

For a Sociology of India

The remembering village: Looking back on Louis Dumont from rural Tamil Nadu

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Louis Dumont (1911–98) was one of the foremost anthropologists of the 20th century and a central figure in essential debates on the sociology of India. He is known especially for his work on social institutions such as caste, and for studying such institutions from a holistic and comparative standpoint. What is not acknowledged often enough, however, is that his later work on subjects such as hierarchy and purity—the focus even now of lively controversy—built outward from extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in south India. In an early essay on renunciation published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* in 1960, for example, Dumont notes that ‘the direct study of a small Hindu group led me to abstract certain principles which, it then appeared, could be more widely applied’ (Dumont 1960: 37). Between 1948 and 1950, Dumont spent two years in Tamil Nadu and eight months, in particular, studying the Piramalai Kallar caste in the countryside west of Madurai. T.N. Madan has written that Dumont’s experiences with the Kallars and more generally in the Tamil country had made the strongest and most durable impressions upon him (Madan 1999: 478). As Dumont mused in a 1979 interview with Jean-Claude Galey: ‘The Tamils are born sociologists and the culture is beautiful. I am deeply attached to the Tamils’ (Galey 1982: 21).

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Dumont's ethnographic work in the region is recorded most fully in *A South Indian Subcaste*, published first in French in 1957 and then much later in English in 1986, in a revised edition translated and edited by Michael Moffatt. The text is comprehensive in its scope and meticulous in detail. Over the course of nearly 500 dense pages, the monograph discusses aspects of territorial settlement, domestic and agrarian practices, political organisation, lineal kinship, marital alliance and religious ritual among the Piramalai Kallars and other local castes. Building on observations of everyday practice as well as mythological and historical narratives, the work moves gradually towards conclusions of great generality and portent: 'Everyone has his being outside himself. Here there is no reality; there are only appearances, or better, relationships' (Dumont 1986: 464). Now and then, the text yields sudden glimpses of the diverse local relationships that would have provoked such reflections: 'The main informant' Periya Karuppa Thevar, for example, is described in one section as 'proud and starving, greedy and susceptible ... an incomparable storyteller' (ibid.: 146), while the caption to one of the many photographic plates in the volume (Plate 4) identify four small children more warmly as 'three little friends of the ethnographer'. For the most part, however, the work draws no attention to the ordinary encounters, transactions and exchanges that inspired its insights. Dumont observes that the 'direct and animated approach' and 'lively curiosity' of the Kallars set them apart from other castes in the region (ibid.: 24), but we have little sense of how these qualities may have been exercised with respect to the person of the fieldworker himself.

It may seem unreasonable to expect such details from a work conceived long before the era of reflexive ethnography. However, these observations are meant not to criticise, but instead to suggest that another route remains available to those curious about the social texture through which anthropological insights must necessarily emerge: retrospective conversations with local acquaintances and informants, long after fieldwork has assumed the fixity of published prose. Over fifty years after Louis Dumont had traversed the Kallar country of southern Tamil Nadu, my own ethnographic work drew me to the same region, and indeed, to another ethnographic exploration of the same caste and its contemporary condition.¹

¹ My project is less an ethnography of the Piramalai Kallar caste as such and more an investigation of their contemporary condition as postcolonial subjects of moral reform.

Over the course of this research work—rather different in its aims and scope from Dumont’s own project—I often felt a sense of awe in trailing behind such a distinguished scholar: when the hereditary caste headman of the Kallars removed from a small wooden chest, for example, the very same royal insignia that his own father had revealed for Dumont some five decades back. It also struck me, however, that there was something perhaps to be gleaned from this accidental crossing of paths.

The circumstances of my own fieldwork took me far from the villages where Dumont had worked most closely: the hamlet of Tengelapatti, where he had lived for the duration of his fieldwork with the Kallars, and the larger nearby village of K. Puliyanukulam, where his principal informant and other figures essential to his research had lived. Nevertheless, and out of simple curiosity more than anything else, I was able to visit both Tengelapatti and K. Puliyanukulam a few times, in 2001 and 2002 and then again in 2008. In these visits, I was startled and delighted to find that numerous traces of the French anthropologist had persisted here nearly sixty years beyond his departure from the region. I picked my way through the remains of the house where he had lived, and met several men and women who had lived, spoken, associated and even worked directly with him. What follows are a few stories derived from their fragmentary recollections. This brief account is meant neither to reprise Dumont’s work nor to challenge its conclusions, as so many of his interlocutors have done. All I offer here are some glimpses of how this venerable foreigner may have been seen and imagined by his own informants in mid-20th century south India. As Dumont himself had long insisted that we all find our social being beyond ourselves, I hope that he too would concur with the spirit of these reflections.

