

Professional Weeping: Music, Affect, and Hierarchy in a South Indian Folk Performance Art

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Introduction

Tamil *oppari*, or *oppaari*,¹ is a distinctively South Indian genre of weeping songs performed primarily by grieving women, or by professional male musicians mostly from Harijan² caste communities. Oppari is most commonly identified as the grieving song of a widow at the funeral of her husband. The genre is also performed in other cultural contexts and has adopted other cultural meanings and functions. Women also perform oppari at home, lamenting a wide range of problems and even injustices, and their laments carry beyond the home's open-air structures to be overheard by others. Indeed, Blackburn and Ramanujan (1986:17-18) argue that much of Indian folklore, and Tamil weeping songs in particular, are designed to be overheard (see also Urban 1988:392).

Oppari performances constitute an undercurrent, a secondary code of emotional and substantive expressions which are marginalized in the contexts in which they are heard. For example, although the expressions of women's grievances (and even protests) through oppari are impossible to completely ignore at a funeral, the stated purpose of the rite is to send the soul off to the next life. Women's emotional expressions are considered peripheral to this "official" function, at least according to several men I interviewed after a funeral. Nevertheless, oppari is an important expressive opportunity for many rural Tamil women.

Although Harijan women participate frequently in public activities and can voice their concerns in work songs (Greene 1995:240-246), women of many other caste communities, such as the landowning Kallar caste, live lives restricted to domestic, private cultural spheres, and have few opportunities for public self-expression. Through oppari they can publicly voice personal concerns, and even protest unfair conditions and injustices. Successful oppari performances by women can, and often do, function not only as cathartic release but also as effective vehicles of social protests and special appeals for sympathy, reaching the ears of many people in a village or neighborhood, including those of higher castes. At a funeral, an oppari performer can even make claims to the possessions of the deceased.

This exceptional space that many women find to voice their personal concerns is encroached upon by professional male performers. At most rural Tamil funerals, six to eight professional drummers are hired. As Dumont observes in his account of a Tamil funeral, one of the stated purposes of the drum music is to "distract" the participants with "lively and even tempestuous" sounds (1986:272). In many cases, male singers (who may or may not also be drummers) are hired to perform the

persona of a grieving women, or several grieving women, and possibly other personae as well. Likewise, as a distraction, this professional oppari sometimes becomes somewhat spectacular, involving dramatic buildups of emotional expression, and even dancing, mockery, and buffoonery. This is not to say that the professional oppari performer's role is in some way "inauthentic": like women's oppari, professional men's oppari has a long-standing tradition behind it. But I argue here that professional oppari functions as a countermeasure to women's oppari, stealing their thunder. Although patrons of professional oppari merely say that the performances are hired out of respect to long-standing traditions, I find that professional opparis serve an unstated, traditional function of competing with and standing in for real women's expressions, partially eclipsing the expressive goals of the grieving women who are present. Moreover, professional opparis typically lack the suggestions of blame or claims to possessions that may be heard in women's oppari. Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that it is the male relatives of the deceased who hire the musician, not the female ones. But in order to be an effective stand-in, a professional man's oppari must embody the essential trappings of emotional, musical, and poetic expressions of grieving women. In some ways, then, it is important that he *become* a grieving woman in his performance.

One can examine the cultural contexts, meanings, and politics of professional men's oppari in Tamil folk culture; enumerate the musical and poetic features of the little-documented oppari genre; and undertake a careful analysis of an oppari performance by a professional musician. Successful oppari performances are rich in metaphors, constructed of elaborate, impromptu poetry, and calculated in sonic design, and they function as effective vehicles to move the listener and to appeal for sympathy. The performative design of opparis involves wails, shrieks, sobs, and breathy intakes: sound elements (included as sound samples and analyzed in [a part of Section 3](#)) which musicologists and ethnomusicologists have only recently begun to analyze as music, and which are crafted, deployed, and developed in performance quite deliberately, in ways that I find warrant musical analysis.

In order to understand professional oppari performers and their calculated expressive designs, I argue it is necessary to understand a double bind in which the musicians find themselves, and, by extension, the men who hire them as well. On the one hand, a professional musician is charged with performing in a way that sounds like the intense, personal, spontaneous emotional expressions of a woman grieving over death. This official role in an important public ritual is a source of income as well as some cultural pride (see Moffatt [1979](#):201). On the other hand, death and widowhood are often considered highly dangerous (Wadley [1980](#):155), and widowhood in particular is commonly called "the most inauspicious of inauspicious things" (Reynolds [1980](#):36). In addition, spontaneous, personal, intense emotional expressions, although highly valued in certain contexts of Hindu devotion, are more commonly considered "solitary emotions" (Brenneis [1990](#):119-121), and their public expression is characteristic of "weak" people (Greene [1995](#):79-85, 98-106). The prestige of the performer is caught in a double bind between these contradictory expectations. He therefore seeks to distance himself from widowhood, death, and the appearance of emotional spontaneity by performing in ways that are controlled, deliberate, patterned, and "musical"-- therefore reputable. The male relatives who hired the musician are also caught in this double bind, since they are responsible for his role at the funeral. They love and honor their deceased relative, but find the corpse frightening and disgusting (Evison [1989](#)). Although non-professional women oppari performers are caught in a somewhat different double bind, they, too seek to perform in controlled, calculated, "musical" ways. This article does not dismiss oppari as merely the emotional outbursts of unimportant people, but engages it as a kind of socially functional music, a genre of deliberately crafted expressions, regardless of the performer's personal emotional state, whether performed by women or men.

The musical genre of oppari remains understudied, although death has been an important topic in ethnographic research on South India for several decades, and the body of literature on the region's music can no longer be said to be small. One reason may be that oppari analysis involves attention to sonic features such as wails, breathy intakes, and sobs: sounds which might be dismissed as non-musical, especially from pitch-based perspectives common in western musical analysis traditions.

Moreover, as suggested above, there are Tamils who dismiss oppari as emotional outburst, not music. But such assertions, as Raheja and Gold (1994) would warn us, can be a means of marginalizing voices in a society, in this case the voices of women and low-caste men. It is inherently difficult, but very important, to "listen to the voices" of those who are marginalized. In general, this may be one reason that there is a much larger body of research on the Tamil high arts, and research on folk expressions, especially of women and lower caste communities, is slower to emerge. Moreover, recent research on Tamil folk culture and folk music, organized both at Indian universities and those abroad, has only begun to address oppari.

Studying and Writing about Ritual Wailing

In many human societies, a distinction is drawn between activities which can be called "singing" and those which can be called "crying" (Feld 1990:129; Graham 1986; Henry 1988:102; Urban 1988:393-394; Wolf 1997:364), although the distinction often breaks down in specific instances. "Singing" (*pattu* in Tamil) refers to a culturally learned practice, involving poetic features and stylistic conventions, that is often conducted in social settings. Urban (1988) suggests that patterned regularities, alliteration, and adherence to expressive conventions in Amerindian ritual wailing indicate a "desire for sociability": a latent or actual intent to use song as a vehicle of social interaction. In contrast, "crying" (*ayira* in Tamil) refers to a spontaneous, personal, emotional response. It is evidenced not by adherence to culture-specific stylistic conventions, but rather by certain respiratory and vocal features which may be universal human physiological responses to intense emotions, as well as to the related conditions of pain, injury, and body weakness (Urban 1988). But, properly understood, the two activities of "singing" and "crying" overlap and are parts of a continuum of expressions. Many instances of ritual wailing therefore seem to involve both social and personal/physiological aspects, and oppari spans a substantial portion of the singing-crying continuum.

In several ways, Tamil oppari performances parallel Kaluli grieving practices, as studied by Steven Feld. As women weep, it is common for their weeping (in Kaluli: *sa-yelab*) to be gradually elaborated into controlled, patterned, melodic phrases with increasing consistency and redundancy, and become wept song (Feld 1990:128). But while professional male oppari performers may, like Kaluli men who perform stylized weeping songs (*gisalos*), affect the emotions of their audience, an important part of the Tamil professional's performance is to bring *himself* to tears. Whereas *gisalo* is designed to move audiences to emotions of grief and to experience death, loss, and abandonment, a professional oppari performance operates in an almost inverse fashion: it is a stand-in, distraction, or buffer *between* grieving relatives and the emotions caused by death and loss. To some extent, the professional weeps *in place of* the grieving relatives. Accordingly, elements of singing and crying, of stylized music and personal/physiological responses, are interrelated in different ways. This is taken up in a performance analysis in [Section 4](#).

In the ethnographic literature on ritual wailing traditions, an understudied topic is the ways that discourse *about* ritual wailing affects its social efficacy. As mentioned above, the Tamil professional oppari performer is in a double bind between the expectation that he produce the sounds of a widow weeping spontaneously (crying) and the need to distance himself from this persona through stylized, crafted expression (singing). Whether his expression is to be classified as singing or crying is an issue for each person within earshot, who may choose to either ascribe him status as a musical professional or dismiss him as emotional, out of control. In addition, one way in which women's opparis--and the protests and demands embedded in them--are marginalized by men is that they are not given the status of music, but instead dismissed as emotional outbursts. I do not seek to determine whether or not specific opparis embody "real" or "spontaneous" inner emotions. The question of spontaneity is especially difficult to answer, especially since opparis often include phrases from opparis performed earlier, or even printed sources. Instead, I examine what those present *say* about emotional expressions. I follow Abu-Lughod and Lutz, who suggest that the most productive approach in the anthropology of emotions is to analyze the social "discourses on emotion and emotional discourses as social practices" (1990:1). Accordingly, I study how

discourses about emotions may shape the social efficacy of emotional expressions, and place oppari performers and patrons in various double binds.

