

MULTI-CENTRIC VARIATIONS OF THE MATHULANGKANNI FOLKTALE: ECOLOGY, GENDER, AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN KANI ORAL TRADITION

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Abstract

The oral traditions of the Kani tribe preserve a rich body of indigenous knowledge that reflects the community's cultural identity, environmental ethics, and worldview. Among these traditions, the *Mathulangkanni* folktale occupies a significant place because it is narrated across different Kani settlements with both shared and unique narrative features. Although previous studies have documented Kani oral traditions, very few have examined how different versions of the same folktale change across settlements and what these changes reveal about indigenous culture. This study addresses this gap by comparing ten versions of the *Mathulangkanni* folktale collected through fieldwork in different Kani settlements in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. The study adopts a qualitative comparative approach using Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale together with archetypal criticism and ecocriticism.

The analysis shows that while all versions share a common narrative structure, each settlement modifies characters, supernatural helpers, magical objects, and transformations to reflect its own ecological environment and cultural beliefs. The recurring symbols of the pomegranate, birds, forests, rivers, and metamorphosis represent fertility, renewal, justice, and the close relationship between humans and nature. The study also demonstrates how the female protagonist represents cultural continuity and ecological balance, while the hero's journey symbolizes moral growth and communal responsibility. By comparing these narrative variations, this article contributes to indigenous literary studies, folklore research, and the documentation of Kani oral heritage. It further argues that oral narratives remain living cultural archives that preserve traditional knowledge while adapting to changing social and environmental contexts.

1. Introduction

Oral traditions are among the oldest forms of cultural expression. They preserve the history, beliefs, customs, values, and collective memory of indigenous communities. Unlike written literature, oral narratives continue to evolve because each storyteller adapts the story

according to the needs, experiences, and environment of the community. These changes allow oral traditions to remain meaningful across generations while maintaining their cultural identity.

The Kani tribe, an indigenous community living in the Western Ghats of Tamil

Nadu and Kerala, possesses a rich oral tradition that includes myths, folktales, songs, rituals, and legends. These narratives are closely connected with forests, mountains, rivers, medicinal plants, animals, and ancestral beliefs. Rather than functioning only as entertainment, Kani folktales teach moral values, preserve ecological knowledge, strengthen social relationships, and maintain cultural continuity.

Among the many narratives found within Kani oral literature, the *Mathulanganni* folktale occupies a special place because it is narrated in almost every Kani settlement. Although the central storyline remains the same, each settlement presents different characters, magical objects, supernatural helpers, and narrative events. These variations demonstrate the dynamic nature of oral tradition and reveal how storytelling adapts to local geography, cultural practices, and community experiences.

Previous research on Kani oral traditions has mainly focused on documenting stories, songs, rituals, and traditional knowledge. However, little attention has been given to comparing multiple versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale across different settlements. Similarly, few studies have examined how these narrative variations reflect ecological knowledge, gender roles, cultural identity, and indigenous worldview. This absence represents an important research gap in the study of Kani oral literature.

To address this gap, the present study

compares ten versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale collected from different Kani settlements. It examines both the shared narrative structure and the unique local variations. The study investigates how different storytellers modify the narrative while preserving its central cultural values. It also analyses the symbolic meaning of recurring motifs such as the pomegranate, birds, magical helpers, transformation, and supernatural justice.

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To compare the structural variations of the *Mathulanganni* folktale across Kani settlements.
- To analyse the symbolism of recurring motifs and supernatural elements.
- To examine how the folktale reflects Kani ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and indigenous worldview.
- To demonstrate the significance of oral storytelling in preserving and transmitting Kani cultural heritage.

By combining folklore studies, archetypal criticism, and ecocritical perspectives, this article argues that the different versions of *Mathulanganni* are not merely alternative stories but living expressions of indigenous knowledge. The narrative variations reveal the close relationship between people, nature, and culture while illustrating the adaptability of oral traditions in changing social and environmental contexts.

2. Literature Review

Oral traditions play an important role in preserving the history, beliefs, and cultural identity of indigenous communities across the world. Unlike written literature, oral narratives continue to change through repeated performances, allowing each generation to preserve the past while responding to present social and environmental conditions. Scholars have therefore recognised oral traditions as valuable sources for understanding indigenous knowledge, cultural memory, and community identity.

