

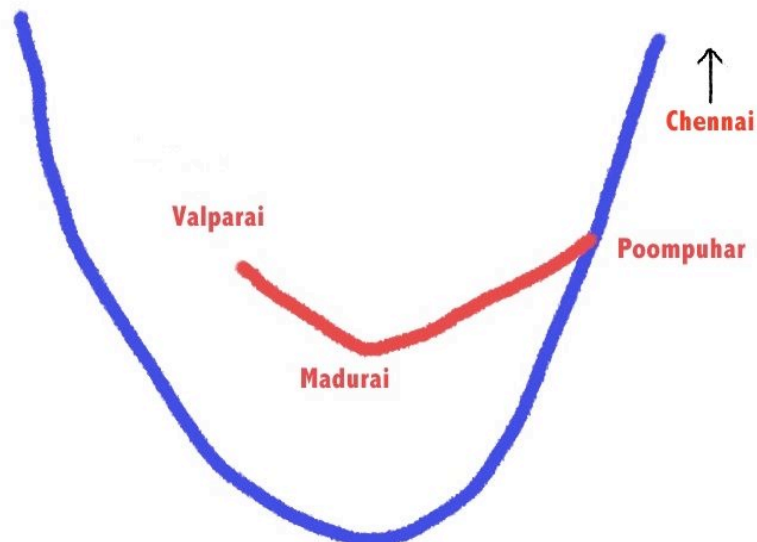


From last year's Storytelling Tour: A storytelling session with Irula tribal people in their village in the Chenglepet area. Jeeva Raghunath translates.

“The Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour, 22 Feb to 7 March, 2010” by Eric Miller

Stories can be spoken. They can be written on paper. Poetically-speaking, stories can also be considered as having been written on the land on which the episodes of the story occurred.

This coming February 8 (Monday) to 21 (Sunday), the World Storytelling Institute is scheduled to lead its second Storytelling Tour. Story Tours offer to visitors the opportunity to trace the stages of a story, and Storytelling Tours give visitors the chance to listen to and tell stories along the way -- even to learn to tell local stories in local styles (with the help of translation, when needed). The 2010 Places of Kannagi Tour is an instance of both Story and Storytelling Tourism. We will be traveling from Chennai, by air-conditioned bus, to these Places of Kannagi: Poompuhar, Madurai, and the Valparai area.



Three genres of storytelling in Tamil Nadu that Tour participants will be exposed to are 1) *Kathaiyum Pattum (Story and Song)*; 2) *Villupattu (Bow Song)*; and 3) *Katha Kalak Chebam*, also known as *Harikatha (God Story)*. All three of these performance genres feature alternation between singing and speaking. Villupattu and Harikatha are performed by teams: a lead storyteller, and supporting players who may engage in dialogue with the lead storyteller, and who join in during the singing sections. Villupattu is a folk genre that began in southern Tamil Nadu and has a traditional repertoire of local stories, although this repertoire has now been expanded to include many more types of stories.¹ Harikatha is an orthodox Hindu form of moral and spiritual discourse, often involving telling and commenting upon episodes from the pan-Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Story and Song, however, will be the star of our journey. This is a non-professional genre, used mostly for domestic storytelling. The stories told in this style include folktales such as Grandmother stories, Raja-Rani stories, and Animal Stories (such as those in the Panchatantra, and Aesop's Fables collections).

Today one can travel from one side of the globe to the other in a day, and can telecommunicate over that distance instantly. And yet, language remains one of the last great barriers between people. Storytelling is often very rooted in local language, with references to local history and landmarks. Making all of this accessible to visitors is a great challenge, and we at the WSI have taken on this challenge by developing numerous methods of spoken and visual translation.

One of our goals is to enable informal conversation between visitors and locals. Such conversation often occurs in and around storytelling events. Conversation can be an antidote to the objectification that sometimes arises between people.

Last year, 20 USA people participated in the WSI's Storytelling Tour, which was conducted in partnership with the Eth-Noh-Tec Storytelling Company.² In addition to styles of storytelling, Tour participants experienced performances and workshops in *Bharata Natyam* (South Indian classical dance), *Therakuttu* (folk theatre), puppetry, children's songs and games, rowing chants, and lament songs.

The 2010 Storytelling Tour will feature a similar range of performing arts, experienced in their home locations. Along the way, participants will undergo a course in storytelling. We will be listening to and telling variations of the *Epic of the Anklet*, related stories, and other stories. There will be talks by scholars and by members of communities. There will also be some informal and relaxed teaching-and-learning of the Tamil language (for those people on the Tour who might not yet be fluent in Tamil).