I have focused in particular on the moralising interventions of the colonial Criminal Tribes Act with respect to Kallar conduct, and how these legacies have shaped practices of self-fashioning among men and women of the caste today. I worked primarily in the Cumbum Valley—to the west of the ‘Kallar country’ or *kallarnaatu* where Dumont had based himself—among Kallar households that had emigrated to the region from the late 19th century onward. Although most of these migrants kept kin and ritual ties to their ancestral temples and lineal territories in the east, they also derided the ‘savagery’ of life in the Kallar country, marking its contrast with the prosperity they enjoyed in these booming agrarian villages and market towns. My own periodic work in the Kallar country was meant to explore such moral and material contrasts.

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Louis Dumont had rented what he had described as ‘a stone house with a terrace’ among the households of the Kachiti sublineage in Tenganlapatti, paying its owners Rs 10 each month (Dumont 1986: 64). The house was still standing when I first visited Tenganlapatti in 2001 and 2002, with plaster peeling from exposed red brick, but the terrace still framed by delicate carvings. The family that had long occupied the house in the decades after Dumont’s departure had since moved to a more modest dwelling across the road, leaving its recesses uninhabited and overgrown with weeds. But despite its recent abandonment, I was surprised to learn that the house was still known to this day—in Tenganlapatti and even in the larger village nearby—as ‘the white man’s house’. Children in the immediate vicinity, for example, would be encouraged to sit and relieve themselves among the bushes behind ‘the white man’s house’ (Figure 1). And a middle-aged woman who had long lived in this house, while too young to have been alive during Dumont’s stay, was still playfully known as ‘white woman’ herself, and her own grandchildren addressed by others living nearby as ‘white woman’s grandsons and granddaughters’. Dumont, the scholar of kinship and lineage, would have no doubt been amused.

Figure 1
‘The white man’s house’ in Tenganlapatti, 2002



Source: Author.

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‘[T]he reason for my presence was never clear to most people’, Dumont admitted in his writing (1986: 24), a judgement confirmed by some retrospective accounts. Retired Deputy Registrar Paraman of Madurai Kamaraj University, for example, who had grown up in one of the houses closest to Dumont’s residence, recalled imagining as a boy that the foreign visitor had something to do with the moment of India’s freedom from Britain: ‘We had thought, that at Independence time, here was some white man who had escaped and come here’. According to Amsu Thevar, former headman of the nearby village of K. Puliyanukulam, Dumont’s very presence in the area was cause for some excitement. ‘When he went out, all of them [would go] behind, [exclaiming] “White man! White man!” People did not know at the time that this was like chasing a madman’, he said. Others would have speculated about the occasion for his stay, he also said: ‘An Anglo-Indian has come, for some reason. He’s come to see the country.’

From what Dumont did during his sojourn in the region—his tours through the area, his many questions to its inhabitants, his attention to diverse aspects of their lives and most especially the many photographs that he took of them—people in Tengalapatti and its environs pieced together some idea of what led him here. ‘He came just to understand what happens in the world’, said Palkannu, who was in his early twenties when Dumont had lived in the house just adjacent to his own. This was an understanding elicited in dialogic form: “‘What are the customs of the country?’” he asked me. I said as much as I knew’, Palkannu recounted. In nearby K. Puliyanukulam, Amsu Thevar was also aware of Dumont’s interest in the most ordinary aspects of rural life: ‘He would see what is happening. He would see how two bulls were used to draw water from each well. He would see how people dig wells: how they dig, how they carry the earth. I would take him to all such places’, he told me.