As a male writer engaging an expressive genre that is primarily by and about women, I follow the lead of feminist writers like van Oostrum (1995): I seek to not only analyze but also critique cultural representations and enactments of women performed by men. One of my goals is to deconstruct professional oppari, to expose the mechanisms by which it marginalizes women and their expressions. Accordingly, [Section 4](#) exposes some of these mechanisms in a careful analysis of a professional oppari performance. I find that one way a professional oppari can marginalize women is by functioning as a spectacular but socially inert stand-in for the socially charged expressions of women. A professional musician can enact the sound patterns and emotional expressions of women but leave their personal concerns and protests unvoiced. In some cases, men's opparis go one step further, by ridiculing women and their expressions, a point taken up in [a passage in Section 3](#). For example, in carefully crafted oppari, a stylized wail can be subtly crafted to sound a bit like laughter, and listeners can experience in the wail a double-entendre. In other instances, the "sonic icons of crying" (Tolbert 1994:180; Urban 1988:389) can be so exaggerated as to become comical. Certain instances of audience responses faintly audible in the background of some of my sound samples in [Section 4](#) suggest that such ridicule is sometimes successful.

My critical analysis is intended not only to illuminate professional men's oppari, itself an important expressive tradition, but also to clarify the nature of women's struggle for self-expression. In the existing literature, ritual wailing is primarily modeled as an expression of personal concerns designed to be overheard. But my data suggest that many Tamil women find that being overheard is a difficult *struggle*, for they are competing with many other boisterous voices clamoring for attention in the same setting. This competitive aspect of ritual wailing is understudied, and is not even mentioned in most ethnographic accounts. By analyzing and critiquing men's oppari, I hope to open up research so we can better understand both men's and women's ritual wailing practices. In 1993 and 1994, I conducted field research in villages of the Thanjavur District³ of Tamil Nadu, South India. Most of my field research was focused on the village of Icaikurichi.⁴ One of the reasons I focus on professional male performances is that, as a male ethnographer in rural South India, I decided that it was not appropriate for me to record the intimate emotional expressions of women (provided I would even have been allowed to do so). Even female researchers in Tamil Nadu have found it difficult to record women's oppari in context, and ended up recording crying songs⁵ that were performed for the purpose of being recorded by an ethnographer (Egnor [Trawick] 1986:303). However, I was able to hear (but not record) women's oppari at a funeral I attended. [Section 1](#) is an ethnographic account of an Icaikurichi funeral in which grieving women and professional musicians perform oppari. [Section 2](#) then examines the cultural meanings and functions of oppari. [Section 3](#) outlines the features of oppari as a musical genre, informed by interviews with four professional musicians, mostly from the Thanjavur district. [Section 4](#) is a performance analysis of a professional oppari, showing how characteristic musical elements are deployed as a professional musician struggles with the double bind of professionalizing funerary weeping.

EOL 5: Professional Weeping ([Greene](#))

1. A Funeral

My first encounter of oppari is at a funeral ceremony (*eruti chatangu*) that takes place approximately one kilometer outside the village of Icaikurichi, a chiefly agricultural village of approximately four thousand. My host in the village informs me that a man of the Kallar caste community has very recently died, and that his relatives and locally important, "known men" (*terinta manitar*) are making arrangements for a funeral. At about five o'clock in the evening, I make my way by motor-bike to the site of the ceremony, which is a collection of about five buildings in open fields. About fifty people are gathered for the event, and another fifty arrive in the following thirty minutes. As I approach the site, I hear loud noises. Villagers are lighting

firecrackers and launching small rockets into the air. Five drummers are walking in procession into the area of the huts, where they begin an extended performance.



[Plate 1](#). "M.G.R." leads musical performance at the funeral.

A group of Harijan (Paraiyar) professional musicians has been hired to perform at the funeral. Their performance, shown in [Plate 1](#), is led by one drummer, who calls himself "M.G.R.," a stage name he borrows from one of Tamil Nadu's most popular film actors. The original M.G.R. was a fantastically popular celebrity who later became Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The leather *tappu* drum, shown in the plate, is commonly used for funeral performances like this one and also to accompany the incantation of village announcements. The performance is in call-and-response format: M.G.R. (shown in front) sings a phrase, then he and the other drummers responds to the sung phrase by drumming out a pattern. M.G.R.'s words concern the greatness of the dead man and certain matters of the funeral preparations. Although a few people present refer to this group performance as *oppari*, most people reserve the term *oppari* chiefly for solo performances.

After some time, M.G.R. also performs solo. It is in these solo performances of *oppari* proper that he is most emotionally expressive. He sings a few phrases to a repeating incantation melody, and punctuates groups of phrases with wails and shrieks. Into these punctuating wails he incorporates expressive effects such as sobbing, breathy intakes, groans, and falsetto. As he sings, it becomes clear that he has adopted the performed persona of a grieving woman, sometimes the daughter of the deceased, sometimes the wife, sometimes the mother. At several points in the performance he actually sheds tears. M.G.R. performs with tremendous stage presence as well as skill. His performance is quite animated: he moves around, swaying with his body and lifting his arms and legs in a slow dance. He even grins at times, as shown in [Plate 1](#).

Perhaps M.G.R. takes his performance too far in the direction of showmanship. He leads his group in performing a pop folk song called "Rasathi," originally by the popular singer Pushpavanam Kuppuswamy, and one of the relatives approaches him and loudly insists that he turn his performance to the occasion at hand rather than to a love song. The relative further complains that M.G.R. and the other drummers are being too money- and career-minded.

After some time, I become aware of wailing and sobbing coming from a group of mourners in a structure behind a white sheet. The sounds of grief become louder and louder. These wailers are the deceased man's widow, sisters and other close relatives and friends. They are mostly women, but also include a few men. They are crying in a loosely structured, more spontaneous form of *oppari*. They cry out about how their lives will be forever changed, and how they will have difficulty supporting themselves. They accompany their performance with arm and hand gestures of two types: 1) a performer strikes her fists against her collarbone, then extends both hands forward; or 2) a performer clasps both hands against her collarbone on the left side, then lowers the hands to her lap, then raises them to her right side, then back to her lap. Mourners do not synchronize their expressions, and the result is heterophonic incantation on a shared pitch center, punctuated by sobbing (see also Feld [1990](#):100-102). They lean against each other and hug each other as they perform. Gradually, the weeping grows in volume, and weepers begin to sing about the dead person and their relation to him, settling on a single incantation pitch. Their *oppari* continues for about thirty minutes.



[Plate 2](#). Funeral bier prepared for transportation to the cremation site.

Meanwhile in one of the huts some of the close male relatives of the dead man wash themselves and put on red clothing. Some of the "known men" do likewise.

Other relatives decorate a bier with flowers and garlands ([Plate 2](#)). After a pause the drummers start again. The mourners process out of the huts to the

accompaniment of fireworks. The corpse is placed in the bier. Mourning women walk around the cart clockwise several times, still performing *oppari*. The men pick up the bier and carry it to the road. The dead man's eldest son leads the way, carrying a tripod which holds a pot of burning cow dung. The women follow the procession only as far as the road. There they stop, huddle down on the road, and continue to sob and hug each other. (Henry observes similar practices in women's

laments in North India [[1988](#):102].) The mourning women remain huddled as the men, led by the dead man's eldest son, proceed with the cart up a small hill, accompanied by firecrackers and energetic drumming. The road is quickly littered with flowers and garlands that fall from the cart. The men carry the bier about a third of a kilometer to an immolation site on a small hill above the fields. When the cart reaches the site, the drumming and firecrackers cease. Conversation becomes pragmatic, task-oriented, and unemotional. Older men and "known men" give orders about how the body is to be situated, and so forth. The body, wrapped in a pink cloth, is placed on a pile of cow dung covered with sticks and logs. The men cover the corpse with rice hay and other flammable materials, and present coins and rice near the head of the corpse. After a few ceremonial actions, the dead man's son lights the hay with the flame he has carried. Everyone immediately leaves. The entire ritual takes no more than twelve minutes, and the immolation runs its course in the barren field without spectators. After settling the expenses on the road nearby, the male and female mourners immediately return home and bathe.

Funeral rituals like this one seem to be slow to change in Tamil Nadu. Comparison of this Kallar man's funeral to Moffatt's account ([1979](#):195-201) of a funeral outside Madras (now renamed Chennai) and especially to Dumont's account ([1986](#):272-278) of a Kallar woman's burial ceremony outside Madurai (observed during his research in 1949-1950), reveals many striking similarities and only a few differences. Dumont describes a "band of Untouchables (six to eight members)" who played "lively and even tempestuous music" on drums with the purpose to "keep the mind occupied, or distract it" (p. 272). Dumont observes the same distinction between the grieving practices of male and female relatives, also noting that the women weep audibly while under the white sheet with the dead man, and do not follow the corpse to the cremation/burial site.⁶ Icaikurichi villagers deny that funeral rituals have changed much over recent decades, a claim that would seem to be supported by the outburst M.G.R. encountered when he tried to perform a commercially-marketed folksong. Although commercial processes and western technologies have stimulated changes in many other dimensions of village life (Greene [1999](#)), funeral rituals seem to be especially conservative, resisting change.