Early folklore studies focused mainly on collecting and classifying folktales. Vladimir Propp, in *Morphology of the Folktale*, argued that folktales follow a common structural pattern despite differences in characters and settings. He identified recurring narrative functions that shape the hero's journey and influence the development of the story. Joseph Campbell similarly proposed that many traditional narratives follow the pattern of the hero's journey, where the hero leaves home, faces supernatural challenges, receives guidance, and finally returns with knowledge or reward. These structural approaches continue to influence comparative folklore studies.

Later scholars expanded folklore research by examining the relationship between storytelling, culture, and society. Alan Dundes argued that folklore should be understood within its cultural context because oral narratives

express the beliefs, fears, and social values of the communities that preserve them. Oral stories therefore function not only as entertainment but also as cultural documents that preserve collective memory and social identity.

Recent studies have moved beyond structural analysis by examining oral traditions from ecological, feminist, and indigenous perspectives. Ecocritical scholars argue that indigenous narratives present nature as an active participant in human life rather than as a passive background. Forests, rivers, mountains, animals, birds, and plants often function as living beings that guide, protect, and communicate with human characters. Such narratives demonstrate indigenous environmental ethics based on respect, balance, and coexistence with nature.

Research on indigenous storytelling also emphasises the importance of cultural memory. Oral narratives preserve traditional knowledge related to ecology, medicine, agriculture, rituals, and social customs. Storytelling becomes an important means through which communities transmit values, identity, and historical experience to younger generations. As a result, many scholars now recognise oral literature as an essential component of indigenous knowledge systems rather than simply a form of entertainment.

Studies on South Indian tribal literature have documented the oral traditions of several indigenous communities, including the Todas, Irulas, Paniyas, Kurumbas, and Kani tribes.

These studies describe myths, folktales, songs, ritual performances, and medicinal knowledge that reflect close relationships between people and the natural environment. However, most of these studies primarily focus on documentation and preservation. Comparative analyses of multiple versions of the same folktale remain limited.

Existing scholarship on the Kani tribe has explored traditional ecological knowledge, medicinal practices, ethnobotany, language, and selected oral narratives. While these studies contribute significantly to the documentation of Kani culture, very few examine how individual stories change across different settlements. In particular, no detailed comparative study has analysed ten versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale to understand how geographical location, local beliefs, ecological conditions, and cultural practices influence narrative variation.

The present study addresses this gap by comparing multiple versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale collected through fieldwork in different Kani settlements. Rather than treating each version as an independent story, the study examines their shared narrative structure, recurring symbols, and local adaptations. This approach demonstrates how oral traditions remain dynamic cultural systems that preserve indigenous knowledge while continuously adapting to changing environments and community experiences.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework by combining Vladimir Propp's structural theory of folktales, Archetypal Criticism, and Ecocriticism. These approaches together provide a comprehensive understanding of the narrative structure, symbolic meaning, and ecological values found in the *Mathulanganni* folktale.

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* forms the primary framework for analysing the structure of the ten story versions. Propp argues that folktales follow a sequence of recurring narrative functions regardless of differences in characters or settings. Although the *Mathulanganni* stories vary across Kani settlements, they retain a common narrative pattern that includes a challenge, departure, supernatural assistance, trials, transformation, recognition, and the restoration of justice. This framework helps identify both the shared structural elements and the unique local adaptations within each version.

Archetypal criticism provides another important perspective for understanding the symbolic meaning of recurring characters and motifs. The hero's journey, the wise sage, the magical bird, the sacred forest, the supernatural maiden, and the deceptive woman are recurring archetypes that appear in many traditional narratives across cultures. In the *Mathulanganni* folktale, these archetypes are adapted to reflect the cultural values and beliefs

of the Kani community. Rather than functioning only as literary symbols, they express indigenous ideas about courage, morality, justice, and communal responsibility.

