship ties.

The most important overt function of the kudi is seen in its place in Muthuvan society as a unit of economic co-operation. The agricultural pursuits of the people call for the collective, co-operative efforts of all its members. From jungle-clearing to harvesting and threshing of sheaves, the kudi functions as a co-operative unit. The village site, as well as the cultivation site are shared among the members. It takes the joint effort of several men to prepare the land for cultivation, to protect the crops from animals, and to build the kudi. Muthuvans always emphasise the need for group living. The kudi also provides a certain measure of economic security against widowhood and old age, sickness and incapacity to work, by enabling

persons to live through these contingencies. Mutual aid is a predominant characteristic of Muthuvan kudis. On account of the close relationship among the families, children look upon all the houses as their own and eat from other houses without inhibition. Old men and widows who are incapable of cultivating for themselves, are provided for by their kinsfolk. Pauperism is unknown in the Muthuvan kudi.

It might appear that the spatial and human mobility of the kudi is a disrupting factor. This is not so. The changeability of the periphery is, in fact, a point of strength, and a mechanism by which the kudi persists in the face of increase in membership and pressure on land. The fact that, in spatial terms, the kudi is a temporary association means that its members do not develop a sentimental attachment to a particular locality. This makes it easier for people to move from one place to another. In a shifting agricultural economy in which it is uncertain if a given number of people could support themselves year after year, it is essential that there must not be any rigidity about membership of the group. The size and quality of cultivable land available in the forest is highly variable. Under such circumstances, the comparative looseness of kudi membership becomes all the more meaningful.

While it is true that, spatially and demographically,

the kudi is mobile, the range of spatial mobility is not unlimited. In the first place there is the natural limitation of cultivable space itself, and secondly, there are limitations imposed by government rules which require hill tribes to live in given areas. There is also a third restrictive factor, namely, the mutual respect for the territories of other like groups and of other tribes. Although there are no set boundaries for the territories of the different entities, the hill tribes desist from encroaching upon the territory that is supposed to be of any particular tribe or kudi. On account of these factors, a kudi moves within a definable range only. Hence, it is always possible to identify a kudi by the place name. For instance, a kudi known by a particular place-name will continue to be known by the same name even after it has moved out of the original place. All kudis, in fact, are known by place-names.

As in all human societies, there are potential conflicts in the Muthuvan kudi, despite the fact that here the emphasis on group-living and cohesion is so persistent. The conflicts arise out of various factors, most important of which are personal and economic. Personal conflicts are often centred round the headman whose actions, or decisions in the settlement of a dispute might come under partisan criticism. It is natural that people take sides

in the event of disagreements. This may lead to the moving out of some members. Among other personal factors giving rise to conflicts, are the accusations of sorcery (Koodothram). Disease or death of people or cattle, damage to crops from pests or animals, a seeming loss of luck, as for instance, in hunting or honey collecting, or any other painful happening, is generally attributed to one of two factors: divine displeasure, or sorcery by hostile individuals. Accusation of sorcery often leads to standing enmity between individuals, and this may eventually lead to separation. Similarly, the non-observance of certain kinship obligations also leads to separation. A boy's initiation rites are to be performed by his maternal cross-cousins. If the latter fail to do it or if they are not allowed to do it as a reprisal against some previous enmity, serious inter-personal conflicts leading to separation may occur. Likewise, the death-rites of a person are to be performed by his matrilineal kin, and if they fail to do it, or if they are not allowed to do it, there would be enmity between the two groups of kinsmen.

Economic factors in conflicts are often related to pressure on land. The extent of cultivable land within the territory of a kudi is limited. There is an optimum number of persons who can be supported with the available

resources of land. When the membership of a kudi exceeds this number, there is an inevitable conflict. This may result in the bifurcation of the kudi, so that one section will move to an hitherto unoccupied area and establish a new hamlet.

Bifurcation usually takes place on the lines of kinship. When a leading man of one kudi decides to move out and establish a different one, his fellow-clansmen of the parent village go with him. However, this is not necessarily so; considerations of personal friendship or other obligations, which cuts across clan loyalties, come into play sometimes.

