

Power, Agency and the Oikos

Nirmal Selvamony

ABSTRACT

This essay introduces one of the world's earliest ecocritical theories, the Tamil concept *tinai*, which has a Greek equivalent in the word *oikos*. *Tinai* organizes ecoregions into three basic constituents: the space-time continuum, naturo-cultural features, and agency. That last concept is to be understood in terms of not only human agency but also natural and sacred agency. Building on international ecocritical investigations into natural agency and the history of sacred agency, the author clarifies the need for a reorientation of the idea of human agency. The contemporary world, as evidenced by the recent tsunami that struck South and Southeast Asia, requires an integrative agency. Such an integrative agency is explored through both ancient Tamil songs and the adaptations of contemporary songs in light of the destructive force of the tsunami. These adaptations indicate the importance of both game relations and play relations in terms of the dyad of power and powerless agency.

KEY WORDS

Tamil (*tamizh*), *tinai*, *oikos*, ecocritics, tsunami, Tamil songs, agency, game relations, play relations



One of the earliest ecocritical theories of the world is found in the ancient Tamil sources (*tolkaappiyam*, *cankam* poetry). According to this theory the earth's surface is divisible into five ecoregions—scrubland, mountain slopes, arid tracts, riverine plains and the sea coast. This classification is similar to the modern concept of biome. Ecologists have identified five biomes on the surface of the earth—the grassland, the mountain, the aquatic region, tundra, and the desert (*The World Book* 15: 478). Each biome is a geographical region with its own unique flora and fauna. While the biome includes the typical flora and fauna of the regions, it does not identify definitive traditional human communities associated with them. Tamil *tinai* theory has identified these human communities as well. The economy, worship, music and other social practices of these communities evolved out of their close association with the land. For example, the life of the coastal people was inalienably moulded by the nature of the seacoast. Fishing, salt making, boat making, and pearl fishing have been the main economic activities. The fisherfolk worship the sea deity and their musical mode made up of soft notes is called 'soft mode' (*vilarippan*, soft musical mode).

Each ecoregion has three basic constituents—space-time continuum, naturo-cultural features, and agency. The first is the primary constituent. Naturo-cultural features are the generative ones, and agency is "that which is appropriate to" each region. Space and time are primary, for they are the ultimate entities without which we could not conceive of either any object or action. By virtue of the qualities, namely, immanence and transcendence, the spatio-temporal continuum can be thought of as godhood (Jammer 28–30). When the

sacred is understood as a kind of localizable power or mystery it is known as deity. Though the sacred may manifest itself in both forms—as abstract godhood, and concrete deityhood—the latter is identified as a generative constituent and not as the primary.

Each ecoregion has its own naturo-cultural features, especially, flora and fauna, deity, music and economic activity. These features are generative inasmuch as they give rise to idea, feeling and value in the mind of the human agents. For example, the song of the bird, and the musical note produced by the wind blowing through a bamboo bored by a beetle, inspires a human song. The affection of one animal for another evokes a similar feeling among humans.

The third constituent, namely, agency is predominantly attributed to humans though it might not be wholly inappropriate to animals too. For example, pining is the characteristic agency of the coastal region. Even as the woman pines for her man who has left her behind in her coastal home, the female bird in the nest on the palm tree pines for her mate. Though coastal dwellers are capable of several actions, pining is the representative and characteristic one of the region. This action has to be understood in its relation to the generative and primary constituents of the ecoregion. In other words, the act of pining especially on the part of the humans has to be seen as the one that is generated by the naturo-cultural features of the region and ultimately traceable to the spatio-temporal foundation of the region.

The spatio-temporal continuum (or the sacred), the naturo-cultural features and agency together constitute the macro level ecoregion. Such a nexus, called *tinai* in Tamil, has its counterpart in the Greek idea of the “oikos.” The oikos is not simply the household. It involves the homestead, the people who dwell in the house, the animals that support them and also the spirits that dwell thereabouts (Everett 36–37).

