ABSTRACT. In South Kanara, India (formerly the kingdom of Tulunadu), an area stretching some 150 miles along the Arabian Sea and 25 to 50 miles inland, ancient forms of rural pageantry in honor of particular local Spirits are enacted yearly. These ritualized performances include elements of masked folk drama and epic recitation and serve a valued social role as a form of healing and counselling within village communities. Contemporary practitioner-patient interactions are part of an intricate tapestry partaking of customs occurring since times long past, such as the kinship structure (aliya-santana or nephew inheritance), the geopolitical milieu and the myths of Tulunadu. The power of these healing Spirits lies in their ability to reproduce social form through the cultural idiom of therapeutic efficacy.

In South Kanara, India healing Spirits maintain and re-affirm a ritualized cosmology that concerns itself with relationships between men, women and Spirits. In the pre-dawn hours following an exhausting night of ceremonial rites, the Spirit dancers assume the role of healer and problem solver. My experience of Arthur Kleinman’s Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture (1980) brought new elements in the presentation of my own field matter. Specific aspects of his analytical framework provided me with a way of describing the activities of the Spirit healers of South Kanara. When observing practioner-patient interactions, I found it meaningful to adapt Kleinman’s five catagories (1980:203—258) in the following abbreviated form: namely

1. Institutional Setting;
2. Characteristics of the Interpersonal Interaction;
3. Idiom of Communication;
4. Clinical Reality; and
5. Therapeutic Stages and Mechanisms. Such healing transactions are never far removed from the kinship structure, the geopolitical milieu and the myths of ancient and contemporary South Kanara.

MYTHS AND CULTURAL DISTINCTIONS

Setting

Agumbe is a hill town near the Eastern border of South Kanara District in the State of Karnataka. It sits upon one of the highest points in South India’s Western Ghat Mountains. Here, surrounded by forests, one can
look down some 5,000 feet to the plains below, and, on a clear day, Westward to the shimmery horizon of the Arabian Sea line. It was in Agumbe, in some dark eon of the past, that Parasurama, the son of Jamadagni, avenged his father's murder using an ax given to him by Shiva to wipe out the warrior race, the Kshatriyas, almost to total extinction. Sage Kasyapa officiated at the ritual sacrifice which commemorated Parasurama's victory and for his role claimed the earth as his fee. Then Sage Kasyapa desirous of protecting the remaining Kshatriyas ordered Parasurama off his territory, off the whole earth. Parasurama appealed to the God of the Ocean to grant him a little space. The ocean rolled back and created the ancient realm of Tulunadu, now known as South Kanara.

This Hindu myth which is still current in the South Kanaran district is part of the cosmology of the Brahmins who migrated in the 8th and 9th centuries A.D. in large numbers to Tulunadu. Certainly the Brahmins were skillful adapters in that they knew how to absorb and to shape existing local beliefs to fit their own needs. Earlier alternate myths of creation from out of the recesses of Tulunadu's past are lost just as the exact dates of this ancient kingdom beside the sea had come and gone before the advent of historical documents. Contemporary geological evidence suggests that Tulunadu's creation was a freeing of land from under the water, whether by some violent shift in the bottom of the sea or as the land left exposed from a tidal wave. Indeed, tied still to the moment of its emergence, Tulunadu seems more like an island even though it is firmly attached to the very Western edge of the Subcontinent of India.

Tulunadu, South Kanara, is about 150 miles in length: at its narrowest point it is about 25 miles wide; at its widest, it is close to 50 miles across the land. The only major city is Mangalore, which is at the extreme end of an arc which crosses the peninsula of India from Madras to Mangalore, passing at the midpoint through Bangalore. Even though isolated from the earliest times, Mangalore, and, Basrur, mentioned as important trading places by all the Arabian geographers, had early contacts with the outside world. Many seamen became familiar with this coastal area and informed the people in their countries. Merchants from the Red Sea and the Mediterranean came to trade along the Arabian coast of India from the second millennium B.C. They brought woolen and linen cloth, wine and gold bullion in exchange for nutmeg, cinnamon, black pepper, gems, ivory, tortoise shell and betel nut.

Tulunadu is a land of long sandy beaches, palm trees, fertile rice paddies and rivers. Who its original inhabitants were remains a puzzle. Some scholars have speculated that they came from the nearby Western Ghat mountains; others have conjectured that the immigrants came by