Dumont was known for having travelled through the countryside recording such deeds with a ‘hand camera’, and those who remember him today find him most memorable for this reason. ‘I’m there too!’ several people said to me with a laugh, describing their place in his collection of photographs. Recollections of these images suggest that Dumont had not merely recorded cultural tradition as he found it, but also sought to stage its persistence in particular ways. ‘He would put *thanthatti* in the ears [of women] and take photos’, Amsu Thevar said, for example,

describing the heavy earrings that women in the region had once worn to lengthen their ear-lobes. And it appears too that people here began to turn their own lives towards the frame of his camera. When an old person had died, for example, Amsu Thevar suggested that some would pose themselves excitedly for its lens: 'He is going to take a photo, he is going to take a photo, stand, man!'

Dumont himself is recollected in the region as a tall man with a stout build and a wide chest, offering a surprising contrast to the photograph of a slender elder scholar with which T.N. Madan's festschrift (1982) for the anthropologist begins. The reminiscences of those who knew him seem to linger in particular on his practices of the body. Palkannu and his brother Rasu, for example, saw fit to emphasise that the visitor did not build a 'bathroom' in the house he was renting, making do instead with a makeshift thatched enclosure raised behind the house. Rasu reported that Dumont was singularly unimpressed with the way that sorghum had to be cleaned, pounded and processed laboriously with ample quantities of water at each stage: 'What nutrition is there in that?' he had asked them bemusedly. The anthropologist seemed to prefer his bread and chapattis, along with plenty of biscuits. Peanuts too had won his favour. 'It is good', Rasu reported he would say, cracking them open and eating them one by one. Amsu Thevar suggested meanwhile that Dumont was so frugal with his apples—at a time of great scarcity, no doubt—that he would share very little of them on the expeditions they made together: 'He would have bought and cut an apple fruit. From that, he would give only one piece.' But the gustatory pleasure that appears in retrospect to have been most scandalous was a clandestine indulgence in beef. Retired Registrar Paraman said that he was a small boy, six or seven years old, when Dumont had lived in Tengelapatti, and that he and his sister would watch through the window while the anthropologist roasted big pieces of beef on a fire. 'Holding our noses we would run and come, saying "Ayyoo, he is eating the flesh of a cow!" Beef does not agree with us, no?' he told me. It remains for us to wonder how the formidable thinker of purity and pollution would have grappled with the possible impurity of his own embodied desires.

While his wife appears to have come at least once to stay with him in Tengelapatti, local recollections suggest that Dumont mostly lived alone during the months of fieldwork here. The Piramalai Kallars, with whom

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he worked, had been classified as a 'criminal tribe' by the British colonial state for much of the early 20th century, an attribution lifted just two years before Dumont's arrival. His monograph describes the radical measures in colonial policing that the Kallar reputation for thievery had sustained, balancing this image with his own observations in the region: 'we must single out a small number of habitual if not professional thieves from the great mass of those who farm the land' (Dumont 1986: 31). Retrospective accounts, meanwhile, suggest how the anthropologist may have tackled such legacies as a foreigner himself. I asked Amsu Thevar, the former headman of K. Puliyankulam, for example, whether Dumont was afraid while here. 'Fear indeed. Then he grew accustomed', he replied. He described how Dumont had asked him to join him on a trip by car one day to the nearby city of Madurai, to see the 17th century Naicker palace at the heart of the erstwhile capital. 'Revolver: on this side he's kept [one], on that side he's kept [another one], for his protection', Amsu Thevar recalled. The former headman reported that Dumont's caution extended even to things as small and prosaic as peanuts, such that 'some kind of doubt' led him carefully to roast and wipe each one with his kerchief. 'Something impure?' I asked. 'No', Amsu Thevar replied with a casual speculation I found startling myself: 'That they would have put something [there] to kill him'.

I do not know whether there was some specific cause for the sense of threat evoked by Amsu Thevar, a man with whom Dumont had apparently travelled by bullock cart and car throughout much of the Kallar country. 'Only a few tried to take advantage of me', Dumont reports in his monograph, noting that most men engaged him with 'a rather dry cordiality ... no doubt polite but brusque' (Dumont 1986: 24). I found that in the village of Tengelapatti itself, Amsu Thevar's recollections notwithstanding, the anthropologist's local interactions were cast in a much warmer light. 'He would take and give us a one-paisa candy if we came running', said Alagamma, for example, who would have been ten or eleven years of age when she lived in a house close to Dumont in 1949. And brothers Palkannu and Rasu, from the house adjacent to Dumont's, laughed when I asked whether he spoke often to them, thinking of what Amsu Thevar had said. 'We would all eat as one, *ayya!*' one exclaimed, while the other added 'All of us were one. He would eat the food that we would eat, we would eat the food that he would eat. We were like one family' (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Palkannu and Rasu: 'We Were Like One family'



Source: Author.

