Insiders, Outsiders, and the Tamil Tongue

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In the shift that Sheldon Pollock traces from a Sanskrit cosmopolis to the vernacularization of the literary in India, Tamil presents a special—and especially challenging—case. The vexing date of caṅkam (academy) literature; the disputed antiquity of the porulatikāram (field of poetry’s significance) of Tolkāppiyam, Tamil’s first extant treatment of the poetic norms that govern this literature; the involved taxonomies of akam (interior) and puram (exterior) that these poetic norms dictate, which reveal no clear trace of Sanskrit’s own explorations of poetic form: at the very least, early Tamil literature presses us to recognize it as a language apart. Of course, the conversation is far from over, and history may not bear this out. At the level of textual history, however, the idea that Tamil wordsmiths crafted a vision of the literary that has no parallel in other Indian vernaculars emerges with impressive clarity.

This essay takes up the case of Tamil exceptionalism by discussing textual moments when the language marked the identities of its speakers. Does speaking Tamil, that is to say, mean being Tamil? The question takes on added interest given Pollock’s own spirited critique of linguism in his masterwork, The Language of the Gods in the World of Men, in which he rejects the equation of language affinity with group identity:

There are a number of basic conceptions, derived from Western experience, about language as a social fact that seem problematic in light of the data on culture and power in South Asia gathered in these pages… Foremost among these conceptions is the conviction that language is a core factor, or even the core factor, in social group identification, one that focalizes the group’s emotional energy to a peculiar or even unique degree. Indeed, one might even say that for much social theory, language is assumed to be the object of a kind of cultural political cathexis. (2006: 505)

For the past two centuries, the history of Tamil literary scholarship has been inseparable from the question of what it means to be Tamil. Be it a worthy guide or a truculent champion, language now stands at the heart of Tamil character. How much of this, we may ask with Pollock, is really new?
Is a Tamil identity grounded in language a construction of modernity, reified without warrant as a timeless hallmark of selfhood, or in this, as well, is Tamil different?

Tamil Calls to the Tamil Soul: The Recent Past

In 1891, a Tamil drama took to the stage of linguism as though it had been built expressly for its performance. The text was Pe. Cuntaram Piḷḷai's Maṉōṉmaṇiṉiyam, and its publication marked the first time in Tamil literary history that poetic verses addressed themselves to a people as a whole (Bate 2005: 480); a people, moreover, that the text sought to unite in reverence for their language. As the six famous lines of its prologue declare, giving worship to the Tamil tongue:

Circled by the liquid sea, maiden earth
has shining Bharata as a wholesome face, awash in beauty,
her bright, gentle brow, graced with a fragrant tilaka
are the South and the wholesome Dravidian land,
and you, splendid goddess Tamil, are like that tilaka's scent
spreading fame everywhere, filling the entire world with joy!

In 1970, these words were elevated to the status of officially sanctioned prayer by the state's ruling party, the Tirāviṭa Muṉṉēṟṟak Kaḷakam (Symposium for Dravidian Progress or DMK), a rather unsurprising fact given the DMK's use of Tamil as an effective instrument for forging political sanction (Kailasapathy 1979: 26; Ramaswamy 1997: 17–18). We should note, however, that Maṉōṉmaṇiṉiyam was by no means new when the DMK came on the scene, having been written almost sixty years before the party's formation in 1949. Long before Tamil was laid on the altar of an independent nation-state, the language had become the signal marker in a broader struggle for Dravidian identity (Sivathamby 1986: 50–51). Cuntaram Piḷḷai's drama was a crystallizing instance of this process of distinction, and it was forged in opposition to a hypostatized Aryan oppressor. Continuing beyond the verse just cited, the prologue extends its devotion to Goddess Tamil by laying out the stakes quite clearly.

Like that one primal matter which remains as it was before
even as many souls and many worlds are created, borne, and destroyed,
though there are many,
Kannada, joyous Telugu, graceful Malayalam, and Tulu,
One rises forth from your womb,
as turns of phrase like the Aryan tongue pass on and fade away,
enchanted by your vibrant youth, we worship you, amazed! 

The hallmark of beauty on this woman is Dravidian, and Tamil is what makes her known to the world, constant and ever new even as Sanskrit fades into the past.