Whatever be the reason for an individual family or a section to move out, the process of separation is comparatively easy, on account of the absence of any attachment, sentimental or traditional, to a particular hamlet village site. It is seen that the tendency to bifurcate is greater at the present time than in the past. This is possibly because of the added stress of limiting conditions in the Muthuvan region as a whole. Another noteworthy feature is that the new kudis tend to be smaller in size, and to be relatively permanent. It may be surmised that when these small, semi-permanent settlements expand in course of time due to natural demographic increases, the stresses and strains of group life will also increase

correspondingly. One means of relieving the strain is for the people to depend less on land and more on other means of livelihood, than ever before. Signs of this are already noticeable in Muthuvan life. It is possible that in course of time Muthuvans will depend increasingly on permanent, wet-land paddy cultivation and on subsidiary or substitute occupations such as money-crop cultivation, paid employment in estates, etc.

We shall now consider the political and judicial function of the kudi. In this respect we shall have to make one important distinction. Muthuvan social structure, as we shall see in the next chapter, is based on the division of society into six exogamous clans. The clan has a hereditary head who, in principle, exercises jural authority over all its members. In practice, however, the head of the kudi exercises the immediate judicial authority over the members of the kudi irrespective of their clan membership. Since every Muthuvan is a member of one kudi or another, the effective control of the people rests with the head of the kudi rather than with the clan head. Membership of the kudi cuts across clan barriers and hence it is possible that in the same kudi there may be members of several clans under the effective control of ^{the} head of the kudi. This is because of clan exogamy, descent through females, and cross-cousin marriage. Members of inter-

FIG. 24

AN INFLUENTIAL MUTHUVAN CLAN-HEAD
(He is also a Kani - Head of a Hamlet)



marrying clans are found in the same kudi. The exercise of the judicial authority of the clan-head comes only in the case of serious offences which are to be referred to him, or in the case of an appeal against the decision of the head of the kudi. The pattern of clan distribution in relation to the kudi can best be illustrated by the following diagram. (See next page)

The six clans are divided into two groups A-B-C and D-E-F each containing three inter-marrying clans. The vertical columns A,B,C, and D,E,F represent the clans. At the head of each clan is the clan head. The horizontal columns represent kudis, at the head of each of which is the ^{hamlet} ~~village~~ headman denoted by the letter 'K'. It would be wrong to consider that each Muthuvan kudi is a collection of co-resident persons, representing three inter-marrying clans, in the same manner as depicted in the diagram. The purpose of the diagram is only to indicate the general lines of clan distribution in relation to the kudi, in order to understand the political and judicial function of the kudi.

Although each clan has its own head, the effective, immediate and direct control of persons as members of a kudi, as already mentioned, rests with the head of the kudi. Every Muthuvan belongs to two social institutions or structural divisions, namely the clan and the kudi.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLAN AND KUDL

GROUP I				GROUP II			
A	B	C		D	E	F	
CLAN-HEAD	CLAN-HEAD	CLAN-HEAD		CLAN-HEAD	CLAN-HEAD	CLAN-HEAD	
1			K	1			K
2			K	2			K
3			K	3			K
4			K	4			K
5			K	5			K
6			K	6			K
7			K	7			K
8			K	8			K
9			K	9			K
10			K	10			K

Membership of the first of these is obtained by virtue of birth, it is automatic and unchangeable; membership of the second is to a certain degree voluntary; it is subject to individual preferences, and is changeable. As a clan member the individual is theoretically subject to control by the head of the clan, but the clan being a dispersed unit there is little direct relationship between clan members and clan head. This makes the direct exercise of judicial authority by the clan head over all members of the clan in day-to-day affairs difficult, if not impossible; therefore, immediate judicial control lies with the head of the kudi who is the man on the spot. In a few instances, the clan head may also be the head of the particular kudi in which he is resident, but otherwise the heads of kudis are not themselves clan heads, because there are many more kudis than there are clans.

Apart from this structural basis of judicial authority for the hamlet headman, there is also an official, administrative basis by which authority is vested in the hamlet headman. In view of the difficulty of access to the tribal regions, government have ruled:

Each settlement will have a headman who has attained that position either by hereditary right or by selection or election by the members of the settlement, in conformity with the existing practice.