The book itself, meanwhile, does little more than to map the spatial proximity of these houses and to note the identity of their inhabitants (Dumont 1986: 61–5).

A South Indian Subcaste is dedicated to one Kallar individual in particular—Muthusami Thevar—as ‘a representative of the sociological genius of the Tamils’, nearly a ‘co-author’ of the book who had understood most closely ‘the needs of the fieldworker’ (ibid.: 1). Although Dumont did not write very much more about Muthusami, I learned from his eldest son Kamadevan that the man was a high school graduate who had served briefly in the army before returning to Tengelapatti to cultivate the family’s orchards. Dumont had enlisted him as a ‘translator’, Kamadevan suggested, relying upon his unique knowledge of English. He did not pay him in cash for his assistance, but gave ‘small small things as gifts now and then’: pens, biscuits, chocolate, an umbrella, ‘even a transistor radio back then’. ‘My father and he were together as one, like dearest friends’, Kamadevan recalled. Dumont had once returned to visit them a few years later, unfurling a large bedroll to sleep on their porch that

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night and spending the following day bathing and relaxing in his father's orchard. 'Raju, Raju', the anthropologist would call Kamadevan himself, and it is this name that identifies the image of Muthusami's son sucking in his cheeks as a small naked boy in one of the plates of the monograph. 'He is sad', Dumont's caption reads with remarkable sen-sitivity: 'It is the weaning crisis'.

Reflecting on the inadequate domestic food budgets prevailing in the region, Dumont noted in his work the enduring scarcity with which households here contended: 'The family lives at the same time in great poverty and beyond its means' (Dumont 1986: 124). The arid landscape of the Kallar country would have itself attested to such hardship. As Dumont observed elsewhere in the monograph, 'The basic physical fact is the scarcity of rain' (ibid.: 95), a judgement echoed in Amsu Thevar's account of one expedition made with the anthropologist to the low range of Nagamalai Hills overlooking the area of his fieldwork. 'This country is without *pasumai* [greenness, freshness, or moisture]', Dumont had said, looking outward from that vantage point. 'How do they live?' The former headman replied simply: 'We show [how] by living'. Amsu Thevar gave an especially poignant and wrenching sense of how people in the region would have then struggled to eke out a living on this terrain, with another tale concerning a visit to these hills. Dumont had wanted to make an etching of a Jain stone inscription found here, and he had brought Amsu Thevar along for company. At one point, the latter recalled, Dumont had needed to relieve himself, but there was no water to be found on that hill slope with which to cleanse himself afterward. He is said to have taken out a rupee note then to wipe himself clean. 'He left it just like that', Amsu Thevar said. 'Someone took it and went, they ran away', he added, describing what had happened to this soiled note: 'They took it and washed it and kept it'. Only later did I learn what the former headman was too embarrassed to admit to me—as he had to my friend who introduced us—that he himself was this 'someone' in question.

It appears that soon after its initial publication in 1957, Dumont had sent a copy of his book on the Piramalai Kallars to his friend Muthusami Thevar. 'A book came by parcel post, when I was a very small boy', Kamadevan remembered. But his father sent this French edition back to its author: 'I did not understand it at all', he had told his son. After a long time, Kamadevan recounted, Dumont had mailed them another version

in English translation. And from then on, this copy of the work traversed a circuit of its own:

Many people from our village would take the book and go, saying that they wanted to read it. Then, for six months, the book they had taken would not come back at all. 'I am doing research', they would say, and take it away. If asked, 'It is in Thanjavur [on the coast, some 180 km away]', they would say, 'In Thanjavur someone is reading it'. If you ask there, someone would say 'It has come to Madurai [some 20 km away], I will get it and give it to you'. But saying that and saying that, they tricked us. Then at last, where that book was, I did not know.