The ecoregion (*tinai/oikos*) could also be seen at the micro level. Now its constituents could be represented as the agent, the patient, and the context. If the primary and generative elements constitute the context of action, the agency has two aspects to it, the agent and the patient.

Some basic principles undergird this ecocritical theory. Firstly, that *oikos* is the first principle or the ultimate reality. The human mind cannot conceive of any object, event or action outside of it. Everything that happens does so within this context. Secondly, the members of the *oikos* always stand in an organic interrelationship. In other words, the relation between one oikic member and another is like the relation between a member and the body of which it is a part. The naturo-cultural features of the human are like organs of a body and the nature of each is determined by its relation to the body as a whole. The ontology of the human is determined by his/her relation to the sacred. Thirdly, since the nature of the members of the *oikos* is organic rather than objective, dualistic categories such as subject-object, matter-mind, *purusha-prakriti* and so on are inadequate to comprehend the nature of either the *oikos* or its members. Fourthly, the oikic relation among the members is an agentive one, in that the relation among the oikic members expresses itself in one act or the other. Such an act may be termed as an address, which could be manifest as consciousness, thought, or some physical action. The implication is that ontology cannot be spoken of apart from praxeology.

Now let us see how the *oikos* as an agentive nexus can be understood in terms of the theory of action expounded in *tolkaappiyam*. According to this theory, any act has the following eight constituents: agent, patient, action, place, time, instrument, use and end. If the agent is the source of the act, the patient is the one who complements the agent. Without this reciprocal relation to the patient, there cannot be an agent. The act of the agent may involve some instrument, which may be material or non-material. The act presupposes a spatio-temporal context, some use or the other, and also a purpose.

To say that the oikic members stand in an agentive relation is to say that each member is capable of agency. Even as the humans, both nature and the sacred are also agents in their own right. The theory of action outlined in *tolkaappiyam* can help us understand natural and sacred agency better.

Ecocritics have now begun to explore the agentive potential of nature. Christopher Manes deals with this issue in his essay, "Nature

and Silence” (Glotfelty and Fromm 15–29). He shows how the articulate Nature of the animistic societies has been silenced in modern, rational, scientific societies. Nature “has grown silent in our discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object” (17). Animists believe that “all the phenomenal world is alive in the sense of being inspirited . . . and that the non-human world is able to communicate with humans” (17–18). Even language is not seen as a unique human faculty, but as one that humans share with the rest of the speaking world (18). Manes also identifies two factors that are responsible for the breakdown of animism—literacy and Christian exegesis (18). “At one time Nature spoke and now texts do” (19). Similarly, Christian exegesis swept all things into the net of divine meaning. The phenomenal world was referred to as the literal level of meaning, which pointed to a moral level and a still higher spiritual level. So, every object of the world was significant only inasmuch as it pointed to a higher meaning.

Neil Evernden (Glotfelty and Fromm 92–104) addresses this problem from a different angle. He problematises the very ontology of a human when he reminds us that we cannot speak of a human as an individual, but only as an individual-in-environment, the individual as a component of something not-distinct from the rest of the environment (97). He also points out that when we extend “the boundary of the self into the environment, then of course we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate—it is animate because we are part of it . . . all the metaphorical properties so favored by poets make a perfect sense: the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego clencher. Metaphoric language is an indicator of ‘place’—an indication that the speaker has a place, feels part of a place” (101).

Natural agency is represented in literary language as metaphor, pathetic fallacy and transferred epithet. These literary devices have their origin in animistic societies and for that reason should be regarded as animistic survivals in post-animistic, aesthetic representation (Buell).

Divine or sacred agency is less problematic than natural agency. It is widely acknowledged and represented in all theistic societies.

