

The Malay-Tamil Cultural Contacts with Special Reference to the Festival of *Mandi Safar*

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INTRODUCTION

The Malay-Tamil cultural relations in the premodern times are well attested by archaeological as well as epigraphical evidence. From the archaeological point of view, apart from the presence of beads and crude glassware of Indian origin in the neolithic strata of the Malay archipelago, there is also a direct transition from the neolithic to the historical level witnessed by excavations at Kuala Selinsing in the state of Perak on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, where a cornelian seal inscribed in the South Indian Grantha script belonging to circa the 5th century A.D., was found. The inscription on the seal reading Śrī Vishṇuvarmasya in faulty Sanskrit language is interpreted to mean Śrī Vishṇuvarman, which is perhaps the name of a king or a merchant-prince (Evans 1928, 1932; Braddell 1934; Nilakanta Sastri 1936). In this connection, it is also noteworthy that the fragmentary Sanskrit inscriptions containing the Buddhist credal formula about *dharma* and *karma*, which were discovered at various sites such as Ceruk Tekun and Bukit Meriam in the Malay Peninsula have also been identified as written in the South Indian Pallava Grantha characters of the fourth to the fifth or sixth centuries A.D. (Coedès 1964: 50).

The Chinese annals entitled *Liang-shu* 梁書 of the early seventh century A.D., refer to the establishment of a Malay kingdom known as Lang-ya-hsiu 浪加修 (Langkasuka) in the second century A.D. (Wheatley 1966: 253) and this kingdom was to be identified as Ilaṅkācōkam in the Tamil Cōla inscription of the eleventh century A.D. (Nilakanta Sastri 1935: 254–255). The kingdom of Langkasuka straddled the northern half of the Malay Peninsula reaching the sea on the east as well as on

the west. Further north in the region of present-day Nakhon Si Thammarat (Ligor) was situated the kingdom of Tambralinga, which was known as Tambalinga in the Pāli Mahā Niddesa of the second century A.D. (Wheatley 1966: 181) and as Tāmraliṅgam in the Tamil inscription mentioned above. Again, the ancient port of Takkola (Wheatley 1966: 268–272), identified with Takuapa on the west coast of present-day Thailand, was the port of embarkation for the embassy which the kingdom of Funan (later Kampuchea) sent in the third century A.D., to the court of the Indian ruler of Murunda (Coedès 1964: 46; Nilakanta Sastri 1978: 223). The Tamil inscription discovered at Takuapa confirms the presence of Tamil merchants in the vicinity, equipped with facilities for commercial and religious activities in the ninth century A.D. (Nilakanta Sastri 1949: 25–30).

Towards the end of the seventh century A.D., the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim I-ching 義淨 reported that there were regular sailings of vessels between Chieh-ch'ā 羯茶, that is, Kedah, in the Malay Peninsula and Nāgapattiṅam on the east coast of South India (Takakusu 1896: xxxviii–xxxix). Again, it is noteworthy that the Sumatra-based Malay empire of Śrī Vijaya is mentioned by the name Kaḍāram (a Tamil name for Sanskrit Kaṭāha and Malay Kedah) in the Tamil Cōḷa inscriptions of South India from the reign of the Cōḷa king Rājārāja I (985–1016 A.D.) to that of the Cōḷa ruler Kulōttuṅga I (1070–1122 A.D.). It was at the request of the king Cūḷamaṇivarmadeva of Śrī Vijaya in Kaḍāram or Kedah that a Buddhist monastery called Cūḷamaṇivarmavihāra was built at Nāgapattiṅam in 1005 A.D., and the Cōḷa ruler Rājārāja I himself granted the endowment of the revenue of a village towards the maintenance of the monastery for the benefit of the visitors from the kingdom of Śrī Vijaya (Subrahmanya Aiyer 1936a; Nilakanta Sastri 1949: 75–76, 128–131). The gift was confirmed by his son and successor King Rājēndra I (1014–1044), who later in his reign under-took a maritime expedition to the Malay archipelago in 1025 A.D. (Hultzsch 1891; Nilakanta Sastri 1949: 80–82, 131). Around 1068 A.D., another Cōḷa ruler Vīrarājēndra (1063–1069 A.D.) claims to have conquered Kaḍāram from an usurper and handed it back to its lawful ruler (Nilakanta Sastri 1949b: 84). During the reign of the Cōḷa ruler Kulōttuṅga I (1070–1122 A.D.) the Malay ruler of Kaḍāram (Kedah) sent envoys to the Cōḷa ruler in 1090 A.D., for the regulation of affairs relating to the monastery at Nāgapattiṅam (Subrahmanya Aiyer 1936b; Nilakanta Sastri 1966: 191). Moreover, the Tamil inscription of 1088 A.D., discovered at Lubuk Tua (or Loboec Toewa) near Barus, Sumatra, is another piece of tangible evidence of commercial and religious contacts established by the Tamil merchants with the Malay archipelago (Nilakanta Sastri

1932).