Provided that when a headman fails to carry out any of the duties . . . the Divisional Forest Officer may call upon the adult male members to depose him and elect another competent man to take his place.

The headman of a kudi is called kani, or kanikkar, the latter being the honorific title. Both these terms have other meanings also, which may be stated in order to avoid confusion. The term kani is used for a tribal settlement (in a spatial or regional sense), as well as for the headman of a settlement. However, kani in the sense of settlement, and kudi, are not the same; the former, referring as it does to the locality of the settlement or the habitat, is different from the latter which refers to the human element, the social configuration that forms the settlement. In the present context, kani means the hamlet headman. Likewise the term kanikkar, which, in the present context, means the head of a hamlet, is also the name of a particular hill tribe in South Travancore.

The word kani is probably derived from the Dravidian word kanam which means possession, mortgage or lease, but originally, supervision, protection.

Among the Mithuvans the office of kani is not necessarily hereditary. A person is chosen to the position by common consent of the adult male members of the kudi, and he retains it till death unless deposed due to

1. Forest Manual, ~~Vol. I~~, p. 166

FIG. 26

AN OLD KANI (HEAD OF HAMLET), WITH HIS WIFE
(He is a very Influential Muthuvan)



inefficiency, or rendered incapable of performing his duties due to old age or other infirmity. Such instances are, however, very rare, and a kani once appointed to the position remains so till death, except that with advancing age he delegates more and more powers to his prospective successor. Deposition of a kani does not resolve conflicts; it only generates further conflicts or bring existing conflicts into the open. The usual method of resolving conflicts is for the kudi to bifurcate, one faction remaining with the kani and the other establishing a new kudi under a new leadership.

A kani attains the position by virtue of his personal qualities, general ability, and moral character. Age, though not an important consideration, plays a part. Muthuvans respect age for its own sake, but it does not necessarily follow that the oldest man of the kudi becomes the kani. The clan or sub-clan of a person is not, as a rule, taken into consideration for appointment of kani, the professed criterion being that the best man of the kudi is selected for headmanship. In actual practice, however, a man's lineage is also considered. When there is a numerical predominance of one particular clan in a kudi, the kani is generally selected from that group.

Although the office of kani is not necessarily

hereditary a kani tries to endure that he is succeeded by a member of his matrilineal kingroup, so that the headmanship runs in his lineage. The kani exercises considerable control over the members of his kudi. His authority is derived chiefly from the fact that he is officially recognised by the Forest Department as headman, and is charged with various duties. By virtue of its official recognition, the office carries with it dignity and power of a temporal nature, but not a necessary ritual status that is higher than that of any ordinary male member of the kudi, unless the kani is also the poojari (religious functionary) or the priest of some particular deity. The kani can command obedience of the members of his kudi, and his wishes are generally respected, but scarcely does he rule in a despotic manner; in all matters he consults the older men of the kudi. If a kani insists on doing things in his own way, troubles start, and sooner or later the kudi may bifurcate.

The main duties of the kani are to maintain discipline in the kudi, to report to the Forest Department officials periodically on all matters concerning the settlement, to settle disputes involving members or families under his charge, to allocate land for cultivation, to supply labour as and when required by the Forest Department, and to attend to any other matter that he may be entrusted with officially.

The headmanship does not entail any remuneration or other material rewards; nor is there any symbolic differentiation between the headman and other members of the kudi in dress, house or work or any other aspect of every day life; the kani and his family dress, live and work just as anybody else. However, the superiority of his position is symbolically expressed on certain special occasions. At the commencement of forest clearing, the kani leads the other members to the selected site, and he cuts the first tree, branch or bush; at the annual, collective, religious ritual of pongal, he cooks the ritual offering of sweet rice; all common worship of ancestors is performed by him; when the village panbhayat (council of elders) meets he sits on an elevated seat on which a blanket is spread.