EOL 5: Professional Weeping ([Greene](#))

2. Oppari in Cultural Perspectives

Non-professional oppari is performed by women and girls of all ages, from middle and lower caste communities. They are most commonly performed at funerals, but may also be performed at home, possibly with the intention of being overheard. Henry also observes that in North India, women perform chanted laments on occasions of departures from the natal home or upon the joyful occasion of the arrival of a friend or relative ([1988](#):102), but I never heard of Tamil opparis performed in such contexts. In the village of Icaikurichi, I heard of or observed opparis performed by Kallar, Devar, Paraiyar, and Pallan women (the former two are landed castes and the latter two Harijan castes). Opparis performed by Brahmin women are rare. Songs are improvised, although words and phrases may be borrowed from other expressions, including other oppari performances (Kuppuswamy [1994](#)). Professional oppari musicians like M.G.R. come only from the Harijan, or lowest-ranked caste communities. I am told that professional musicians from non-Harijan castes typically refuse to perform oppari. Oppari performance is not a full-time occupation, and the musicians also perform in other events and have other occupations. M.G.R. is also hired to perform village announcements to music, and his primary occupation is wage laborer in the rice fields. The oppari singer most commonly addresses the dead person. Tamils identify categories of oppari expression accordingly, and the most common are: oppari of a wife for her husband, oppari of a daughter for her father, oppari of mother for her daughter, and oppari of daughter for her mother (see also Henry [1988](#):103). Occasionally, opparis are also performed for a sibling. Professionals perform any or all of these kinds of oppari, and commonly combine them, performing songs that address the deceased as father, son, and uncle, or as mother, daughter, and cousin. The performance analyzed in the following section, for example, combines several ways of relating to the deceased. Other oppari themes include a woman grieving barrenness, a decline in her wealth or social

standing, or her husband's extramarital affairs (Saraswathi [1982](#)). Because the most common kind of oppari is of a wife grieving the death of her husband, the genre is often associated with widowhood, or with becoming a widow. Even when the performer is not actually a widow, she may refer to herself as one (Egnor [Trawick] [1986](#):319). To an extent, then, oppari is the performing of widowhood, and it is therefore necessary to understand the associations and stigmas attached to widows in Tamil cultural life, which is taken up below.

Oppari also has broader cultural meanings and functions, and is also performed in other settings besides funerals. Women also spontaneously sing crying songs at home or in private spaces, most commonly about death and loss, but also sometimes about other sorrows. Sherinian finds that oppari is incorporated into folk-based Tamil Christian services, in songs of repentance of sins and requests for forgiveness ([1998](#):669). In several towns and villages of the Thanjavur district, I find that professional oppari performers are willing to make special performances for me, and these comprise most of the sound recordings analyzed in this article.

I was surprised to find that these performances sometimes become small spectacles. Other villagers come to watch the event, sometimes grinning, sometimes even laughing at the performed emotions (behavior I never observed at actual funerals). As a result, audience responses can be faintly heard in the background of some of the sound samples included in [Section 4](#). I even found one commercially-produced audio cassette of oppari music, marketed through the small Madurai-based label Sri Ramji Cassettes, which suggests there may even be a small commercial market for the spectacle of wept songs.

In Icaikurichi, a group of men perform oppari for the village deities during periods of drought (see Srinivas' translations of such songs, quoted in Wolf [1997](#):367-368). Although I never witnessed such a performance, I am told they cry out expressions of sorrow about the lack of rain, and incorporate arm gestures like those of the women in the preceding funeral description. Performers do not believe they can affect the deities' emotions. Instead, they hope that, by performing oppari, the village's deities will see how intense their grief and needs are, and bring rain to the village. Sometimes they set straw on fire with oil in order to create smoke, putting "clouds" in the sky to show the deities how very much they long for rain. The practice is looked down upon by some in the village as an inappropriate way to appeal to the gods.

Oppari is also often likened to another folk music genre called *talattu*, or lullabies. Talattu is a song by a woman for her child while she is embracing it, often rocking it to sleep in a small cloth cradle. Similarity to oppari lies in the fact that in the song the woman commonly describes her child as crying. The tears in the song become like a stream, watering the rice fields, flooding into the rivers, and overflowing the village tanks (Saraswathi [1982](#)). Since talattu involves lists of positive things (gifts to be given to the baby, wonderful things the child will accomplish) and oppari involves lists of personal losses and other negative things, Tamil scholar Kabaliswaran terms oppari a "negative lullaby" (quoted in Wolf [1997](#):368). Like oppari, the genre of talattu extends beyond its central function of helping a child feel affection and go to sleep. In the Thanjavur District, women sing lullabies as worksongs while transplanting rice seedlings during the summer months. Also like oppari, talattu can be used to communicate grievances to others, especially when they can be overheard (Egnor [Trawick] [1986](#):336-340). In some cases, women sing talattu to the deities as well (see Richman [1997](#)). A Brahman family in Icaikurichi sings talattu to Ram, whom they worship as a child deity.

Women's Worlds, Women's Power, and Widowhood

Although the stated purpose of the funeral described in the preceding section is to cremate the body and to send the soul off to the next life, another, quite different, "unofficial" expressive focus emerges in the way the rite is actually performed: a focus on the emotional expressions of women. Even when men perform it, oppari is a performance of women's emotions. To be sure, a few male relatives at the funeral do openly display their own personal emotions of grief, but I find in subsequent interviews that their expressions are dismissed and looked down upon as inappropriate

public displays of "weakness." The dead man's son tells me, "Women cry at funerals because they are weak. But a man must not show weakness in public."

Although such discourses tend to marginalize women, it is nevertheless still very significant that women are given such a prominent, audible voice in this public ritual. With the exception of Harijan women, who commonly voice personal concerns publicly in worksongs and in their own neighborhoods, most women, and their expressions, are usually relegated to private, domestic spaces. Women are discouraged from participating in most public events in rural Tamil culture. In fact, if one takes a stroll down the main street of Icaikurichi, or visits the village during a festival, one is likely to get the impression that only men live in the village, because the women are almost always inside the buildings (see Plates 3, 4, and 5).⁷



Plate 3. A view down the main street of Icaikurichi



Plate 4. Daily conversation in front of the headman's office

Plate 5.



Procession in the annual festival to goddess Muttumariamamma

Even in the funeral, a sense that women should be kept in private spaces may linger in the fact that the women at first gather behind a white sheet. And most Tamil performances, even those involving female performers, take place in events and contexts in which men are in charge. I follow Egnor [Trawick]'s (1986) lead in suggesting that Tamil weeping songs may be an important and exceptional opportunity for women to express their concerns and be heard.

Women's oppari can be a vehicle of their agency. As women perform oppari at the funeral, they express their fears and concerns, and in this way appeal for sympathy. Through oppari a woman can protest unfair social conditions. Women in rural Tamil Nadu live lives circumscribed by tight codes of modesty which usually prevent their voices from being heard. They are not allowed to negotiate their wages, and in Icaikurichi are paid around 60% of men's salaries for the same period of work in the rice fields. Although domestic work is also very difficult, they are often unappreciated for their long hours (see also Jeffery, Jeffery, and Lyon 1989:43).

In Icaikurichi there are few recourses for domestic abuse. Under most circumstances, a woman must channel her complaints through her parents' household, and hope that they are taken up by her father, uncle, brother, or cousin. And to become a widow is to suffer even greater hardships. A widow is considered inauspicious and dangerous, and is therefore excluded from most ritual functions. In Icaikurichi, she is expected to wear white (i.e., uncolored) saris and not to adorn herself with jewelry or anything that might make her attractive or might draw attention to herself. She is usually not expected to remarry, although I was told there were exceptions among Kallar widows. Without a husband, she typically suffers a big drop in her household earning power and general standard of living. At a funeral, the widow of the deceased has a special opportunity to voice all these concerns and more through her oppari, to cry out about the woes of being suddenly thrust into widowhood.

Remarkably, a women's oppari can express a grievance against someone of higher status. This is in part because, in many Tamil folk tales, a good, chaste woman who suffers is attributed a special moral status (Egnor [Trawick] 1980:16). Egnor [Trawick] (1986) finds that Tamil crying songs can successfully communicate grievances up the caste hierarchy, and reach the ears of wrong-doers of higher castes. Such grievances are often not explicit, but rather implicit, suggested through metaphors spun out in the performance. Crying songs, although considered intimate and private, may therefore be intended to be overheard. Funerals are semi-public events, and even "private" oppari at home is likely to be overheard since most homes in rural Tamil Nadu are open-air structures and sounds naturally carry beyond the walls of a home. Egnor [Trawick]'s findings are supported by my field data. Not only do the women at the funeral succeed in appealing for sympathy to those around them, but they also lay claims, through oppari, to the dead man's possessions. In their crying, several women mention in some detail specific interactions they had

had with the deceased, in which he has shared or loaned various objects to them. These publicly-voiced cries can later help to substantiate their competing claims to the man's possessions. In general, the more poignantly one is able to express one's closeness to the deceased, the stronger one can lay claim his or her possessions.

In contrast, in M.G.R.'s oppari I detect no evidence of an agenda to lay claim to the dead man's possessions, nor to protest wrong-doing, nor to ascribe special sympathy to one or another of the grievors. The full text of a re-performance of this oppari is given in the [Appendix](#). Although no one present actually says so, I can see that, as he performs, he actively draws attention away from the grieving women. He is a very prominent, emotionally expressive stand-in for grieving women, eclipsing or at least marginalizing them. In this vein, it is worth pointing out that Dumont's informants at a Kallar funeral indicate that an important role of the professional musicians is to "keep the mind occupied, or distract it" (Dumont [1986](#):272). Perhaps also significantly, M.G.R. is hired by male relatives of the dead man, not female ones. Although no one explicitly says so, I find that M.G.R.'s role at the funeral, and the traditional roles of professional funeral musicians generally, involves shaping, guiding, or marginalizing the volatile emotions of grief, especially of women. This is not to say that M.G.R.'s performance is in some way "inauthentic," rather that it fulfills a traditional role, one of the results of which is that women's emotional expressions are further marginalized.