The study also applies ecocriticism to examine the relationship between humans and the natural world. Nature is not presented as a passive setting but as an active force that guides, protects, and restores balance. Birds transport the hero across distant lands, forests become places of spiritual transformation, rivers test human character, and plants such as the pomegranate symbolise fertility, renewal, and life. These ecological elements reflect the Kani worldview, in which humans and nature exist in a relationship of mutual dependence and respect. By combining structural analysis, archetypal interpretation, and ecocritical perspectives, the study moves beyond simple narrative description. It demonstrates that the different versions of *Mathulanganni* are cultural expressions that preserve indigenous identity, ecological knowledge, and collective memory while adapting to the unique experiences of each Kani settlement.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine the different versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale narrated among the Kani tribal settlements in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand the cultural

meanings, narrative variations, and symbolic elements preserved through oral storytelling rather than to produce statistical findings.

4.1 Fieldwork and Data Collection

The primary data for this study were collected through extensive fieldwork conducted in ten Kani settlements. The folktales were narrated by elderly storytellers, traditional knowledge holders, and community members who have inherited these narratives through oral transmission. The narrators were selected because of their familiarity with the traditional stories and their active role in preserving Kani oral heritage.

Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were used during the fieldwork. This approach allowed the narrators to tell the stories naturally while also providing explanations about local customs, beliefs, and the cultural significance of the narratives. With the consent of the participants, the stories were audio-recorded and documented for research purposes.

4.2 Transcription and Translation

The collected folktales were first transcribed in Tamil to preserve the original expressions, vocabulary, and storytelling style of the narrators. The texts were then translated into English. During translation, special attention was given to retaining the cultural meanings, indigenous concepts, and symbolic expressions found in the original narratives. Literal translation was avoided whenever it

reduced or altered the cultural significance of the stories.

4.3 Data Analysis

The ten versions of the *Mathulangkanni* folktale were analysed using a comparative method. Each version was examined to identify similarities and differences in narrative structure, characters, supernatural helpers, magical objects, transformations, conflicts, and resolutions. The stories were then grouped according to recurring motifs and narrative patterns.

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* was used to identify common structural functions, including the hero's departure, supernatural assistance, trials, deception, recognition, and the restoration of justice. Archetypal criticism was applied to interpret recurring symbolic figures such as the hero, the wise sage, magical birds, the supernatural maiden, and the false bride. Ecocritical perspectives were used to analyse the representation of forests, rivers, animals, plants, and other natural elements that shape the cultural worldview of the Kani community.

Rather than treating each folktale as an isolated narrative, the analysis focuses on how the different versions collectively preserve cultural memory while adapting to the geographical and social conditions of individual settlements.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines for

research involving indigenous communities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before recording their narratives. The purpose of the research was clearly explained, and participation was entirely voluntary. The stories are presented with respect for the cultural traditions of the Kani community, and the research acknowledges the narrators as the custodians of this valuable oral heritage.

4.5 Scope and Limitations

The study focuses exclusively on ten versions of the *Mathulangkanni* folktale collected from selected Kani settlements. Although these narratives represent important regional variations, they do not include every version currently circulating among the Kani community. Therefore, the findings should be understood as a comparative analysis of selected oral performances rather than as a complete documentation of all existing versions.

5. Comparative Analysis and Findings

Instead of presenting the complete folktales in full, the narratives are analysed comparatively to understand how each settlement reshapes the story while preserving its central themes. The comparison demonstrates that the *Mathulangkanni* folktale possesses a stable narrative framework but allows considerable flexibility in characters, settings, supernatural elements, and cultural symbolism.

Across all ten versions, the hero undertakes a difficult journey to obtain

Mathulanganni. However, the reason for beginning the journey differs from one settlement to another. In some versions, the quest begins with a domestic challenge during a ball game, while in others it arises from childhood promises, royal duties, personal determination, or community expectations. These different motivations reflect the social values and everyday experiences of each Kani settlement.

The hero's journey also varies according to the local ecological setting. Birds, sages, magical animals, giants, rivers, forests, mountains, and sacred trees appear as helpers throughout the narratives. These elements demonstrate that nature is not merely a background for the story but an active participant in the hero's success. The close relationship between humans and the natural environment reflects the ecological knowledge and environmental ethics of the Kani people.

