

## Marriage necklace. *Kali thiru*



- Gold
- Height: 105 cm.
- Southern India, Tamil Nadu, Chettinad.
- 19 th century.
- INV. 2504-121

The magnificent marriage necklace of the Nattukottai Chettiars of Tamil Nadu is called the *kali thiru* or the auspicious neck ornament.

Considered necessary, auspicious and protective, ornaments are an integral feature of the Indian woman's life. At the time of her marriage it was and still is customary for the young bride to receive gifts of ornaments from her parents. Under Hindu law these jewels are indisputably her property, to be used in times of need for her protection and security. Of all the jewels that she receives, none is more important than the *tali* or marriage necklace.

Etymologically *tali* refers to a species of palm tree – the talipet – and even today, in some tribal communities in south India, a single strip of palm leaf tied around the bride's neck can serve as a marriage emblem.

The antiquity of this use of an auspicious emblem to sanctify marriage is unclear. However, after the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the custom became mandatory and was adopted in practically all parts of the country by every caste and community. Even Hindus who have converted to Christianity tie on marriage emblems similar to Hindu *talis* but embodying a crucifix. In southern India, marriage tokens are strung on a sacred yellow cord and tied with three knots around the neck of the bride, thereby invoking the blessings of the Trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Simple tokens, usually stylized elements derived from nature and associated with spiritual, protective and procreative concepts are common.

Amongst all the various kinds of marriage necklaces integral to different communities in different parts of the country, none is more impressive and enigmatic than the *kali thiru* of the Nattukottai Chettiars. The Chettiars are a merchant community who migrated inland from the flourishing ancient seaport of Puhar or Kaveripattinam on the Coromandel coast of south-eastern India. Their patron deity is Shiva and their most important shrine, the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram.

Traditionnally, the *kali thiru* is made of two rows of pendant elements interspersed with beads. In this respect, the Barbier-Mueller necklace is incomplete. However, this lacuna is more than made up for by the quality of the craftsmanship.

Elaborate claw-like elements flank the traditional M-shaped centrepiece, which features a miniature replica of a temple and images of Shiva and Parvati seated on their vehicle. Areas in between the images are crowded with birds, flowers, foliage and granulation. The pendant elements on either side are believed to be stylized simulations of crab claws and other forms derived from the shells that the Chettiars wore as jewellery when they were still a simple sea-faring coastal community; they are embellished with decorative details typical of the domestic architecture of the region. These pieces are interspersed with rectangular beads, each finely decorated with a granular design.

The *kali thiru* together with the *gowrishankaram* epitomize the affluence and aesthetic sensibilities of the Chettiar community.

Usha R. Bala Krishnan, *ICONS IN GOLD JEWELRY OF INDIA from the Collection of the Musée Barbier-Mueller*, Musée Barbier-Mueller and Somogy Art Publisherst, 2004 : pages 140 and 174.