Reynolds' research ([1980](#)) on Tamil women and widowhood are pertinent here. Reynolds finds that one reason Tamil women are so carefully controlled by men is that they are believed to be extremely powerful. Tamil daughters bring prosperity to their brothers and fathers. Tamil mothers and mother-like goddesses bring order to life. According to countless Tamil folk epics, a woman who is wronged, especially if she is wrongly killed, can become a deity and exact a terrific revenge. The power of a Tamil woman best serves the family and the community if she is controlled, both symbolically and in concrete ways, by a father or husband (Reynolds [1980](#):43, 46). An unmarried goddess is worshipped because, in the absence of male control, her female power, or *shakti*, makes her unpredictable, dangerous, but also potentially a fiercely protector of her devotees (Reynolds [1980](#):43-44). Such unmarried goddesses are among the most important deities in rural Tamil Hinduism, exemplified in the village of Icaikurichi by the fierce and very popular Muttumariamman.

When a woman becomes a widow, male control and binding--both symbolic and actual--are broken. The *tali*, or marriage necklace, is removed, and a Tamil woman becomes unbound from male control. Like an unmarried goddess, a Tamil widow represents capriciousness, a lack of control (Reynolds [1980](#):36). At least one man who has exercised control over her is now absent. But unlike village goddesses, a widow is especially dangerous, because she is suspected of sinning, by not maintaining self-control in this or a previous life. Were she not a sinner, her husband might still be alive (Reynolds [1980](#):56; Wadley [1980](#):155). Thus, a widow's presence is considered inauspicious not because she is weak, but because she is dangerous. Following Wadley's research, one may theorize that one reason male control over women's oppari at this funeral was indirect--through the centralizing and showcasing of M.G.R.'s less dangerous oppari--may be that there are no other, more direct ways to control women at this cultural moment. A more direct approach might even be dangerous.

Death

Although not all opparis are about death, most are, and in rural Tamil Nadu, contact with death is something to be avoided. A shunning of death is evident in the fact that, after the immolation, all participants immediately made arrangements to leave the site, return home, and bathe. Bathing is an act of purification, believed to remove the association with death and with other undesirable substances or beings, and is therefore also an important part of preparations for sacred activities. Icaikurichi villagers preparing for pilgrimage to Sabari Malai, upon encountering death, are expected to bathe (Greene [1995](#):283-295). Whether or not the villagers actually conceive of death as a kind of "ritual pollution," the grievors respond to it in ways that are compatible with Madan's ([1985](#):12-13) understanding of ritual pollution in Hindu culture. Madan describes pollution as a

tarnishing of one's soul which can be corrected through acts of purification, such as bathing. In any case, the Paraiyars' association with death is the primary reason they are given the lowest social standing in the village of any caste community. It is the job of the Paraiyars to work with dead carcasses, process cow leather, and watch over cremation sites. As a result, they are separated from other caste communities through taboos of food sharing, intermarriage, and physical contact. Paraiyars may be understood as a kind of buffer between people of other caste communities and death.

M.G.R. like many professional oppari performers, is of the Paraiyar community, a Harijan caste. Oppari performance, the tappu, and the Paraiyar community are therefore associated with death. Unlike other participants at the funeral, then, it is in some ways more difficult for him to shake off the association with death. His association with death is the source of his employment, but it also keeps his social standing--and that of his caste community--at a low level. This means he is in a double bind. He must genuinely perform and embody the emotions brought about by death, and he must perform the persona of a widow, because this is his job. His contact with death is highlighted in performance by the fact that, to perform oppari properly he must sing *to* the dead man, cry out to him, recounting so many things she (i.e., M.G.R.'s performed persona of a woman) had done for him. "I took such good care of you, but you died anyway!" is a common oppari outcry (compare to similar laments in North India noted by Henry [[1988](#):103-104]). But at the same time he must attempt to distance himself, inasmuch as he can, from death and widowhood. Caught in this double bind, he cultivates a kind of professionalism that allows him to put some distance between himself and his own performance. This professionalism is taken up [below](#) and in the performance analysis in [Section 4](#).

Emotion

Interviews in Icaikurichi lead me to the conclusion that oppari is looked down upon not only because of its association with death and with widowhood, but also because it involves or represents the expression of spontaneous emotion. Several days after the funeral, the son of the dead man explains to me, "At the funeral I must be strong. A man must show no emotion or sadness, even at a funeral of his father. Women cry at funerals because they are weak. But a man must not show weakness in public." He then admits, "When I am alone, perhaps then I can express my sadness and cry." (I have also heard that men are sometimes known to cry in the brief, informal period before the funeral when family members are beginning to arrive.)

I find that many people in the village also make the distinction between "strong" and "weak" actions or emotional expressions, although villagers often disagree about how to classify any given action or expression. Brenneis ([1990](#)) finds a similar classification system of emotions in a community of Indians in Bhatgaon. He finds that some spontaneous personal emotions are considered appropriate only in solitary settings. Although the dead man's son does not say that M.G.R.'s performance is "weak" in this sense, a few others from higher caste communities in the village do: public emotional displays, whether deliberate or otherwise, are not considered fitting for a person of prestige.

M.G.R.'s critics posit that a better-educated person simply would not express such intense and personal emotions in public. They also point out that M.G.R.'s performance is very physical and body-based, not lofty or spiritual, and not sufficiently self-controlled.

The ideals voiced by M.G.R.'s critics echo those described in classical *rasa* theory, principles of aesthetics and emotional expression articulated in the great texts of the Indian high arts, and a part of high-caste education. Although it is debatable the extent to which *rasa* aesthetics are part of one's cultural upbringing in rural India, or among all but the social elite, several researchers, such as Appadurai ([1990](#)), Brenneis ([1990](#)), and the author ([1995](#):79ff) have observed many cultural practices in everyday life that seem to embody *rasa*-like ideals, whether or not the practitioners were schooled in the classical *rasa* principles. According to *rasa* theory, emotion should be cultivated, or "built" (*bhavan*) through stylized gestures, which should be contemplated by a meditative audience. Emotional expression may become intense, but it should never be spontaneous. Ramanujan and Gerow describe the *rasa* ideal as follows: "In a play, what the actor acts is not the central mood of love or grief. He acts out the conditions that excite the mood and the responses that follow from it:

he shudders or faints or sweats, he weeps and his voice cracks. The Indian theorists spelled this out in great detail, prescribing for each of the rasas the correlative consequents, the kinds of dramatic personae, the gestures and scenery and kinds of diction, thus analyzing content into forms" (1974:128). They further observe that "the emotion itself ... is never real; it can only be suggested. Paradoxically, any eruption of real emotion, which is by its nature grounded in individual awareness, would terminate the process of suggestion and therefore terminate the drama as well" (1974:133). This understanding of emotions seems to underlie critiques of women's oppari: grieving women are sometimes critiqued as expressing "real," personal emotions rather than performing the expressive trappings of emotions in specific, prescribed, stylized ways. According to M.G.R.'s critics, his own performance also fails to exhibit what could be called *rasa* ideals, because it resembles that of grieving women too closely.⁸

Therefore, the oppari performer, whether a non-professional woman or a professional male musician, is caught in a double bind by the problematic nature of spontaneous, intense emotions. On the one hand, it is essential to the effectiveness of oppari performance that it at least seem to be rooted in genuine emotion. Women's appeals for sympathy or protests of grievance must sound genuine to be taken seriously, at some level. Professional musicians must work especially hard at funerals to offer expressions that can be accepted by those present as appropriate to the event. If they do not succeed, they are reprimanded. Indeed, M.G.R. was reprimanded at one point during the funeral for deviating from this aim as he sang the pop folk song "Rasathi." On the other hand, these intense emotional expressions are taken as evidence of one's low social standing by some high-status villagers.

In my analysis of emotions, I follow Abu-Lughod and Lutz in suggesting that the most fruitful ethnographic approach is not to examine whether emotional expressions are *actually* spontaneous or premeditated, *actually* rooted in emotion or style. Instead, I find it more fruitful to examine what various people *say* about the expression (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990:1). And I find that one of the ways that women's oppari is marginalized is through discourse that dismisses it as mere emotional outburst. Men's professional oppari, in contrast, is more frequently accepted in village discourse as a form of stylized, deliberate, and musical expression. This is not to say that professional oppari does not involve "real" emotion. But since it is very difficult and problematic to attempt to study the nature of inner, personal emotions, I focus analytic attention instead on the social dimension of emotional expressions, and on the cultural discourses surrounding them. It would be intriguing to know how M.G.R.'s inner emotions, as he moved himself to tears, were similar to or different from those of the grieving women, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Professionalism of Male Performers

The tension between the contradictory goals of being accepted as genuine and as prestigious shapes the way professional oppari performers describe what they are doing, and the way oppari is performed. I ask M.G.R. how he is able to perform with such emotional conviction, and he responds by bringing up the concerns of being a "strong" performer, as the dead man's son had before. He strongly denies that his performative skill comes from grief experiences in his own life, probably in part because this would make him vulnerable to a discourse of "weakness," as described above. Instead, his skill comes from his *musical* experience: from his long apprenticeship, the many kinds of music he has learned to perform, and the many years he has performed as a professional musician in the area. To him, performing oppari is not primarily about being emotional, but rather a matter of musical craftsmanship.