The long-established Malay-Tamil cultural and trade relations centering around the coastal region of Sumatra and Kedah in the Malay peninsula were in later times extended to the newly-evolved kingdom of Mēlaka early in the fifteenth century A.D. (Sandhu 1973: 50-75). A significant feature of the presence of the Tamils in Mēlaka in the early period of the kingdom (1400-1511 A.D.) is that the Tamil traders and others connected with trade had their own settlement in Mēlaka, such a settlement being known as Kampong Kēling (Kaliṅga) (Mills 1930: 19). It is also known that during the period the Tamils, some of whom were of Islamic faith, played a significant role in the trading activities and in the royal court (Cortesão 1944: 241, 265, 270, 272-273). It may also be noted in this connection that members of the Tamil Hindu community, who had chosen to settle there permanently, had intermarried with the members of the indigenous Malay community and had adopted the local customs, although they retained some of their basic Hindu beliefs and practices in a modified form (Narayanasamy 1968; Rabeendran 1976).

The close and continuous commercial and cultural relations which the Malays have had with the Tamils through the centuries had led to the process of adoption and interaction of selected cultural elements. The results of such interaction and acculturation may be seen in the fields such as the institution of kingship, ceremonial, administration, language, literature, arts, beliefs and practices of the Malay people to this day (Winstedt 1961: 26-33, 63-77, 139-175; Asmah 1969; Singaravelu 1981, 1982). The festival of *Mandi Safar* would seem to be an example of such an interaction, and therefore an attempt is made in this paper to examine some aspects of the possible interrelationship between the Malay festival and an ancient water festivity of the Tamils.

MANDI SAFAR

The festival of *Mandi Safar* (Blasdell 1943; Zainal Abidin 1949; Paul 1964; Haji Ahmad Derus 1973) is known to have been and is still being celebrated by the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia annually on the last Wednesday of the second Muslim month known as *Safar*. For the joyous occasion thousands of people, including a large number of young men and women under the watchful chaperonage of elderly women, journey in groups by traditional bullock-carts and other means of travel to river-banks and sea-side on the eve of the festival, that is, on Tuesday evening. On arrival at their destination, they set up their camps on the sea-shore or river-banks for the night and the following day, and during the time they entertain themselves by singing *pantuns* (rhyming

quatrains in Malay)¹ to the accompaniment of music (of violin and drums) and dances such as *joget* or *ronggeng*.² On the day of the festival they take part in ceremonial bathing in the waters of a river or the sea, and hence the use of the term *mandi* which in Malay means 'bathing' especially in a river as opposed to having water poured over oneself. It is also said that many elderly people immerse into the water a piece of paper on which a special prayer is written before they dip themselves into the water and usually drink some of the water, which they regard as sacred. It is also believed that those unable to proceed to the river or seaside should at least drink some of the water brought from the sea or river on the occasion of the festival. The reason for this belief is the need to cleanse oneself of spiritual impurity and safeguard oneself from any misfortune in the future (Zainal Abidin 1949: 103).

Though the festival is known to have been commonly observed in many parts of Peninsular Malaysia including Morib in the state of Selangor, Port Dickson in the state of Negeri Sembilan, and Bagan Luar in Penang, it is carried out with particular zest and on an elaborate scale at Tanjong Keling ('Cape of Keling', the term *Keling* being the Malay form of 'Kaliṅga' and a synonym for the people of South Indian origin) about seven miles north of the Mēlaka (Malacca) town, and also on the neighboring island of Pulau Bēsar.

It has been pointed out also by more than one observer that the festival, apart from being an occasion for the ceremonial bathing for spiritual purity, also provides an opportunity for the marriageable young men and women to see each other and choose their future life-partners. It is not unusual that soon after the festival the traditional match-makers get busy in arranging marriage proposals with the parents of the interested parties (Zainal Abidin 1949: 103-104; Haji Ahmad Derus 1973: 91).