5.1 Narrative Structure and Local Adaptation

The comparative analysis shows that all ten versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale follow a common narrative structure despite differences in characters and events. Each story begins with a challenge that motivates the hero to leave home, followed by a difficult journey through forests or distant lands. During the journey, the hero receives help from supernatural beings such as birds, sages, giants, or magical animals. After overcoming several

obstacles, the hero finds Mathulanganni. In many versions, deception temporarily separates the couple before truth is finally restored through supernatural justice.

This common structure reflects Propp's theory that folktales share similar narrative functions even when their details differ. However, each Kani settlement reshapes the story according to its own geographical surroundings, cultural beliefs, and social experiences. These local adaptations demonstrate that oral traditions are dynamic rather than fixed. Storytellers preserve the central message while modifying events to make the narrative meaningful for their own community.

5.2 Symbolism of the Pomegranate and Transformation

One of the most significant symbols in the *Mathulanganni* folktale is the pomegranate. In several versions, Mathulanganni emerges from a pomegranate that grows beyond the seven seas. The fruit represents hidden life, fertility, renewal, and sacred feminine power. It also symbolises the idea that valuable knowledge and blessings can only be obtained after patience, courage, and perseverance.

The repeated transformations of Mathulanganni into a lotus, tortoise, parrot, leafy vegetable, champak flower, and finally back into human form reveal the resilience of life. Although evil temporarily destroys the heroine, nature continually restores her. These

transformations suggest that truth cannot be permanently defeated. Instead, life repeatedly renews itself through the natural world.

From an ecocritical perspective, these transformations also demonstrate that humans and nature are closely connected. The heroine becomes part of the environment before returning to human life, showing that the natural world actively protects justice and restores balance.

5.3 Ecology and Indigenous Environmental Knowledge

Nature occupies a central position throughout the *Mathulanganni* narratives. Forests, rivers, mountains, birds, trees, flowers, and animals are not simply backgrounds for the story but active participants in the hero's journey.

Birds guide the hero across impossible distances. Rivers become places of both danger and rebirth. Sacred trees provide protection and spiritual guidance. Mountains function as places of meditation and transformation. Even animals such as deer, tortoises, hawks, and parrots assist the hero or protect the heroine.

These recurring ecological elements reflect the Kani understanding of nature as a living partner rather than a resource to be controlled. The stories promote harmony with the environment and emphasise respect for forests, wildlife, and natural resources. This ecological worldview reflects the traditional lifestyle of the Kani people, whose culture has

developed through close interaction with the forests of the Western Ghats.

5.4 Gender, Power, and Female Representation

The character of Mathulanganni is more than a traditional princess waiting to be rescued. She possesses extraordinary powers and repeatedly demonstrates wisdom, patience, courage, and compassion. In several versions, she protects kingdoms from famine, restores justice, guides the hero, and overcomes betrayal through her own supernatural strength.

The false bride, represented as the Kurathi, carpenter's daughter, or another deceptive woman, functions as the opposite of Mathulanganni.

While Mathulangannisymbolises truth, generosity, and harmony with nature, the false bride represents greed, jealousy, and deception. The conflict between these two female figures illustrates the moral values preserved within Kani oral tradition.

Rather than presenting women only as passive characters, the folktale portrays female characters as powerful agents who influence the fate of individuals and communities. This complexity reflects the important social and cultural roles women occupy within indigenous storytelling traditions.

Table 1. Female Characters and Their Narrative Roles

Character	Role	Symbolic Meaning
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Mathulanganni	Heroine	Truth, fertility, ecology
Kurathi	False bride	Greed and deception
Carpenter's Daughter	Imposter	Social disorder
Queen	Mother	Endurance
Elder Sister-in-law	Catalyst	Beginning of the quest

5.5 Archetypes and Collective Cultural Memory

Several recurring archetypes appear throughout the ten versions of the folktale. The hero represents courage, determination, and moral responsibility. The sage symbolises wisdom and spiritual knowledge. Birds function as divine messengers connecting the human and supernatural worlds. Forests represent transformation, while magical objects symbolise the rewards of patience and faith.