It is through the artistry of musical expression that he arrives at intense emotional expression, not the other way around. Through careful control of pitch, vocal inflection, and rhythm, he explores the various possible musical embodiments of sorrow, and weaves these sonic embodiments together into an unfolding musical form. Because he is a musician and a professional, he argues that his performance should be considered prestigious and "strong."⁹ In at least two other ethnographic accounts of Tamil funerals, professional musicians likewise claim that their craft requires training in specific musical skills (Dumont 1986:272 n28) as well as discipline, sacrifice, and years of study with the elders of their communities Moffatt (1979:197).

Some other villagers confirm M.G.R.'s claims. Although M.G.R. embodies in his performance some of the outward characteristics of a "weak" person, of a person moved spontaneously by powerful emotional forces, he is *not* considered by many villagers to be performing from a position of emotional "weakness." In fact, one of the reasons he was hired was that, in his career as a professional musician, he has demonstrated an ability to control his emotions. Also, it is important that, although he knows the deceased man, he has not been too close to him during his life. In fact, I am told that such closeness would make him ineligible to perform at the funeral.

In any case, the presence of musicians at a Tamil funeral is generally believed to be "indispensable" (Dumont [1986](#):272). Moffatt even finds in his account of a funeral near Madras [Chennai] that the role of Harijan (Paraiyar) musicians is so important that members of other caste communities tolerate the musicians as they recount a Paraiyar origin myth--in which Paraiyars have dominance over other castes--as part of the funeral ritual. It is said that, at the funeral "we must nod our heads to these Harijans" (Moffatt [1979](#):195-196). Further, the funeral is a rare opportunity for a Harijan musician to take on the persona of a person--a widow--of a higher status caste community than his own. Moffatt observes in Endavur that funeral musicians perform special rhythms at funerals of higher-caste people, suggesting that the substitution of a professional performer from one caste for a griever of another is reflected in a kind of musical "code-switching" ([1979](#):200).

Ironically, then, M.G.R.'s role is a source of income, prestige, and significant social importance, but it also puts him dangerously close to death, widowhood, and emotional spontaneity. Perhaps, much as the villagers shun death and are therefore dependent on Harijans to handle death for them, villagers may also refrain from publicly expressing emotion yet still wish their grief to be expressed. This is the double bind of the professional oppari performer: he derives social importance and income as he expresses the unexpressible, and he is also thought less of by some for doing so.¹⁰

Moreover, the men who hire M.G.R. are also in this double bind, since they are responsible for public expressions that they consider to be characteristic of low status. As Tamils of different social standing and class position themselves differently with respect to the oppari professional, they are situating themselves vis a vis the dangerous associations of widowhood, death, and emotional spontaneity, which could damage their own social standing. It seems, although this warrants further ethnographic examination, that M.G.R.'s professionalism and the musicality of his performance seem more suspect to those of higher social status, who have more to lose from association with his oppari.

Professional oppari performance, then, is situated in an area of contention in cultural discourse about which kinds of public expressions are to be considered "strong"--forms of reputable artistry--and which kinds of expression are to be considered "weak"--emotional indulgences. Although women and their opparis are more often classified as "weak," I find that they, too, are concerned about the deliberate patterning of their expressions. Women structure their opparis not only for cathartic release, but also for communication, to convince the listener of the importance of their messages, and to get the listener to see the world from their point of view (see also Egnor [Trawick] [1986](#):302).

The whole genre of oppari, whether performed by male professionals or women, is situated in this area of contention. The project of identifying the distinctive musical features of the oppari genre, undertaken in the following section, must be informed by contradictory definitions and standards of artistry and good musicianship which are found in rural Tamil discourse surrounding oppari. More is at stake in this contentious discourse than the status of oppari as an expressive genre. Oppari performances, and the discourse surrounding them, have to do with the status of women, the reception of their message, and the status of Harijan professional musicians. At an "official" level, oppari strengthens and confirms social hierarchies because it evidences the emotional weakness of female and low-caste performers and connects these performers to death and to widowhood. At an unspoken level, oppari performances exhibit good musical craftsmanship and, in the case of many women performers, are exceptional vehicles of personal protest and empowerment.

EOL 5: Professional Weeping ([Greene](#))

3. Musical and Expressive Features of the Oppari Genre

Since it is a point of contention between rural Tamils whether oppari is actually music (*icai*) or merely emotional outbursts, I should point out that I situate myself and this article closer to the position of professional musicians and grieving women. Taking as an analytic point of departure M.G.R.'s claim that his oppari performance grows out of musical craftsmanship, I look for evidence of artistry and deliberate patterning in oppari performances I have witnessed. My data suggest that women oppari performers are also concerned about the deliberate crafting of musical and emotional expression, in order that their expressions be more persuasive. The data marshaled in this section come mostly from recordings of four professional musicians, but analysis is also informed by my experiences of women performing at the funeral, and by many interviews with people who have witnessed or participated in oppari.

When women perform oppari, as at the funeral, they commonly perform in groups. Incantation is heterophonic, based loosely on the same pitch range and gravitating toward a shared pitch center, but not synchronized in rhythm or words (see also Feld [1990](#):100-102). At the Icaikurichi funeral I notice that performers often wait for gaps when other grievors become momentarily silent before crying out a line, which supports the contention that oppari is intended to be a public voicing of personal concerns. The two types of arm and hand gestures described in [a passage in Section 1](#) function to reinforce the rhythm of an individual griever's incantation, which is the rhythm of her words, her message. Although oppari performances are not synchronized, there is a social, interactive aspect of group oppari. As grievors perform, they increasingly lean on each other. As men carry the bier toward the Icaikurichi cremation site, the grieving women remain huddled together in the road, performing oppari together.

Oppari performance, both professional and non-professional, consists of a series of melodically-similar, incanted phrases, each of which is performed on a single breath (see also Urban [1988](#):387). Phrases are punctuated by inhalations, and sometimes also by wails and drumming. Phrases end in what could be called half or full cadences...

listen and compare:

[Phrase 1](#) ending in a half cadence

[Phrase 2](#) ending in a full cadence)

[Audio help](#)

...although an alternative way to hear these is also suggested below). To be sure, identifying pitch centers and cadences in oppari is sometimes somewhat speculative, since pitch centers sometimes rise or fall microtonally during performance, and some opparis involve sudden shifts of pitch centers. I find that half cadences typically end on lowered scale degree 7 (*ni*), and full cadences on 1 (the pitch center, *sa*). The pitch range of incantation is typically quite narrow. In almost all of the opparis that I have studied, melodic performance is limited to four or five pitches. If C may be defined as the pitch center (*sa*), the most common pitch domains for incantation are: {Bb, C, D, Eb, and F}; {Bb, C, D}; and {Bb, C, D, E-natural}. Most oppari performers, even the professionals, have not received formal musical training, so performance is not directly based on the classical ragas. Cried out words usually bring to mind a spontaneous stream of consciousness (Saraswathi [1982](#)), but the words sometimes gravitate toward patterns involving bipartite stanzas (Egnor [Trawick] [1986](#):299-300). Recurring periodically in oppari performance is an apostrophe, in which the singer's persona sings to the dead person, addressing him or her as "my dear," "you who I brought up," "sir," or "my dear parrot." The latter is a term of affection that M.G.R. for example, uses frequently. The following sound samples are a few typical incantation melodies performed by a professional oppari musician, recorded outside the village of Marungulam, in the Thanjavur District. These phrases, taken from near the beginning of the performance, exemplify well the melodic makeup of this oppari, since the performer repeats similar melodic material throughout:

[Audio help](#)

[phrase 1 \(half cadence\)](#)

[phrase 2 \(half cadence\)](#)
[phrase 3 \(half cadence\)](#)
[phrase 4 \(half cadence\)](#)
[phrase 5 \(half cadence\)](#)
[phrase 6 \(half cadence\)](#)
[phrase 7 \(full cadence\)](#)

I have suggested that the most likely way these phrases are heard by Tamils is that they start on scale degree 1 (*sa*) and end on lowered 7 (*ni*) in the case of half cadences, or end on 1 (*sa*), in the case of the full cadence. However, it is also possible to hear these phrases as starting not on 1 (*sa*), but on 6 (*dha*). In this hearing, phrases [1](#) through [6](#) would be heard as ending on 5 (*pa*), and [phrase 7](#) would end on 6 (*dha*). The fact that [phrase 7](#) is followed by a non-pitched wail with sobbing, which is a section-articulating device, tends to support the first hearing (although not definitively), in which the singer arrives at the pitch center, *sa* (rather than 6, *dha*) at the end of a section. But even if the arrival at the end of [phrase 7](#) clarifies the pitch center to the listener, it is likely that the pitch center remains ambiguous at least up until that point, and possibly afterwards as well. Many *oppari* likewise often involve ambiguous or unclear pitch centers.

Sometimes the intervals of performance are inflected slightly for expressive purposes. For example, in this Marungulam performance, the musician gradually raises scale degree 4 (*ma*), to #4 as he performs the series of incantation phrases (or, in the alternate hearing, from 2 to #2). Listen to and compare [phrase 1](#) to [phrase 6](#), and both to [a later phrase](#) (click to hear), which occurs later on in the performance. By gradually augmenting the pitch range of *oppari* performance, the performer makes successive incantation melodies express increasing emotion, and perhaps take on a more wail-like melodic shape.