One of the most important uses to which this wandering text was put concerned a dispute over the right of Tengelapatti villagers to pray at a goddess temple in K. Puliyanikulam. Dumont had recorded that one of the Kallar lineages here had been initiated by tradition into the cult of the Kamakshi temple in the latter village, and that the men of another Tengelapatti Kallar lineage had participated by custom in K. Puliyanikulam's annual Pongal festivities (Dumont 1986: 391, 422). In 1999, the local leaders in K. Puliyanikulam pronounced that Tengelapatti villagers had no right to pray in one of their temples. As Kamadevan put it: 'You should not burst firecrackers and come singing and dancing to our village', they had said, despite the annual practice of this custom. A civil case was filed in retaliation, and their lawyer was told that 'all of this' was in a book that a 'white man had come and written'. They sent for the itinerant text of Dumont's by courier, explained K. Pichai, one of the central figures in the court case: 'Saying that all of this belongs to Kachiti [Kallar lineage of Tengelapatti], we caught hold of that book and used it for our case'. The case was won in court, and the worship now continues under police protection.

For many in Tengelapatti today, Dumont's book—and most especially its photographs—is of interest chiefly as an index of historical transformation. 'Street by street through the whole village that book went, and everyone saw it', said Kamadevan: 'They would gawk at it. "Oh, were we like all of that? Was it like all of that? Has it all changed like this?"' Dumont had identified certain elements of change among the Kallars,

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but these appeared to transpire almost despite their own efforts: 'The Kallars have no taste for intellectual culture, and, what is more typical, seem hardly aware of the practical advantages they could draw from it' (Dumont 1986: 29). This observation may help us understand how Dumont could have written a letter with language such as the following to an Indo-American professor of sociology—Piramalai Kallar by caste—who had contacted him from New York in the late 20th century:

Dear Solomon,

During my research, during the 1950s, I never imagined that a Pramalai Kallar would be educated and come to New York ...

Dr Solomon's brother-in-law, the retired Deputy Registrar Paraman, recounted the language of this letter in careful English and its receipt by his brother-in-law, to emphasise that his kinsmen had lived like 'barbarians' during Dumont's time here, suffering from a 'dearth of food, dearth of water, dearth of clothing'. I asked him how it felt to look at Dumont's book now. 'It is beyond imagination indeed', he told me: 'Our growth will appear only great to us, no?' He pointed out the tiled and concrete houses that lined the lane in which we spoke: 'Everyone wears chappals, wears a wristwatch. In each house, television, a cable connection, electricity'. He was supervising the construction of a tall and elaborate tower for the Kachiti lineage temple that day, and a cellular phone ringtone interrupted our conversation twice in the span of just a few minutes.

I did not linger long enough in Tengalapatti to examine the sources of this evident wealth, or to investigate how widely Paraman's claims might hold. I would suggest, however, that the triumphal tone of this narrative is belied by the condition of at least one structure in the village today: the house in which Dumont himself had lived nearly sixty years ago. When I returned here in August of 2008, I found that this house had collapsed almost entirely, one high side wall and the remnants of a back wall alone framing the mound of stone and rubble where its rooms had stood even just a few years back. 'We couldn't maintain it', the inheritors of the house told me, and asked whether I myself might finance its reconstruction: 'If you rebuild it, people like you will come, will stay and go, will sit for awhile', one woman said. As we spoke along the dusty roadside, drowned out and buffeted by the lorries that kept trundling by,

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a white-haired woman named Rasathi commented: 'Wealth will decay. Learning will not decay'. She carried an empty basket on her head, and wore the heavy earrings in her ears that Dumont had found so interesting. I do not know whether she was speaking about the ruin of the house, or the parade of lorries that drove us back into the weeds that had overgrown it. For Rasathi too, this was still the 'white man's house'. And in spite of its abandonment and collapse, this name itself, she insisted, had somehow remained: 'This [name for the house] shines, just like that'.

Anthropology often reproaches itself these days for struggling against the passage of time. And time no doubt challenges in turn the pretence of our own elaborations. What we may take, however, from these scattered reminiscences of an anthropologist once at work in such a place in south India, is the possibility that our own work may endure in entirely unexpected situations, forms and spaces. Those who slip ineluctably beyond the range of our attentions may not be willing to let go of us that easily. And in an enterprise that so relentlessly turns the ends of ethnography into means of advancement—theoretical or otherwise—it is no doubt worth taking care to heed such unforeseen remnants of our own lives in other places.

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