Several societies speak of the creative, protective and reductive acts of the sacred. Most myths revolve around these divine functions. Those theologies who speak of godhood as something beyond action, also conceive of a domain in which it is marked by the acts of transcendence and immanence. Even when the latter are identified as qualities, they are in reality praxeological.

Though we have described the agency of the three oikic members as though they are separable, in reality they are not, for the nature of one member flows into another, making any ontological boundary of identity impossible (Selvamony). As a result, we must shift from our conventional compartmentalist understanding of agency to a holistic one wherein the three types of agency define a complex configuration.

Agency could be seen from the point of view of what it does to the interrelation among the three oikic members. In this view, agency could be either integrative or disintegrative. If that type of agency that promotes integration among the members may be integrative agency, the type that tends to disintegrate the interrelation is disintegrative agency. Natural disasters like the tsunami, earthquake and volcano appear to be disintegrative on account of the toll they take on several ecosystems, individual organisms and objects. However, openness to the possibility of new creations or configurations from the wreckage and ruin should not be completely ruled out.

Integrative agency could foster two types of integration, bilateral and unilateral. Bilateral integration involves integrating the members both vertically and horizontally. The members stand in a relation that is at once hierarchic and egalitarian. In other words, the oikic agency configures the sacred, human and nature in a hierarchic relation and also disposes them in an egalitarian relation. This is not unlike in personal or intimate human relationships where the partners are at once unequal and equal to each other. Such relationships are complex and cannot be reduced to simple equations. Disintegrative agency on the other hand breaks the interrelational bonding. A typical example of integrative agent is rain. The rain brought down by the rain dance of a tribal community, integrates the humans and the sacred in a complex integrative relation. The rain as an agent of the gods is unequal in its

relation to the subordinate humans, but insofar as it helps the crops grow, it is treated as a welcome guest with all honour and respect. However, incessant rain can be a disintegrative agent.

Action is not possible without power. In the case of the agent it is the ability or capability to do something. To say that the agent is a speaker is to say that he/she has the ability to speak, the power to speak. However, the ability of the speaker is validated only by means of her/his relation to the listener. In a more direct relational exercise of power, the agent has power over the patient. In this sense, power is the ability to cause results or outcomes or effects that affect the existence/or interests of those things or persons" (Ball 549). Political scientists do not accept all effects caused as instances of power. These should be intended as evident in Russell's definition of power: "Power is the production of intended effects" (19–27). Obviously, one is thinking of human intention which renders the act moral. This humanist definition of power does not acknowledge the effects caused by storms and tsunamis as instances of power on the grounds that the effects are not intended by the natural agents. An ecological approach to the idea of power requires us to redefine it as ability on the part of either human or natural or divine agent.

Most societies acknowledge divine power. Omnipotence is said to be one of the qualities of godhood. Even primitive societies which do not have any definite form of theology show evidences of conceiving of the sacred as being powerful. For example, the early Tamil notion of *ananku*, a form of the sacred, is an entity of power. The role of power in human agency has also been discussed thoroughly, especially in political discourse. But natural agency has not been given due consideration. The "actions" of natural agents are described not as instances of power, but as mere happenings (Ball).

In fact, an oikic approach to this question involves a thorough reorientation. We need to move away from the isolationist approach of compartmentalizing human, and natural and divine agencies to a holistic way of regarding any instance of agency as involving all the three agentive members. In other words, we will have to acknowledge the role of the sacred as well as nature in any instance of human agency,

and the roles of human and divine agents in natural agency.

Such a holistic approach will find not only science, but also myths, the traditional knowledge of tribal people, and also natural knowledge edifying. The knowledge of animals, birds and insects and trees will also help us better understand agency and the role of power in it. We will begin to see the importance of “books in running brooks, and tongues in trees.”

In the exercise of power, powerlessness is also a kind of power. When the agent lets the patient take possession of her/him and attains a state of spontaneity, (s)he does not assert her/his power but becomes powerless. Such an act is play rather than game. All art acts seek to approximate play and to that extent they are acts of powerlessness rather than power. Politics on the other hand involves acts of game and therefore acts of power rather than powerlessness.