Among the western Muthuyans, there are two kanis in each kudi, but their status and functions are different. The chief kani is called the nadappu kani, and he is responsible for all external matters such as relations with the government and with outsiders; he is the liaison and the arbiter on behalf of the kudi in all cases where the kudi has anything to do with the outside world; for all practical purposes, government recognises him as the headman. The subordinate kani is called the moottu kani, and he looks after the internal affairs such as initiation,

marriage, religious rituals etc. He is also the poojari and the manthravadi (exorcisor and medicine man). While the nadappu kani is chosen for his ability, integrity and moral character, the moottu kani is chosen for his knowledge of folklore, tribal traditions, magic and medicine. The words nadappu and moottu, suffixes to the titles of the headmen for external and internal affairs respectively, signify the nature of the functions of the two persons. Nadappu means walk or to walk. It also means practice, custom, or tradition; but in the present context it probably has the first meaning. Moottu or moodu means at the root, or at the foot of. The nadappu kani is the man who deals with external matters; the performance of his functions necessitates movement, walking, contacting the outside world, the external, the distant: the moottu kani deals with internal matters, things within the kudi; he remains at the root or at the foot; he is stationary.

The eastern Muthuvans do not have an exact parallel to such a recognised division of duties and responsibilities. Nevertheless, in most of their kudis, there is a poojari who performs the religious rituals and is also the exorcisor and medicine man. (Poojari means one who performs pooja, worship, rituals; a religious functionary, a temple priest). He has more or less the same place in an eastern kudi as the moottu kani of a western kudi. An important difference

between the two is that while the division of functions is institutionalized in the western kudis, it is a matter of convenience, or a fortuitous arrangement in the eastern kudis. In the smaller kudis of the east the kani and poojari are one and the same person, performing the different functions as occasion demands.

In so far as his relations with other members of the kudi are concerned, the kani derives power by virtue of his position as the judicial head of a unit of co-residential persons. The exercise of judicial authority is the duty as well as the privilege of the kani. In this role he is assisted by the elders of the kudi who constitute the panchayat or judicial body. Among western Muthuvans this judicial body of the hamlet is known as koottam kettal which literally means assemblage, or the act of assembling. The panchayat or koottam kettal is a powerful institution, but its membership is not clearly defined. All male heads of families in a kudi are theoretically members of the panchayat, and are entitled to express views in meetings of that body. In actual practice, however, a man's role in the panchayat depends on age, social status, lineage, his reputation for wisdom, ability and fairness, and the respect he commands. Therefore, the effective membership of the panchayat is confined to men who are of notable social consequence.

The judicial body of the kudi has the same position as a subordinate court, and it is empowered by custom and tradition to deal with minor offences involving members of the settlement. Matters that the panchayat is called upon to settle usually are complaints of petty thefts, quarrels between neighbours, insults or the use of abusive language, minor disputes over property rights etc. Sexual misconduct, allegations of sorcery etc. are serious offences and are tried by a higher judicial body consisting of the heads and elder members of the clans involved. An appeal against the judgement of the village panchayat may also form a matter for consideration by the higher body.

When an offence or suspicion of offence is brought to the notice of the kani, he calls a meeting of the panchayat which invariably meets in the chavadi (guest house cum bachelor hall). The kani sits at the head of the assembly on an elevated platform, and on his right at a lower level, sits the manthri (minister). The manthri holds office by hereditary right wherever there is a member of the manthri's clan, the office descending by seniority of age in the same kudi. We shall necessarily have to consider this subject again in the next chapter, but since this is an integral part of the structure of the kudi, it may be worthwhile to mention it briefly here.

A manthri is the official adviser to a headman;

FIG. 27

(THREE RESPECTED ELDERS OF KILIPARAMBU(WESTERN MUTHUVANS)
 (The Man on the Left is the Nadappu Kani - Chief Head of
 Hamlet - and the Man in the Centre is the Manthri -
 Minister or Adviser Representing the Molvaka.)



he is also the representative of the Melvaka, the supreme head of all Muthuvans. Traditionally, the manthris must be of the Kanakuttom clan, just as the Vakas, or hereditary chiefs, are of the Melakuttom clan; however, where there are no adult male members of the Kanakuttom clan, the headman may nominate a person to be the manthri. Among western Muthuvans, there is a manthri in each kudi. The Kanakuttom clan is confined mainly to the western regions where there is a fairly even distribution of its members ^{Among} ~~between~~ the various kudis so that one finds one or more Kanakuttom families in each kudi. If there is more than one adult male member of the Kanakuttom clan in one kudi, they take precedence according to age as ipso facto manthris. The crucial point is that by virtue of birth itself all members of the Kanankuttom clan are potential manthris.