Last year's Tour began with us visiting sea-fishing communities in Chennai. We proceeded to visit Irula tribal people and others in the countryside south of Chennai, and finally we returned to Chennai. This year's Tour will follow a similar pattern, but we will be going further from Chennai, and we will be tracing what is perhaps the central story of Tamil culture: *Silappathikaram*, the *Epic of the Anklet*. Kannagi (pronounced ka-na-ghee) is the heroine. To summarise the story:

Kannagi and Kovalan married in Poompuhar, on the east coast. After some time, Kovalan went off with a dancer named Madhavi. A year later, he returned home. He and Kannagi walked to Madurai, a distance of about 250 km, to start a new life. There Kovalan was falsely accused of stealing the local queen's anklet; and he was unjustly put to death by the local king. Kannagi came to the court and proved that her husband had been innocent of this crime. The king punished himself for the injustice he had done, by simply laying himself down and dying. Kannagi walked around the city three times, tore off her left breast and threw it against the city wall, and called for the city to burn -- but for good people and animals to be able to escape

the flames. Agni, the god of Fire, accomplished this. Kannagi wandered to the Western Mountains, where some people worshipped her.

This story was written as a long poem, which is linguistically-dated to have been composed approximately 1400 years ago. The poem is attributed to Ilango Adigal, the brother of the king of Kerala at the time.³

When Kannagi and her husband lived in Poompuhar, it was a bustling international seaport city. However, the story states that shortly after its incidents took place, Poompuhar was swallowed by the sea. Today, all that remains at Poompuhar is a quiet fishing village, and a lodge and exhibits courtesy of the Tamil Government. In the social-economic ecology of Tamil Nadu, Chennai plays a role that is similar to the one that Poompuhar once played. For this reason, one can consider Chennai to be New Poompuhar.

So, for the November 2010 Places of Kannagi Tour, first we will visit sea-fishing villages -- in Chennai, and down along the coast until we come to Poompuhar. A similar culture is shared by the sea-fishing communities all along Tamil Nadu's east coast.



The author with members of the Nocchikuppam sea-fishing community in Chennai.

Then we will proceed to Madurai, the city that is central to both the *Epic of the Anklet*, and southern Tamil Nadu itself.

Ilango Adigal's version of the *Epic of the Anklet* states that when Kannagi left Madurai, she walked to the Western Mountains, but it does not say exactly where she went. The Mudhuvan tribal people live in these mountains. They believe that their ancestors left the burning Madurai with Kannagi, and that together they walked to their present location, in the Valparai area (south of Pollachi). The Tour will thus visit some Muduvan people in this area.



Muduvan tribal people in their village near Valparai demonstrate the sari knot that they believe Kannagi taught their ancestors so they could carry things as they were leaving Madurai together.

One hundred kms south of this location -- near Thekkadi and Kumili (on the Kerala side of the border) -- there is a temple that is dedicated to Kannagi, and local people also say that Kannagi came there when she left Madurai. Actually, there are numerous claims by people in these mountains that Kannagi came to their place. Therefore, the entire southern section of the Western Ghats (south of the Palghat Gap) could be called the Kannagi Mountains.

After visiting the Kannagi Mountains, we will return to Chennai, and here the Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour will conclude.

Notes

- 1) Additional information regarding Villupattu is posted at <http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/33.html> .
- 2) Eth-Noh-Tec (<http://www.ethnohtec.org>) is based in California, USA.
- 3) An article I wrote about Kannagi is posted at <http://tinyurl.com/de2djs> .
Twenty years ago, I walked Kannagi's route: a travel journal I wrote about this experience is posted at <http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/18.html> .

About the Author

Eric Miller is Director of the World Storytelling Institute (Chennai), and Assistant Professor of Story and Storytelling at the Image College of Animation, Arts, and Technology (Chennai). He is near completing a PhD in Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania: his dissertation concerns the use of videoconferencing for performance of, training in, and discussion about verbal arts. A native New Yorker, he has taught at St. John's University, Fordham University, and New York University (all in New York City). He has re-located to Chennai, where he lives with his Chennai-born wife, Magdalene Jeyarathnam (founder-director of the Center for Counselling), and their daughter, Kamala.
<http://www.storytellinginstitute.org> , <http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com> (personal website), <eric@storytellinginstitute.org> , 98403 94282.