Now, which of these acts (acts of power or those of powerlessness) contribute to the integration of the members of the oikos? One cannot ignore the role of both in realizing the above end.

Similarly, we need to consider the possibility of disintegrative agency. Are all disintegrative acts powerless? Could powerless agents cause disintegration? In Tamil imagination, land has been represented as the prototype figure of endurance. Gaia has endured innumerable human acts of plunder and pillage. Is she complicit to such disintegration?

Against the background of the above discussion of agency and power in relation to the oikos, let us see how the sea is represented in ancient and Modern Tamil songs.

In ancient Tamil songs of the oikos (*tinai*), the seacoast rather than the sea itself is the setting. The littoral oikos takes its name after a flower named *Nymphae stellata* (*neytal*). The Tamil name of this flower, namely, *neytal*, captures the representative quality of the region, namely, plaintiveness, which is due to weakness or powerlessness. Etymologically, the word derives from the vocalic root *ey*-to grow weak, thin. *n+ey=ney*-to melt, *ney* (n), oil (that which is got from melting); *ney+t*, euphonic particle+*al*, nominal suffix=melting, pining, flower that appears like a teary eye.

According to one classification of land, there are two basic types—soft and hard. *Neytal* and *marutam* belong to the soft type whereas *kurinci* and *paalai* to the hard type. Sea songs make abundant references to soft sand, soft dune, fine sand coast, flowery sand coast and soft land. It is interesting to note that while the sea and its waves are attributed to force or power, the coast itself is said to be soft and tender: powerful sea, *kuruntokai* 316: 4; powerful waves, *kalittokai* 132: 1; breakers of the ocean, *narrinai* 106: 1–2; 211: 6–7; swelling wave, *narrinai* 35: 1.

Dusk, the appropriate time of this region, also contributes to the plaintive mood of the region: the enfeebling time, *narrinai* 94: 1. Evening is the time when the sea begins to roar; some flowers of the sea grove bloom; the *neytal* flower begins to close, the birds in the grove seek out their mates; the sun reddens the sky. All these strike a note of sadness (*narrinai* 117). Birds also contribute to the evoking of such mood. The night heron is spoken of as the epitome of love; if one of a pair dies the other too perishes soon thereafter. Coastal poems show this bird perching on the palm tree and calling its plaintive notes (*narrinai* 335; 303; *kalittokai* 137; *narrinai* 303; *kuruntokai* 117). Another coastal bird, *kuruku*, also calls quite balefully like the night heron from the top of the palm tree in the village square (*narrinai* 338).

Like the *neytal* flower the eyes of the woman are teary (*narrinai* 263) due to pining for her beloved (*narrinai* 223). Her forehead is discoloured (*kuruntokai* 205; *narrinai* 63) and her bangles have slipped from her arms (*narrinai* 131). Sleeplessly she languishes for him (*narrinai* 287). Both the man and the woman of this region are tender and melancholic (*narrinai* 398; *akanaanuuru* 330; 400).

The sacred is a power in-dwelling in objects, organisms of the sea and seacoast (*akanaanuuru* 240; *narrinai* 303: 3–4; 270: 12). The shark has also been worshipped (*pattinappaalai*) possibly because it was a totem for a group of fisherfolk once.