As regards the spiritual significance of the festival, there would seem to be a difference of opinion on the question whether the festival is connected with any particular teaching of Islam. On the one hand, there is the view that the festival is not an intrinsic part of Islamic belief and practice, and for this reason considerable pressure is said to have been brought to bear upon the people by religious leaders not to participate in the festival, though it is also observed that the advice and views of the religious leaders do not seem to have affected the participation of people in the festival at Tanjong Keling in any appreciable degree. On the other hand there is also the view that the festival of the *Mandi Safar* may well be considered as a religious observance, and in this connection it has been mentioned that the ablution at the end of

the month of Safar is possibly connected with a feast held in memory of the prophet Mohamed's experience of some mitigation of his final illness through such an ablution. In view of this, it has been also pointed out that it is customary for some pious followers of Islam to write seven verses of the Holy Quran, namely the Seven *Salams*, then wash off the ink and drink it as a charm against evil (Zainal Abidin 1949: 103; Blasdell 1943: 141-142; Jaffur Shruuef 1832).

While there can be no doubt that the observance of the *Mandi Safar* festival is spiritually significant, nevertheless the presence of other elements in the festival such as the traditional journeyings of people in groups by bullock-carts to the river or the sea-side, the participation of young men and women under the chaperonage of elderly women in charge of nubile maidens, and the lively entertainments of music, songs and dances which mark the occasion would seem to have close parallels with some aspects of a water festivity of the ancient Tamils described in a Tamil poem entitled *Paripāḍal* (Cōmacuntaraṅār 1964; Gros 1968) of the fourth (Jesudasan 1961: 40-41) or the seventh century A.D. (Vaiyapuri Pillai 1956: 56).

THE TAMIL PARIPĀḌAL AND BATHING FESTIVITY

The Tamil poetic work *Paripāḍal*³ is a collection of twenty-four extant poems (out of the seventy poems supposed to have been originally included in the work) and, of the extant poems, seven are dedicated to the Hindu divinity Tirumāl (Viṣṇu), eight to Murukan (Subrahmaṇya), and nine to the river Vaiyai. In the poems dedicated to the river Vaiyai the traditional Tamil poetic theme of love is worked out against the background of bathing festivities. The poems, which were indeed composed as songs intended to be sung, are ascribed to thirteen poets. Of the poems which are dedicated to the river Vaiyai, the tenth poem or the song ascribed to Karumpiḷlaippūtaṅār is of special interest to the subject-matter of this paper, for in this poem, an English translation of which is appended to this paper, are to be found the details of the ancient Tamil bathing festivities, which would seem to have several parallel elements with those of the *Mandi Safar* festival as it is known to have been celebrated in Peninsular Malaysia.

The parallel elements, which are common to both festivities include the following: (a) A large number of people journey to the banks of the river by using various kinds of vehicles including the traditional bullock-carts. (b) The participants include a large number of nubile maidens and young men. (c) The young girls are chaperoned by greyhaired elderly women. (d) Young men and women look forward to meet their future life-partners during the bathing festivities.

(e) There is a great deal of merry-making including melodious music, songs and dances. (f) The melodious music stimulates the young participants' longing for each other, but being afraid of others' scandal-mongering, they try to conceal their ardor of love. (g) Young men partake of the food cooked by the young maidens in the little shelters along the river banks. (h) Many sing songs, and the sound of their singing, praising, dancing, and music is heard loudly. (i) Young men and women disport themselves in the river water and they include some young maidens who have managed to escape from the protective guardianship of elderly women. (j) Some young maidens drop certain objects into the river with a prayer for the abundance of happiness. (k) As the sun sets and the moon appears to dispel the darkness, people on the river banks begin to return home singing songs.

As regards certain elements which are not common to both festivities, it may be noted that the Tamil bathing festivities in the ancient city of Madurai in South India would seem to have been held to rejoice over the abundant monsoon rainfall and the consequent inundation of the river Vaiyai. Secondly, the prayer offered by young maidens as they dropped objects such as figurines of fish and crab as well as conch-shell was for the abundance of crops and happiness.⁴ Thirdly, the ancient Tamil festivities are said to have taken place along the river banks of the Vaiyai, whereas the Malay *Mandi Safar* festival is known to have been celebrated on an elaborate scale by the sea-side at Tanjong Keling near the town of Mēlaka, though some people are known to have celebrated the festival at riverside too.

If we were to look at the overall picture, it would seem that there are certainly more points of similarity than difference in the modes of celebration of both the Tamil and Malay festivities. In this connection, it is also of some interest to note that the tenth song of the Tamil poem *Paripāḍal* in its ninth line refers to *mandi-āḍal*. It is open to question whether the Tamil word *mandi*, occurring as it does in conjunction with the (*āḍal*) bathing festivity along the banks of the river Vaiyai, merely expresses its verbal participial meaning of 'thronging' in Tamil or whether it has any relationship with the Malay word *mandi* meaning 'bathing' especially in a river. Though the latter possibility is rather remote,⁵ nevertheless there can be no doubt about the inter-relationship between the Malay and the Tamil bathing festivities on account of the numerous points of similarity found in them, unless the corresponding elements are to be ascribed to pure coincidence.