Mathulanganni herself functions as an archetype of fertility, justice, and cultural continuity. Her repeated rebirth through natural forms suggests that cultural identity cannot be destroyed. Instead, it survives through memory, storytelling, and the natural environment. These recurring archetypes connect the Kani oral tradition with broader patterns found in world folklore while preserving its unique indigenous identity.

5.6 Cultural Significance of Narrative Variations

Although each settlement narrates the story differently, the variations do not weaken the tradition. Instead, they strengthen it by allowing each community to preserve its own experiences within a shared cultural framework.

Some settlements emphasise family relationships, while others highlight bravery, spiritual discipline, ecological knowledge, or communal responsibility. These differences demonstrate that oral storytelling remains flexible and responsive to changing social conditions.

The multiple versions therefore function as a living archive of Kani cultural memory. Together they preserve language, beliefs, environmental knowledge, moral values, and indigenous identity across generations.

Table 2. Comparative Features of the Ten Versions of *Mathulanganni*

Story No.	Quest Begins With	Supernatural Helper	Main Symbol	Ending
1	Ball game challenge	Hawks	Pomegranate, Lotus	True bride restored
2	Ball game challenge	Sage, Flying Bird	Pomegranate, Pearl	Marriage and prosperity
3	Royal exile	Sage	Magical Fruits	Marriage
4	Desire to marry	Dragonfly, Sage	Magical Stones	Marriage

5	Hunting journey	Hawks	Pomegranate	Kurathi punished
6	Childhood promise	Sage, Sparrow	Magical Stones	Marriage
7	Ball game challenge	Hawks, Giant Birds	Pomegranate, Tortoise, Parrot	Justice restored
8	Royal journey	Mathulangkanni herself	Famine, Parrot	Peace restored
9	Royal exile	Giant Couple	Pomegranate	Family reunion
10	Village promise	Sage, Magical Deer	Golden Palace	Marriage

6. Conclusion

The *Mathulangkanni* folktale demonstrates the richness and diversity of Kani oral tradition. Although the story follows a common narrative pattern across different settlements, each version reflects the local environment, cultural practices, and collective experiences of its community. These variations show that oral traditions are dynamic cultural systems that preserve continuity while adapting to changing social and ecological contexts.

The comparative analysis reveals that recurring motifs such as the pomegranate, magical birds, sages, forests, rivers, and metamorphosis are not merely imaginative

elements. They represent the Kani understanding of nature, justice, morality, and cultural identity. The repeated transformation of Mathulangkanni into different natural forms symbolises renewal, resilience, and the inseparable relationship between humans and the natural world. Likewise, the hero's journey represents not only personal courage but also the values of responsibility, perseverance, and communal well-being.

The study also highlights the important role of women within Kani oral narratives. Mathulangkanni is portrayed as a figure of wisdom, strength, fertility, and ecological balance rather than as a passive heroine. Her supernatural abilities and repeated restoration emphasise the triumph of truth over deception and reinforce the moral values preserved within indigenous storytelling.

By combining structural analysis, archetypal criticism, and ecocritical perspectives, this study demonstrates that the *Mathulangkanni* folktale functions as a living cultural archive. It preserves indigenous ecological knowledge, social values, historical memory, and cultural identity while continuing to evolve through oral performance. The comparative approach adopted in this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Kani oral literature and expands the scope of indigenous literary studies.

7. Contribution of the Study

This study makes several important

contributions to folklore and indigenous literary research. First, it provides the first detailed comparative analysis of ten versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale collected from different Kani settlements. Instead of examining a single narrative, the study demonstrates how one oral tradition develops multiple local forms while preserving its core structure.

Second, the research moves beyond documentation by offering critical interpretation. Through structural, archetypal, and ecocritical analyses, it explains the symbolic meanings of recurring motifs and demonstrates how oral narratives preserve indigenous knowledge.

Third, the study contributes to the growing field of indigenous literary studies by highlighting the ecological knowledge embedded in Kani storytelling. The narratives illustrate the close relationship between humans, forests, animals, rivers, and sacred landscapes, thereby enriching discussions on environmental humanities and ecocriticism.