According to *tolkaappiyam*, *varunan* is the presiding deity of the coastal region. But no early Tamil poem (*cankam*) speaks of this deity. This may be due to the fact that *tolkaappiyam* and *cankam* poems belong to different times and that there was no such worship during the

time when the poems were composed. However, in recent times the deity of the sea is not a masculine one but the mother goddess herself, *katalammai* (sea mother, murukaanantam 55; tanancayan 183; kiruttinamuurti 93; Whitehead 24–25). Though the *cankam* poems do not speak of the sea as goddess, they do speak of the sacred dwelling in the sea (*narrinai* 155: 5–7), and interestingly, the use of the term *ananku* shows us that this must be a female power. A non-gender-specific reference is also found elsewhere (*kalittokai* 131: 1). Today the fisherfolk worship the winds also; they call the wind god *kaaravaraayan* (literally, the wind king). These forms of the sacred have manifested themselves in various ways but not anthropomorphically (*narrinai* 398: 1–2). In recent times the fisherfolk worship the goddess on the coast and have several shrines for her all along the coast of Tamil Nadu. The supreme sacred power that dwells in the sea and in the phenomena associated with it is evident in the particular manifestation of the sacred known as *ananku*. This form of the sacred is both benign and malignant at once, though predominantly the latter (*Zvelebil* 16, 22). However, the representation of the sea as mother shows that they saw the sea as their creator and provider.

There are songs among the fisherfolk of today which regard the goddess as a benign powerful being (tanancayan 224).

The recent tsunami compelled these fisherfolk to acknowledge the goddess's malignant aspect. They referred to it as the wrath of *katalammai*. It is not that these sea-dependent communities had suddenly discovered the malignant power of the sacred thanks to the tsunami. Nor was the image of the sea as a powerless entity among the fisherfolk suddenly shattered by this natural disaster. Instead, the disaster has reinforced the ambivalence in the nature of the sacred.

This conception of the fisherfolk has to be contrasted with what may be loosely called a "Christian response to tsunami." Several Christian writers have expressed the opinion that it was God who sent the tsunami. They regard this as God's way of avenging the wrongs such as "fornication, and sexual perversion, increase in the rate of abortion, and gay and lesbian people . . . Others believe that the tsunami was sent for the greater good of God bringing people to God. Yet others

see a clear sign of the last days of the end of the world” (Dayanandan). This deistic conception has to be contrasted with the animistic view of the fisherfolk. In other words, *katalammai* and the Christian god cannot be equated.

In the case of the humans, the fisherfolk had never attempted to overpower the sea though they had tamed her tides and winds and gained enormous knowledge about her. Only the people of the urban, capitalistic and academic world have regarded the sea as a resource to be exploited for economic purposes. But the recent disaster has stunned and rendered them powerless. What is referred to as *katalkool* (taking away by the sea) in early Tamil sources like *cilappatikaaram* and *iraiyanaar akapporul* was not a real issue for the present-day fisherfolk for more than four or five generations. That is why they were not prepared for it, nor could they read any signs associated with it. The tribal people, on the other hand, by virtue of their closer contact with nature, could read natural signs better and react to the changes in the behaviour of nature more instinctively and intuitively not quite unlike the birds and beasts. The instinctive and intuitive relation to nature, especially the tribal communities, is more like play, while the rational, scientific relation to nature advocated and fostered by the civilized peoples is more like game. The play relation involves powerless agency, wherein the agent does not affirm his/her power over the patient in question. The game relation, on the other hand, deploys the power of various sorts, epistemic, economic, and political, in order to manipulate the patient to the advantage of the agent. Modern science is such a game mode of relation.

Is it possible to do without game relation wholly? Human history shows that this is impossible. All human attempts to survive and “develop” legitimise the power-affirming game relation to some extent. But unfortunately, human civilization has overemphasized the importance of game relation almost to the total neglect of the play relation. Earth-shaking occurrences like tsunami remind us the need to reaffirm the significance and role of play relation in our lives and our need to learn from tribal persons, birds and beasts how we should become more powerless, powerful only when necessary and blend both

powerlessness and power in a way that will better integrate humans, nature and the sacred.