As regards the addition of the term *Safar*, which is the name of the second Muslim month, to the word *Mandi*, this might have occurred after the Malay society had adopted Islam especially during the period

of the Mēlaka Sultanate, so as to make the observance of a secular bathing festivity more acceptable to the Islamic society. The explanation that the objective of the *Mandi Safar* festival was to achieve spiritual purity was perhaps also part of the same effort.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of what has been said in the preceding pages of this paper, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the festival of *Mandi Safar*, as it is known to have been and is still being observed by the Malay people in Peninsular Malaysia, would seem to have been originally a secular bathing festivity for the purpose of providing an opportunity for the nubile young men and women to see and know each other in the course of their joint participation in dancing and musical programmes and in disporting themselves in the river or the sea so as to facilitate their future formal betrothal. It would also seem possible that such a festivity might well have been the result of the interaction of Malay and Tamil traditions in the course of centuries-old cultural relations before it was also endowed with an Islamic significance during and after the period of the Sultanate of Mēlaka.

NOTES

1. In the impromptu recital of Malay *pantuns* a male and a female participant usually endeavor to outwit each other in the exchange of extemporised verses of humor causing hearty laughter among the appreciative audience.

2. The *joget* or *ronggeng* is a dance-form in which the male and female partners move towards each other with palms outstretched and fingers upturned in graceful gestures but never actually touching each other.

3. The Tamil poetic work *Paripāḍal* is traditionally enumerated as the fifth of the Eight Anthologies (*Eṭṭuttokai*) belonging to the Saṅgam or the Classical Period (200 B.C.-200 A.D.), but it is relatively a later work. Its contents include partly traditional Tamil love-poetry and partly devotional (*bhakti*) poetry. It is a collection of poems or songs in the *paripāḍal* meter with verses ranging from one foot to four feet, exceptionally to five feet. The term *paripāḍal* means 'running, speeding or rapid song.' A noteworthy feature of this collection is that the colophons to each poem mention not only the name of its author, but also the name of the person who set the poem to music and the name of the tune or melody to which it was set (Vaiyapuri Pillai 1956: 56; Zvelebil 1973: 123-125).

4. There are, indeed, several references in the Tamil literary works of the ancient and the medieval periods to the festival of disporting oneself in the waters of the rivers, seas, or pools. e.g. *Kuṟuntokai*, 295; *Narriṇai*, 80; *Cilappatikāram*, X, 22; *Kambarāmaṇam*, *Bāla-Kāṇḍam*, *Punalviḷaiyāṭṭuppaḍalam*, etc. There are also references in the Tamil literary works to bathing festivities of Hindu religious significance, such as *Mārkaḷinīrāḍal* ('bathing at dawn during the month of Mārkaḷi, i.e., November-December) or *Tai-nīrāḍal* (bathing at dawn during the month of Tai, i.e. December-January). The latter bathing festivities were meant especially for young nubile

maidens who bathed in the pools of water at early dawn during the cold months of *Mārkaḷi* or *Tai* as a form of performing penance or austerity for the purpose of adoring the deity Lord Śiva or Lord Viṣṇu and seeking marital bliss. Examples of Tamil literary works containing descriptions of such festivities include Āṇḍāl's *Tiruppāvai* and Māṅikkavācakar's *Tiruvembāvai*. It may be noted, however, that the bathing festivity described in the tenth song of *Paripāḍal* refers to both young men and women disporting themselves together in the freshly inundated waters of the river Vaiyai.

5. It may be noted in this connection that the Tamil verbal root *maṇṇu* means 'to bath, to perform ablution, or to immerse oneself completely as in water' (Tamil Lexicon, Vol. 5, pt. 1, pp. 3033-3034). Also, the Sanskrit verbal root *mand* means 'to adorn, to decorate, or to rejoice' (Monier-Williams 1964: 775).

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APPENDIX

THE TENTH SONG OF PARIPĀDAL VAIYAI

Author: Karumpillaiappūtaṅar

Composer of music: Maruttuvan Nallaccutaṅār

Tune: Pālaiyāl

English translation: S. Singaravelu

The river Vaiyai, innudated by the abundant rainfall on the mountain-side during the previous evening, flows over its sandy bed in the morning towards the sea, carrying with its new floods a vast carpet of many different flowers together with the tender mango shoots and banana

leaves, to the accompaniment of various sounds including the sound of drums beaten by the guardians of the river-banks, in order to relieve the people of their suffering before joining the boundless sea.