In the eastern region where there is hardly any Muthuvan of the Kanankuttom clan, the headman of the kudi may nominate a person to be the manthri. The manthri's position being next in importance only to that of the headman himself, the nomination usually falls on the prospective successor to headmanship.

The manthri has a two-fold function. As traditional adviser to the headman in judicial matters he is expected to act as a moderating influence in the matter of infliction

of punishments. Secondly, as the representative of the Melvaka he is expected to collect the Melvaka's share of fines and other reparations, and sent it to his chief.

There is one point that needs to be made clear. The offices of manthri, moottu kani, poojari etc. are traditional tribal offices bearing no relation to government. Government recognises only the office of kani (village headman). This, notwithstanding, the tribal offices play an important role in kudi structure.

A person charged with a minor offence is required to stand trial before the village panchayat. If he admits the offence, the matter is quickly settled with appropriate admonitions, and a small fine or other punishment as decided by the council. If he denies the offence, witnesses are examined for both sides until either guilt or innocence is proved. When a man is found guilty, either by his own admission or by the evidence of witnesses, a set pattern is followed in determining the punishment for him. First, the presiding authority, namely, the kani, pronounces a highly exaggerated punishment such as, for instance, a fine of fifty/rupees or ten goats or twenty hens. The manthri then pleads for mercy on behalf of the accused, and says that although the offence deserves such a drastic penalty, some leniency may be shown in view of the man's contrition, and the fact that such a heavy fine is unfair.

to his poor wife and children who are innocent. After due expostulation of the reasons for leniency and without, at the same time, mitigating the seriousness of the offence, the manthri cuts the fine to half or less, say, twenty rupees or five/goats or ten hens as the case may be. This process of gradually reducing the fine is repeated by each counsellor until it is brought to a reasonable amount. The final verdict rests with the manthri. After everyone has had his say in the matter, the manthri, in consultation with the kani, gives the final pronouncement. Fines for male offenders generally range from Rs.1/4/- to Rs.3/8/- or its equivalent in animal or fowl, and for females from a few annas to Rs.1/4/- or so, depending on the seriousness of the offence. Nowadays, fining is the commonest punishment, but in the past caning was frequently resorted to. In the case of juvenile offenders, even at the present time, caning is the usual punishment.

The reason for this unusual practice of pronouncing punishment is obvious. It serves to impress upon the offender the seriousness of his offence, and at the same time it shows him that those who judge him, and the community at large, are not deliberately hostile to him, but are considerate and understanding. It is chastisement tempered with understanding.

The fine must be paid on the spot. This is generally

done for the offender by his kinsmen, of whom such obligation is expected. The amount of fine collected is divided equally between the Melvaka, the temple, and the kudi. The Melvaka's share must be taken to him by the Manthri or given to him when he visits the kudi; the temple's or deities' share is put in the cash tin kept in the temple, and must be used for the annual religious festivities of New Year, and the kudi's share is spent on sweets, betel leaves etc. to which the complainants, accused, judge and jury all help themselves.

Lastly, the kudi is a ritual group for religious observances. Muthuvan religious observances are mostly collective rituals. Each kudi operates as a unit in the religious ceremonies associated with forest clearing, harvest and New Year. In times of particular stress like draught, epidemics and death, the kudi again functions as a ritual group. The most important collective ritual of the kudi is the ritual of pongal in the first month of the Tamil ~~calendar~~ almanac.

To summarise, the kudi is a mobile ^{hamlet} ~~village~~ unit of co-residential cognates co-operating in economic and ritual functions, and is the smallest unit of political structure and judicial authority; while its membership is in a state of excessive turn-over due to fluctuating fortunes of individuals, and successive divisions due to economic

and other reasons, the kudi itself persists as the core of Muthuvan social life. Lest the term co-residential cognates give rise to the impression that the kudi is necessarily composed of a cognatic group, it should be noted that kinship between its members is not an obligatory condition, but only a natural consequence of cross-cousin marriage combined with residence in the wife's village.