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Contributors

Tony Chiaviello is an associate professor in the English Department at the University of Houston-Downtown, where he teaches environmental rhetoric and journalism courses in the B.S. and M.S. programs in professional writing. He earned the Ph.D. in English in 1998 at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, with a dissertation that critiqued the divisive populist discourse of the environmentalism debate, and completed his undergraduate work at Oberlin College in 1976 and the M.A. in mass communications at the University of Denver in 1981. Chiaviello came to college teaching after a career in high-technology public relations and trade journalism, and his early media background includes service as an Army photojournalist in the Vietnam War and as editor of both military and counterculture newspapers in the 1960s and 70s.

Catrin Gersdorf teaches American literature at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Free University Berlin, Germany. Active as both a critic and a translator, she has written *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the (Re-) Construction of America*, as well as essays on ecocriticism and ecofeminism in a variety of international journals and books, complemented by a series of literary and critical translations. She has also co-edited *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism* and *Natur-Kultur-Text: Beiträge zu Ökologie und Literaturwissenschaft*.

Axel Goodbody was born in Dublin, Ireland. He is Reader in the University of Bath, UK. He has published more than 40 journal articles and his *Man-Nature-Technology: Ecocritical Readings of Twentieth-Century German Literature* will appear in 2007.

John Hausdoerffer is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies and Philosophy at Western State College, in Gunnison, Colorado, USA. He specializes in the history of environmental ethics and justice. Dr. Hausdoerffer's book manuscript, *George Catlin and the*

Politics of Nature, is currently under review.

David R. Keller is Associate Professor of Philosophy, Director of the Center for the Study of Ethics, Chair of the Environmental Studies Program, and Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Utah Valley State College (UVSC). He also serves as Editor of *Teaching Ethics*. His first book, *The Philosophy of Ecology: From Science to Synthesis* (co-authored with ecologist Frank Golley), was published in 2000 by the University of Georgia Press.

Murali Sivaramakrishnan is a poet, painter and critic—a specialist in Indian aesthetics and literary theory. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Kerala (1990) and is a scholar of national repute deeply concerned with indigenous values and environmental issues. His book *The Mantra of Vision: An Overview of Sri Aurobindo's Aesthetics* (Delhi: B R, 1997) has come to be recognized as a valuable contribution to the study of Indian poetics and comparative aesthetics. He has also authored a collection of critical essays on area studies, *South Indian Studies* (1998) and a volume of poems and sketches, *Night Heron* (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1998). He is a well known painter and his works have gone on display at several major exhibitions in India and abroad.

Patrick D. Murphy, Professor of English at the University of Central Florida, earned his BA in History from UCLA (1973) and his Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Davis (1986). After teaching for many years at Indiana University of Pennsylvania he has been teaching at the University of Central Florida since 2002. Founding editor of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, among other books he has authored *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* and edited *The Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*. Currently he has a manuscript titled "Ecocritical Explorations" under review at a university press, a proposal to edit an international collection of ecocritical theory under consideration, and is working on a study of nature in the contemporary American novel.

Deborah Bird Rose is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Tsutomu Takahashi received a Ph.D. in comparative literature from Pennsylvania State University and currently is an associate professor of English in the Graduate Faculty of Languages and Cultures at Kyushu University, Japan. His publications include: *Handbook of American, British, and Japanese Nature Writing* 120 (chief editor, 2000); *Dialogue Between Nature and Literature: Urban, Pastoral, and Wild* (coeditor, 2004); *Parallelism in the Literary Visions of Sin* (forthcoming). He is currently serving as vice-president of ASLE-Japan.

Shin Yamashiro earned his Ph.D. in English with an emphasis on literature and environment at the University of Nevada, Reno. He is currently an Associate Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of the Ryukyus, Okinawa, Japan. His publications include: "Richard K. Nelson," "The Beach as a Neutral Ground: Henry David Thoreau's *Cape Cod* and the Tradition of the American Coastal Narrative," "Nature Writing on the Sea: A Comparative Reading of Japanese and American Sea Literature [in Japanese]." His most current areas of research include sea literature, sea ethics, ecocriticism, and Peter Matthiessen.