A performer marks the end of a group of phrases with a full cadence. Some of these full cadences are punctuated by wails or shrieks. Typically, a performer arrives on and sustains scale degree 1 (*sa*) for a few seconds, and then performs a [non-pitched wail](#), an icon of the sounds of crying. Such punctuating wails are both highly personalized elements of *oppari* performance, and a defining characteristic of the genre. The goal of wails, sobs, and shrieks, according to M.G.R. is to harness the sonic trappings of intense emotional expression. In all of my interviews, professional *oppari* performers described the art of crafting and performing these wails as a fundamentally musical one, rather than an emotional one. The musician's skill lies in his or her ability to observe, reproduce, and often exaggerate the sonic elements of weeping.

I have cataloged and analyzed over 250 wails which can be heard in 22 recorded *oppari* performances. I identify eight distinct features that are used in the punctuating wails, which are used to varying degrees in different performances. I introduce English analytic terms, because the *oppari* performers do not use Tamil words in my interviews to describe these performative features (instead, they would perform each feature for me as they discuss the genre). These features are audibly distinct, and also distinct in the ways they are produced by the performing body. The following table offers an example and description of each wail feature, and tabulates the number of occurrences of the feature that I find in my data pool. It is worth noting that not every *oppari* performer uses every feature; some performers use only a subset of the features listed here. The performance analysis I conduct in [Section 4](#) is based on these features.

audio	Respiratory Features	number of instances
sobbing	A chain of "cry breaks," or pulses of air pressure built up and then released behind the glottis (Urban 1988 :389-390). By far the most common respiratory feature, it is heard in almost every wail.	238

raspy intake	The performer makes the intake of air audible by voicing it. This feature is most commonly heard following sobbing and before incantation resumes, as in the sound example.	82
sniffing	If the performer is able to produce tears, phrases can be punctuated by audible sniffing.	2

Vocalization Features

gritty scream	A low-pitched, throaty shriek, related to what Urban calls a "creaky voice" (1988:390).	85
falsetto	A performer can allow his or her voice to "crack" expressively between normal and falsetto vocalization, moving suddenly between the normal vocal range and pitches well above the normal range.	113

Pitch Inflection Features

up-down arc	In this sound example, the arc is followed by brief sobbing.	103
downward slide	This is the most common pitch inflection.	148
upward slide	This pitch inflection is the least common, most likely because it is not a very common or natural sonic shape for a wail. One might speculate that there is a physiological reason for this. In the provided sound example, the upward slide is combined with a shift to falsetto vocalization.	1

As the sonic icons of crying are drawn into stylized expressions, they sometimes suggest new interpretations. For example, Urban ([1988:390](#)) points out that [sobbing](#) loosely resembles laughing, both in the way it is produced and in the way it sounds. (In fact, such [sobbing](#) sounds can even be heard as reminiscent of the laughter of villains in Tamil films.) In addition, any of these wail features tabulated above can be exaggerated to such an extent that they become mocking variants of grief expressions. Perhaps one way out of the professional oppari musician's double bind, as described in [a passage in the Introduction](#), is to perform wails in such a way that they remain recognizable as crying sounds, but are transformed enough to suggest ridicule, mockery, or buffoonery.

Non-verbal performative elements, such as those described here, have been analyzed in a few South Asian folk traditions. Blackburn ([1986](#)) finds that nonverbal performance markers, such as shift in mode of speech, shift from speaking to singing voice, introductions of musical rhythms and nonverbal cries, signal ritually important moments in an unfolding narrative. Wadley ([1991](#)) finds that other nonverbal performative elements function to situate the narrative, moving the audience from one place to another by invoking elements of musical styles that might be typically heard in various social spaces. Unlike the Tamil bow song tradition analyzed by Blackburn or the epics analyzed by Wadley, I find that narrative elements are less important in oppari. Non-verbal performative elements do not highlight important shifts in the unfolding narrative, because oppari,

by design, has only a weak narrative structure, and commonly does not really tell a story at all. Oppari draws its expressive power from metaphors (see also Egnor [Trawick] [1986](#)) and, especially in the case of professional oppari, from the synergy between melodic incantation and the wails and shrieks. In the following performance analysis, I suggest that yet another expressive function of nonverbal performance elements: to musically represent an increase in emotional intensity and an increasing emphasis on the human body of the performer. Wails, shrieks, intakes, and falsetto expressions are deployed in such a way that they suggest increasing emotional intensity. Climactic buildups seem to be a characteristic of professional men's oppari and not of women's oppari, a point also taken up in the following sections.

EOL 5: Professional Weeping ([Greene](#))

4. A Performance Analysis

Several days after the funeral, I meet M.G.R. again, and make arrangements for him to re-perform the funeral oppari at my hut near the center of the village. As a professional musician, M.G.R. is expected to be able perform oppari with conviction, regardless of whether he is at a funeral or not. His performance in my hut differs from his funeral performance in the sense that it is received in a more lighthearted way by villagers present, more as spectacular entertainment. In his performance he wails and shrieks in many intensely expressive and different ways, but throughout his performance he maintains a kind of professionalism by implementing a consistent and deliberate performative strategy--a performative compression--and by carefully developing elements of his wails and shrieks in patterned ways over time.



Unlike most oppari performers, M.G.R. is a drummer, and he punctuates his oppari incantation by drumming. [Audio 1](#) is the opening two utterances of M.G.R.'s performance. Most of his performance unfolds in this fashion. Singing centers on C above middle C and its neighbor notes. [Audio 2](#) is M.G.R.'s first wail in the 15th phrase.

Opening of M.G.R.'s Oppari

[Audio 1](#). Opening two utterances of M.G.R.'s oppari
[Audio 2](#). M.G.R.'s first wail in the 15th phrase (see [full text](#)).

Partial text

Eight varieties of rose flower,
 eight varieties of rose flower,
 I grew fruit for you,
 eight varieties of rose flower.
 [drumming]
 You are going away,
 the Yama's world has blossomed,
 my dear parrot! Appa! [Father!]
 for you, the Yama's world has blossomed,
 I reached for ten varieties of rose flower in the
 land.
 [drumming]
[\(full text\)](#)

In M.G.R.'s oppari, the verbal content of each utterance is only loosely connected to the utterances before and after it, and only in a few cases do the utterances begin to suggest a larger narrative. Each utterance is made very rapidly, and all on one breath. I find it impressive that he is able to perform such a long piece without faltering, never at a loss for words, for drum patterns, or for new kinds of shrieks and wails. The performance is an improvised assembly of metaphors and concepts, some taken from the life of the dead man, and others from "stock" oppari symbols. Recurring

themes developed in oppari performances include references to the world of Yama, the god of death; the color black; tying bamboo, which is part of the assembling of a funeral bier; and the far side of the river, where funeral cremations typically occur. No two oppari performances are identical. In this performance, M.G.R. uses a structuring device of referring to stops on a train of time to invoke moments in the life of the dead man. He also mentions a stomach disease, which the cause of the man's death. He refers to the deceased as "my dear parrot," a term of affection. As is common in oppari, M.G.R. sings *to* the deceased as if a grieving member of his family. Sometimes his persona seems to be that of the dead man's daughter, sometimes the dead man's wife. Because "Appa!" ("Father!") is a common, general-purpose emotional outcry in Tamil, it may not necessarily indicate that he is taking on the persona of a grieving daughter.

These incanted utterances, because they sustain and hover around a single pitch, have the function of building up melodic and rhythmic energy that calls for release. Moreover the rhythms of the drumming and chanting are very repetitive. M.G.R. then offers a musical release in the form of wails. [Audio 2](#) is his first real wail, as heard in its immediate musical context. In wails like this one, he pauses, pulling his performance out of the established metric pulse, and breaks away from the incantation pitch center around which his incantation melodies have been noodling. Indeed, his wail is a continuous slide, and he therefore breaks away from distinct pitches altogether. Through rhythmically repetitive incantation, M.G.R. has created a musical texture which calls for the wails, and the wails thus emerge in his performance as a musical complement.

M.G.R. performs ten wails in his performance. Figure 1 shows how he deploys these expressions over time.

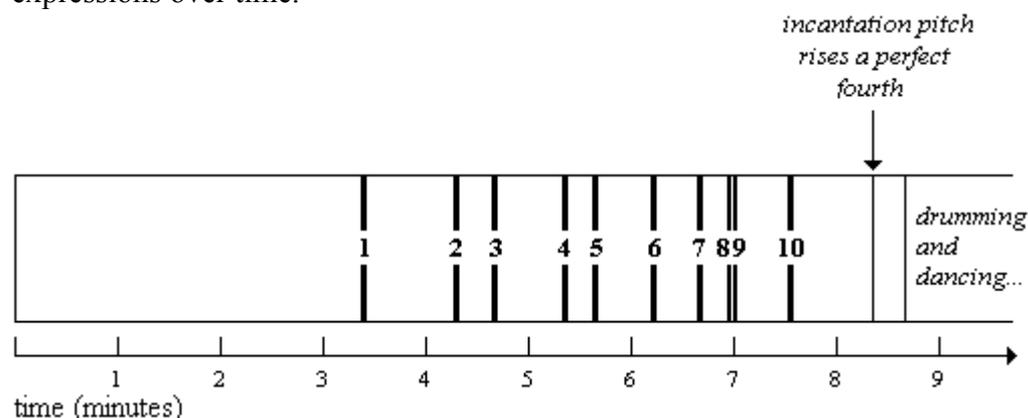


Figure 1. Deployment of Ten Wails

Figure 1 shows that M.G.R. spends considerable time performing incanted material before wailing, and that he reserves most of his wails for the latter half. He deliberately spends considerable time accumulating musical energy through the incantation material before offering releases. In an interview, M.G.R. comments that a good performer does not cry out or make intense expressions of sorrow until he has prepared his audience adequately through the metaphors and allusions of the song. A good performer does not wail until he has adequately explained to the audience the conditions that warrant such grief. The long gap before the first wail shows the careful preparation he makes before offering the sounds of emotional expressions. Following the first wail, successive wails occur with less and less preparation time. M.G.R. performs a process of *compression*, as wails get closer and closer together. A closer analysis of M.G.R.'s ten wails reveals the systematic, musical way in which he expresses and intensifies the sounds of grief. In the Table below, I analyze each wail in turn, providing sound samples and English translations where possible. Specifically, I examine how M.G.R. develops four of the sound qualities introduced

in the preceding section: sobbing, raspy intake, gritty scream, and falsetto.