(Lines 1-8)

People throng around in order to disport themselves in the new waters of the Vaiyai river. Those who are wearing *tāḷitam* over their legs, are seen tightening up their *mēkalai* ornament around their waists. They bring along with them various things including water-squirt (to squirt red-colored vermilion water) and sandalwood paste, and they proceed to the river-side by riding on speedy and adorned horses, mules, bullock-carts, horse-carriages, and palanquins.

(Lines 9-18)

Those who reach the banks of the river Vaiyai include young nubile maidens as well as slightly grey-haired (*viravunaraīyōr*) and wholly grey-haired (*verunaraīyōr*) elderly women, chaste housewives, courtesans and their companions. Their gentle walk is akin to the mellifluous sound of the various musical instruments played by skillful musicians.

(Lines 19-25)

Some of the maidens stop and look at the beauty of the fresh waters of the river Vaiyai. Some sail on boats, while others go riding on horses and female elephants in the river. Some proceed to flowery islets in the river and embrace their lovers. Some indulge in feigning displeasure with their lovers, and some go to sleep. Some of the young maidens manage to escape from the protective guardianship of elderly women and go to sport in the Vaiyai river, looking forward to meet their lovers there.

(Lines 26-40)

Meanwhile, a male elephant, being attracted by the beauty of a female tusker, stops on its path near a mansion, where the figure of a prancing tiger is depicted. The female elephant also desires the male tusker, and on seeing the figure of the tiger, she is frightened, because she thinks that it is a real tiger, who is about to attack the male elephant. Both the male and the female tuskers get out of control of their riders, and they are, however, pacified, soon after they are brought together.

(Lines 41-55)

Men and women indulge in feigning displeasure at each other. Though the melodious music stimulates their sensuous longing for each other, being afraid of the scandal-mongering of others, they try to conceal their ardor of love, and in this respect, they resemble those, who after partaking of wine, try to conceal its joyful effect on them. Thus, the new floods of the river Vaiyai bring boundless love and joy.

(Lines 56-70)

The young maidens, who get tired of sporting in the river, return to the river-banks, and they dry the moisture of their bodies in the

midst of aromatic fumes of *akil* (*agaru*, or eagle wood), and smear themselves with sandalwood paste, which spreads its fragrance in all directions. They pour out the *naravu* (honey or toddy) into silver cups and drink it. Some adorn themselves with soft white cloth. Some wrap the cloth around their tresses in order to wring the moisture out of them. Some grind the *kunkumam* (saffron), the *akil* paste, and camphor into a flaming red paste. Some drop the figurines of conch-shell, crab, and fish, made of gold, into the river with a prayer for the abundance of rice crops and happiness. Some bestow gifts on the poor. Some smear their hair with oil and wash it with ten kinds of astringent substances and sport in the river. Some drop garlands, sandalwood, musk, and also their ornaments into the river, while some pour out the *naravu* in the river. (Lines 71-94)

The faces of the young maidens sporting in the river have become reddish, but they still want to disport themselves with their lovers, and their flower-like eyes resemble the sharp arrows of the god of love. (Lines 95-99)

Some of the young men ride on the banana tree-trunk as boat on the river. Some of them scatter the pollen grains of the *tālampū* (screw-pine, or pandanus flower). Some ride on boats along with the river flood, while some ride against the tide. Some go to partake of the food cooked by the young maidens in the little shelters along the river-banks. When some of them are denied of their share, they playfully snatch away the maidens' balls and *kalanku* (molucca-beans), and as the maidens chase after them, they dive into the river, and the river water becomes muddled, because of their sporting in the river. (Lines 100-111)

With the appearance of the moon to dispel the darkness, people on the river banks begin to return to the ancient town of Madurai. They remove the ornaments, which they had worn during the day, and put on garlands of fresh blooms and other ornaments, which are usually worn for the evening. Many of them sing songs. The sound of their singing, praising, dancing, music, as well as the singing of the bees, is heard more loudly. As they return home, aromatic fumes of *akil*, which come off the mansions of the town resemble the mist which alights on the mountain shrubs and then drifts along with the breeze in the sky. (Lines 112-125)

The faultless bardic troupes of singers and dancers together praise the river Vaiyai on seeing its fresh floods in the feastful town of Madurai. May the river Vaiyai always spread gold on the paddy fields, just like the Pāṇḍya king showers gifts of gold on the poets! (Lines 126-131)