Finally, the study supports the preservation of endangered oral traditions by documenting valuable cultural knowledge that continues to shape the identity of the Kani community.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The present study focuses on ten versions of the *Mathulanganni* folktale collected from selected Kani settlements. Although these narratives represent important

regional variations, additional versions may exist in other settlements that could further enrich comparative analysis.

Future research may examine the performance aspects of Kani storytelling, including narration, music, gestures, and audience participation. Comparative studies involving other South Indian tribal communities could also provide broader insights into shared indigenous storytelling traditions. Furthermore, interdisciplinary research combining folklore, linguistics, anthropology, and digital humanities may contribute to the long-term preservation and documentation of Kani oral literature.

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Appendix A: Story Synopses

These are condensed synopses of the ten narrative variants used in this study.

Story No. 1

The youngest of seven brothers loses a ball game and promises his sister-in-law he will marry Mathulangkanni. Two hawks carry him across seven seas to a pomegranate tree and warn him not to open the fruit he picks until he reaches home. He opens it early; Mathulangkanni appears, but a Kurathi (a gypsy woman) tricks her out of her jewellery, drowns her in a pond, and takes her place. The false bride fails the tests set by fifty-six kings, while Mathulangkanni's spirit becomes a lotus and is eventually restored to human form; she passes the tests, and the impostor is punished and exiled.

Story No. 2

A young man skilled in magic loses the same ball-game wager. A forest sage sends him across the seven seas on a magical bird to a pomegranate tree; he opens the fruit himself, and Mathulangkanni emerges. The sage also gives them a wish-granting pearl, which the couple use to build a palace before marrying.

Story No. 3

A queen's infant son is abandoned in the forest by his cruel grandmother and is raised by an old woman after a hawk carries him to her home. An old woman's rebuke during a ball game sends him to find Mathulangkanni; after saving a giant's children from a serpent, he receives two magical fruits from a sage, and Mathulangkanni emerges from the second.

Story No. 4

An unmarried youngest son sets out alone to find a bride and is carried by a dragonfly to a

mountain peak, where he performs forty-one days of penance. A sage rewards him with four magical stones that summon Mathulangkanni, a flying bird, and finally a palace in the north.

Story No. 5

A prince's hunting trip turns into solitary wandering. Two hawks carry him across the seven seas to a pomegranate tree, where he plucks the seventh fruit from the seventh branch and opens it early, despite a warning. A Kurathi again tricks and drowns Mathulangkanni, but here the prince rescues her himself at swordpoint and executes the impostor directly, without a formal test.

Story No. 6

A boy is promised marriage to Mathulangkanni as a childhood incentive to stop eating mud; grown to adulthood, he holds his mother to that promise. A forest sage gives him three magical stones, and a black sparrow carries him across the seven seas to claim his bride.

Story No. 7

Six sisters-in-law provoke the youngest brother through a ball game; hawks and a pair of giant birds guide him through a year of penance beneath a silk-cotton tree before he receives a pomegranate. A carpenter's daughter drowns Mathulangkanni and takes her place but fails the same fifty-six-king test used in Story 1, following the same pattern of exposure through the ecological trials of pearls, rain, and trembling earth.

Story No. 8

A king's search for a bride is interrupted by an unexplained mystery involving a stationary horse, leading him to Mathulangkanni beneath a tree with no supernatural helper required. After their marriage, she foresees a famine, advises the king to store grain, and distributes food generously to both kingdoms; when her jealous father plots against her husband, she transforms into a parrot and flies to change his mind, reconciling both families.

Story No. 9

This version opens like Story 3, with an abandoned royal infant and an old woman's ball-game rebuke, but a giant and giantess guide the hero through a seven-circle ritual at a pomegranate tree instead of a sage.

Mathulangkanni emerges without any impostor plot, and the reunited family recognises the hero as the king's long-lost son.

Story No. 10

The women of a hill village promise a young man a golden garland if he brings back

Mathulangkanni. A sage gives him four magical stones that summon a flying deer, unlimited food, and finally a hidden seven-chambered palace, inside which Mathulangkanni is found directly; the marriage is sealed with the promised garland.