Table 1. Musical Development over the Ten Wails

Sound Samples	Transliteration and Translation	Musical Qualities Introduced or Developed
Wail 1	"Aaaahahaha! Amaaaaaahahaha!" ("Yes!")	Introduces: <u>sobbing</u> ; <u>gritty scream</u> (on "maaaaaah"); an <u>intake</u> is audible after the second shriek.
Wail 2	"Aaaaaahaha!" [Drumming]	
Wail 3	[Drum strokes] "Ammaaaaahahaha!" ("Yes!")	New element: <u>falsetto</u> . M.G.R. begins this wail in falsetto and then shifts to normal voice, allowing his voice to "crack."
Wail 4	[Drumming] "Appaaaaahahaha! Ammaaaaahahaha! Aaaah." ("Father! Yes!")	Develops <u>falsetto</u> (in first two wails) and deepens the <u>gritty scream</u> quality (on "aaaah") introduced in Wail 1 .
Wail 5	"Appaaa! Ayaaaahahaha!" ("Father!")	Develops the <u>falsetto</u> /normal voice contrast further.
Wail 6	"Ammaaaaahahaha! Ammaaaaahahaha!" ("Yes! Yes!")	Develops and emphasizes low, <u>gritty scream</u> even more than in Wail 4 .
Wail 7	"Ayamaaaaahahaha! Aamaa! Aamaa! Aamaa!" ("Yes! Yes! Yes!")	Combines <u>gritty scream</u> (on first shriek) with a new use of <u>falsetto</u> (three high "aamaa"s), and develops/emphasizes the <u>raspy intake</u> of air by rendering it very slow and raspy.
Wail 8	"Aappaaa! Ayappaaa!" ("Father! Father!")	Develops the <u>falsetto</u> quality by "cracking" his voice in both possible ways.
Wail 9	"Aappaa!...[?]" ("Father!")	Develops the <u>raspy intake</u> of air by exaggerating it and slowing it down even more than in Wail 7 .
Wail 10	"Yamaaaaaaa! Yaamaa! Yaamaahahaha!" ("Yes! Yes! Yes!")	Combines all four elements: <u>gritty scream</u> (on first shriek), <u>falsetto</u> repetitions, <u>sobbing</u> , and <u>raspy intakes</u> of air.

By listening to the succession of wails, it is possible to observe how sonic elements introduced in Wails [1](#) and [3](#) are gradually enhanced, amplified, exaggerated, and combined, culminating in [Wail 10](#). Sobbing, gritty scream, and intake are introduced immediately in [Wail 1](#) to undergo development later. Falsetto is introduced in [Wail 3](#), developed through repetition in [Wail 7](#), and developed further in [Wail 8](#) in which M.G.R. mirrors a shift from falsetto to normal voice with its obverse. Gritty screaming, introduced in [Wail 1](#), is deepened and exaggerated in [Wails 4](#) and [6](#). In wails [7](#) and [9](#) M.G.R. slows down and exaggerates the raspy intake of air introduced in [Wail 1](#). Each element, after it is introduced, is developed and combined with the others. [Wail 4](#) combines falsetto with gritty scream; [Wail 7](#) combines all elements; and [Wail 10](#) also combines all elements in a highly elaborate and dramatic performance: a musical climax involving the inhaling and exhaling lungs, vocal cords in both falsetto and normal modes, and the resonant cavities of his throat and mouth in a wide variety of configurations. The musical development from [Wail 1](#) to [Wail 10](#) is one in which the singer's performing body comes increasingly to the fore in the listener's awareness.

Figure 1 above shows that the oppari performance is a gradual buildup of the trappings of emotional expression, moving toward a sudden rise in incantation pitch at about eight and a half minutes, and culminating in an extended drumming and dancing section which lasts an additional six minutes. The performance, which begins as a chiefly musical rhetorical expression (explaining to the audience the conditions of grief), culminates in body movement, dance. M.G.R.'s performance therefore evolves gradually from a verbal and musical expression to one involving the whole body. Although his performance bears repeated icons of crying, he has deliberately developed his expression according to a calculated musical plan. Moreover, he steps up the intensity of his crafted emotional expressions only after he has prepared his listeners musically and rhetorically. Listeners who champion M.G.R. as a professional not only hear the increasing emotional intensity he performs, but also the self-control, and the deliberate musical planning that lies behind his performance. It is because he is able to develop highly emotional expressions so deliberately that he is valued as a talented oppari professional by many. M.G.R. succeeds, in part, in distancing himself from the intense emotions, death, and widowhood evident in his oppari through the deliberate, patterned, *musical* nature of his performance. He seeks to perform the sounds of spontaneous, intense crying--or exaggerated variants of them--yet distance himself from death, widowhood and the intense, spontaneous emotions he enacts. Because his performances typically involve climactic buildups of performative energy, his oppari is a spectacular distraction. Women performing oppari do not build up toward such climaxes, perhaps because they have different expressive goals. During the actual funeral, I observe no one laughing at the musicians or their performance, although the performers do sometimes verge on buffoonery, dancing, grinning, and waving their arms as they sang. But in the oppari re-performance, analyzed here, the listening audience sometimes responds to M.G.R.'s exaggerated emotional display with laughter. This audience backchannel can be faintly heard in my field recordings, and is perhaps most audible in the background of [Wail 10](#). As mentioned in [a passage in Section 3](#), as icons of crying are stylized and transformed, sobbing can be made to sound like laughter, and other wail features can be exaggerated so as to become mocking expressions of grief. Through careful sonic artistry, M.G.R. can do his job of expressing the sounds of grief, yet distance himself from the emotions, and show himself to be a talented professional.

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Concluding Remarks

Not all professional oppari performances I recorded employ the same performative strategies as those found in the [preceding section](#). Of the recordings I have made, only slightly more than half seem to use the technique of compression, or some variation of it. Other opparis are organized into subsections, each of which involves a process of compression. Many opparis build up performative energy to multiple climactic moments. But in all these performances can be found

ample evidence of deliberate planning and musical craftsmanship, if one is willing to listen for it. Crafted structure is a way of marking a performance as musical rather than spontaneous, since it seems that unstructured performances are often dismissed by Tamils as embodying spontaneous emotion.

Although I have not been able to conduct the same kind of musical examination of women's oppari (for reasons mentioned in [a passage in the Introduction](#)), I can make a few observations. The fact that several women performing oppari begin to share a single pitch center, and that they sometimes time their incanted lines to fit into gaps that emerge between lines sung by other women, suggest that women, too, are crafting their expressions musically in order to allow them to most effectively express their concerns, and to draw the listener momentarily into their worlds. For women, deliberate musical crafting of oppari expressions allows the performer to voice personal concerns, and even protest unfair conditions.

Although sometimes marginalized as evidencing "weakness," a Tamil woman's oppari can function as a means by which she can exercise considerable power. This is the reason that attempts are made to marginalize her, through discourses of her "weakness" and through professional stand-ins. Moreover, comparison of my field data with those of Dumont ([1986](#)) from fifty years ago suggests that this competitive dynamic between professional male musicians (at least drummers) and weeping women has been a feature of Tamil Kallar funerals for decades. It is possible that women's voices may gain some ground as women gain control over more domains of cultural life, a process which has been happening for some time in Tamil cities and which seems to be slowly happening in Icaikurichi.

Although a widow is considered inauspicious in many ways (Reynolds [1980](#):36), and avoided in everyday social life, my data suggest that her presence is actually very important at a funeral (see also Evison [1989](#)). I suggest that this reflects more than the mere fact that the death of a husband invariably results in the presence of a widow. A funeral is an exceptional opportunity for many Tamil women, especially Kallars, to express themselves, precisely because of the condition of widowhood. Furthermore, inasmuch as the professional musician is a competition, distraction, or substitution for a grieving widow, his presence and spectacular performance also actually attest to the cultural *importance* of widowhood, and of women's oppari. At some level, his performance is based on the sounds, words, and persona of a grieving widow, and although he may mock this persona, he is not permitted to deviate too far from his charge of performing it.

The striking cry-like iconicity of the oppari professional's wail features tabulated in [a part of Section 3](#) reflect the importance of the widow's grieving persona, while at the same time the crafted patterning analyzed in [Section 4](#) reflects his efforts to draw attention away from her, and to distance himself from her, as a professional musician. Furthermore, the importance of the widow extends beyond funerals: women singing oppari at home willingly perform the persona of a widow, even if they have not in fact been widowed. In research on South Asian folk culture, widows are most commonly modeled as inauspicious people one should simply avoid.

