

# Pragmatic Meanings of Possession in Paliyan Shamanism

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**Abstract.** – Shamanistic beliefs and practices of Paliyans, an enclaved foraging people of south India, are described then analyzed on the basis of observational and interview data from eight bands, and limited comparison is undertaken with shamanism of other south Indian foragers. Interaction with the gods is shown to have manysided significance to Paliyans. Five practical meanings of the gods and their visits are examined closely. Although visiting gods figure in Paliyan decision making, shamans are found to be prevented from attaining social prominence. [*South India, Paliyans, shamanism, pragmatics of religion, tropical foragers, anthropology of knowledge*]

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## 1. Introduction

There are many senses in which an anthropologist might use the word "meanings" and a number of those are intended by the title of this paper. Following a four-part, descriptive review of the shamanic possession of *Paliyan*<sup>1</sup> foragers in south India, we will examine five very different kinds of meaning of the material, using variously combined semeiotic, functional, and adaptational approaches. The descriptive account will open with a look at the helpful spirits or deities toward whom much Paliyan ritual is directed. Then, a number of pages will be devoted to accounts of three diverse shamanic events. Third, examples of shamans' prayers will be given. Finally, four mock rituals will be described, representative of frequently occurring rituals which stand in playful emulation of the customary ones.

The Paliyan materials are useful in more than one way. For one thing, they are sufficiently detailed for us to undertake the promised study of

several quite different facets of their meaning. This aspect of the paper will be introduced in due course.

A second way in which they prove useful is that they help fill a gap in the literature. With the exception of a single paper on structural and functional implications of Mala Pandaram (*Mala Paṇḍāram*) shamanism (Morris 1981), a paragraph on a brief episode of Irula (*Irula*) possession (Zvelebil 1988: 146), and a five sentence report on the "nervous attacks" of two participants in an annual Kadar (*Kāḍar*) ritual of offering (Ehrenfels 1952: 159 f.), the major ethnographic studies of south Indian foragers (e.g., Fürer-Haimendorf 1943; Ehrenfels 1952; Morris 1976, 1977, 1981, 1982; Zvelebil 1988) have yielded no apparent observational data on shamanism. Morris' exceptional 1981 report and the body of Paliyan data to be presented here, each of which is derived from a combination of repeated observation and interviews, give us our first real detail on the functioning institutions.<sup>2</sup> Parallels between these two accounts are numerous, but there are some informative differences. And the Paliyan data will be found to contradict at least one recent generalization about tropical (as against circumpolar) shamanism of Old World foragers.

1 Hereafter, their name will be rendered without diacritics, as Paliyan; *Paliyan* is a singular or adjectival form and its plural (properly *Paliyar* or *Paliyarhal*) will be indicated by addition of English "s". The names of the state (*Tamiṇ Nāḍu*) and its language (*Tamiṇ*) will appear here only in familiar anglicized versions. Because the Paliyan dialect of Tamil is purely colloquial, Paliyan words will be written as spoken, rather than in accordance with Tamil literary convention. As regards the terms "shaman" and "shamanism," types and boundaries are not a concern, so I find Wolf's recent, inclusive approach (1990: 429) preeminently suitable.

2 Morris witnessed three cases of possession (1981: 234); the present report is based on observation of 10 cases. The Paliyan data have, previously, only been summarized briefly in print (Gardner 1972).