But it seems that many of the powers ascribed to Tamil women (see Wadley [1980](#)) seem to accrue to widows as well, which means that, in addition to being shunned, in some contexts they are to be honored, given gifts, and given a public forum, albeit contested, of self-expression. Tamil widowhood is understudied, and more research should be done in the few cultural contexts, like funerals, in which widows and representations of widows are important: even, almost, central.¹¹

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Notes

1. In Tamil there is a distinction between short *a* and long *a* (*aa*). The *a* in *oppari* is long, pronounced like the *a* in "father." [[back](#)]
2. The term Dalit, "Oppressed," is used by some scholars to refer to members of the lowest-ranked caste communities to emphasize the need for social change. In this article, I continue to follow common practice of using the term Harijan, and not the older term, Untouchable. [[back](#)]

3. Although beyond the scope of this article, research into opparis of the Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli Districts would likely provide a useful comparative study to this project, based in the Thanjavur District. [[back](#)]
4. Icaikurichi, literally "Music" + "village," is a pseudonym I agreed to use for this village. [[back](#)]
5. Apparently, Egnor [Trawick]'s Tamil Paraiyar informants use the term *ayira pattu*, "crying song," to describe these songs ([1986:296](#)). Although she does not use the term *oppari* in her article, it seems from her descriptions and analysis that the genre she is describing is at least very closely related to oppari, performed in the Thanjavur District. [[back](#)]
6. One small difference: whereas in the funeral I observed, the white sheet stays at the mortuary house, in Dumont's account, the male relatives proceed in single file under the white sheet, which is held overhead at arm's length ([1986:273](#)). [[back](#)]
7. The absence of Harijan women in these photographs reflects the fact that Harijans in general are less welcome in the *ur*, or village center. Harijan women are much more active participants in the public spaces of *cheris*, or Harijan neighborhoods/hamlets found some distance outside the village's core. The fact that Harijan women have a more prominent public voice has been found in many South Asian settings, and suggests that in these women's activities lies a revolutionary potential ([Cameron 1998](#)). [[back](#)]
8. Similarly, Sherinian ([1998:620](#)) finds that Christian minister Rev. James Theophilus Appavoo removed the most emotional, wail-like features from his oppari-based songs of repentance of requests for forgiveness, because he was afraid that middle-class parishioners would dismiss his performance as "melodramatic" and rooted in "cowardice." She suggests that his fear may also be rooted in Victorian values that middle-class Tamil Christians have assimilated from western culture. [[back](#)]
9. The case of M.G.R. offers a counter-example to the conclusions of Urban, who states that, in ritual wailing primarily of Amerindian peoples, "the function of meta-signals ought not to be discussed or put into words, lest their force be diminished" ([1988:398](#)). In the case of the Tamil oppari, M.G.R. constructs himself as a *professional* when he discusses the musical design of his wails and of his overall performance, and in this way gains the respect of his audience. Ironically, were he to assert that the emotion he expressed was authentic, he would likely be taken less seriously, even ignored. [[back](#)]
10. It is also important to note that, as I studied M.G.R. and his music, I was undoubtedly drawn into the discourse on his professionalism and prestige. I spent several days observing, interviewing, and recording M.G.R. The fact that a music researcher took his opparis so seriously lent credibility to his claims of professionalism and the musicality of his performance, and it is likely that Dumont and Moffatt were also drawn into such discourses as they conducted their research. [[back](#)]
11. In addition to examining widowhood, research on oppari and gender in Tamil folk culture would also benefit from ethnographic examination of professional opparis performed in small communities of hermaphrodites and transvestites. The gender issues and discourses of emotion engaged in this article undoubtedly become more complex when taken up in such communities ([Hall 1995](#)), in which, properly understood, there are more than two gender distinctions ([Fulton and Anderson 1992](#)). [[back](#)]
12. Yama is the god of death. "Blossomed" means "opened up," like a flower. [[back](#)]
13. "Parrot" is a term of affection. [[back](#)]
14. "Appa!" literally means "Father!" but functions as a more general cry of grief. [[back](#)]
15. Cremation sites are often on the remote side of a river from a Tamil village (although this is not actually the case in Icaikurichi). [[back](#)]
16. The color black here is associated with death. [[back](#)]
17. Indra's world is the world after death. [[back](#)]
18. The blue cart is the funeral bier. [[back](#)]
19. Taramur is a spirit of generosity, willing to give up his life for another. [[back](#)]
20. A bamboo stretcher is a funeral bier. [[back](#)]

21. The image of milk oozing out is often considered a symbol of prosperity, but here it may also refer to the milky complexion of the dead man's face. Perhaps the metaphor is intended to be ironic, juxtaposing death and prosperity. [[back](#)]

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Appendix 1. Text of M.G.R.'s Oppari

Eight varieties of rose flower,
 eight varieties of rose flower,
 I grew fruit for you,
 eight varieties of rose flower.
 [drumming]
 You are going away,
 the Yama's world has blossomed,¹²
 my dear parrot!¹³ *Appa!* ¹⁴
 for you, the Yama's world has blossomed,
 I reached for ten varieties of rose flower in the land.
 [drumming]
 For you, for you heaven has blossomed,
 ten varieties of rose flower,
 ten varieties of rose flower.

you, the rose flower that I brought up,
heaven has blossomed.

[drumming]

Did God call you, my dear parrot, that I brought up?
did God call you?

[drumming]

Beyond the river,¹⁵ for you, beyond the river.
you have fertile lands,
five lands.

[drumming]

The flower snake has bitten you,
the flower snake has bitten you,
you who I brought up,
for you is there a place to go?

[drumming]

I traveled in a train of time
and stood in the entrance of this world,
my dear, who I brought up,
because I didn't wave to you,
it's an ill omen.

[drumming]

In this unhappy station
for you, in this unhappy station,
in that inauspicious land,
I brought you black color.¹⁶

[drumming]

It is pure black color
it is pure black color
in the entrance of Indra's world,¹⁷
for you it is pure black color.

[drumming]

I traveled in the train, Indra's world,
in the entrance of that world, for you
I went to Trichy station.

[drumming]

In Trichy Station, in Trichy Station,
for you my dear parrot, who I brought up,
for you I brought a blue color car.¹⁸

[drumming]

For you it is a pure blue color car,
for you it is a pure blue color car,
for you.

[drumming]

I got in the evening train,
I got in the evening train,
And got off at Aiyaluur,
that is beyond the station steps.

[drumming]

In Aiyaluur station,
for you my dear parrot, who I brought up,
I bought a cloth for which I spent much money,
and ordered them to sew.

[drumming]

I made them sew the way I had ordered,
and bought a piece of silk for your sleep,
[Wail 1] Aaaahahahaha! Aamaaaaaahahahah!
I paid money, I ordered them to sew in my pattern,
for you to wear in the entrance of Tarumar,¹⁹
for you to sleep.
haven't I bought this for you?

[drumming]

My parrot, who I brought up,
you were affected by evil, so you died.

[drumming]

In the bordered cloth,
in the bordered cloth,
in this unjust land,
my father who produced me,
you are affected by [stomach] disease.

[drumming]

I bought nice bamboo,
I bought nice bamboo for you,
I bought a carnation for you,
how beautifully I cared for you, sir.
in the entrance for you I bought *kasaru* silk.

[Wail 2] Aaaaaahaha! [Drumming]

I got in the Mayirum [city] train,
in this unjust land, and got off
in Uluntur station,
in Uluntur station.

[Wail 3] Appaaaaahahahaha!

I shopped for you,
at Uluntur station,
at Uluntur station,
for you.

[drumming]

In this unjust land
to whichever side you turn,
it is your land,
it is your land.

[drumming]

You, who I brought up,
is your land,
wherever you turn.

[drumming]

I tied together three hundred bamboo rods,
I tied together three hundred bamboo rods,
and made the bamboo stretcher²⁰ for you.

[Wail 4] Appaaaaahahahaha!

Appaaaaahahahaha! Naaah.

Aaaahahahaha!

I tied four hundred bamboo rods for you,
I made the bamboo stretcher for you.

[Wail 5] Appaaaa! Ayaaaahahahah!

I cut the coconut coir
and in the center placed a chain.

[drumming]

In front of this easy-chair, sir,
in this unjust land.

[drumming]

The musical instruments were playing in the street.

[drumming]

For you the coconut tree will yield like pearls.

[Wail 6] Ammaaaahahaha! Ammaaaahahaha!

For you, who I brought up, in the entrance,
the coconut tree that I brought up will
bear coconuts for you like *kalkandu* [rocks of sugar].

[drumming]

The coconut trees in the entrance

I brought up in clusters.

[Wail 7] Ayamaaaahahahah! Aamaa! Aamaa!

Amaaahahahahahahaha!

Only now people are hitting themselves on the chest,
only now are they noticing.

[Wail 8] Aamaaa! Ayamaaa!

If you are poked by a golden needle,

[Wail 9] Aamaa!

[sobbing:] you are poked by a golden needle!

I'm a woman.

my son, the tears will fall even over the brows.

[drumming]

In the cursed street,

for you the smoke will go away.

for you it will go away.

[drumming]

If I boil over and come out,

for you who I brought up,

the milk will ooze out.²¹

[Wail 10] Yamaaaaaaa! Yaamaa! Yaamaa! ahahaha!

[drumming]

The village is sleeping well,

having faith in you.

[drumming]

When sleep comes to me,

the yearning for you comes in

and wakes me up.

[drumming]