The appeal to Tamil as the touchstone of Dravidian authenticity was powerfully expressed in the literary world through the rise of the tanittamil (Pure Tamil) movement and its stalwart proponent, Maṟaimalai Aṭikal. The aṭikal (renunciate), who in his youth had known Cuntaram Piḷḷai as an elder contemporary, launched the tanittamil movement in 1915 as a campaign to expunge Sanskrit influence from Tamil letters. Although it resulted, at least to my nonnative ears, in a fairly tedious, monochrome style of expression, the tanittamil movement did imbue contemporary agitations against Brahmin societal dominance with a notable literary dimension. The positive valence of Tamil had found its Other with the capital O, the Aryan Brahman, who lacked an authenticity that a heritable, exclusive relationship with the Tamil language was argued to confer. For Maṟaimalai Atikal, this was a battle to be waged at the level of the lexeme. As his 1939 study Ancient and Modern Tamil Poets declares:

> Writers of over 1800 years ago were careful to practice the art of writing in pure, well-chosen, simple and virile Tamil words. They would not weaken its strength and get themselves demoralized by indiscriminately admitting into its fold any extraneous word... A language loses its vitality if it is needlessly and thoughtlessly corrupted. So also a class of people becomes disintegrated and weak by harmful admixture. That the one strong well-knit group of Tamils has, by corruption of their language, become the disjointed and decaying groups of Malayalees, Telugus, etc. is a sufficient testimony to this truth. According to the census of 1911 those speaking the Dravidian languages numbered about sixty millions. If these had only fostered their Tamil tongue without disintegrating it by reckless admixture of Sanskrit words, they would not have been so deplorably divided into separate groups each unable to understand the other as if they had been aliens. The great and deserving merit of the Tamilians is that, for more than fifty centuries, they have used their language with great care and vigilance and kept it so pure and undefiled, that we who are their descendents are enabled to speak now almost the same language they spoke then and derive the same enjoyment they had of productions of our own age. (1939: 18–19)

For Maṟaimalai Atikal, as it had been for Cuntaram Pillai, the real champion of Tamil identity—and the reason, as his dismissive view of Malayalam and Telugu spells out quite clearly, that Dravidian essentially
means Tamil—was the collection of the language’s earliest texts, collectively known as *caṅkam* literature. As the *aṭikaḷ* was to write in his autumn years, citing these texts as evidence:

Unequalled in their quest for knowledge and their industry, the ancestors of our Tamil people surpassed the peoples of all other ancient civilizations. In addition to the valuable revelations provided by the ancient texts and verses composed by the best among them, who shone as lyric poets, the work of Western [lit. “English”] scholars who have objectively researched this history, as well as the objective research of our own Indian scholars, makes this patently obvious.³

To those committed to an exclusivist model of Dravidian authenticity, the prestige of an independent and ancient Tamil culture was substantiated through the *caṅkam* texts, whose recovery, editing, and—most importantly—printing had recently been inaugurated by the herculean efforts of Ci. Vai. Tāmōtara Piḷḷai and U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar. The caricatured Aryan, whom Maṟamalai Aṭikaḷ would call out at every turn, was not invited to take part.

There are those scholars who lack the patience to see the truth—established through valid proof—that the ancient Tamils excelled in civilization from the very beginning, and that they were the ones who civilized all other ancient peoples. They are under the impression that the Tamils were civilized by Aryans, a belief spread at every turn by people who have done no actual research. Such scholars . . . who seem to believe the familiar canard that Aryan civilization was the sole cause for world civilization are contradicted by all valid proof!⁴

As K. Sivathamby has described the ethos of the time, “in this whole struggle for the acceptance of the historicity and the cultural individuality of the Tamils as a language–culture group, it was Tamil literature more than anything else that was called on to establish the antiquity and achievements of the Tamils” (1986: 51). The fabled tale of *caṅkam* literature’s recovery after a long period of cultural amnesia must have resonated powerfully with Tamil literati, for whom such conditions of textual production were deeply familiar. For Tamil Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas alike, the defining works of their religious traditions were produced by similarly dramatic acts of textual recovery, whose miraculous nature both revealed the texts’ heavenly dispensation and affirmed their imperviousness to the ravages of time.⁵

The use of *caṅkam* literature to resurrect the society it depicted went far beyond the efforts of Maraimalai Aṭikāḷ, whose own efforts to purify the Tamil language never garnered much in the way of imitation. The spate of Tamil
literary histories that began to come out in the late 1920s forcefully advanced a Tamil identity on the basis of language, and given the spirit of the times, generally developed this premise in terms of race. As M. S. Purnalingam Pillai maintains on the opening page of his 1929 examination primer, *Tamil Literature*, “the literature of the Tamil race is a record in suitable form of language and its emotions, thoughts and volitions, and of its observations, ideas and actions. It is ancient, vast and essentially moral and religious” (1929: 1). And so it was with successors, from K. N. Sivaraja Pillai’s *The Chronology of the Early Tamils* (1932) to the Jesudasans’ *A History of Tamil Literature* (1961). That such histories were written in English might seem ironic on the face of it, but in fact it points to the real conditions of their production. Tamil speakers were not operating in a monolingual environment, as indeed they never had. They were responding, moreover, to the perceived denigration of their history by Western scholarship, which in its valorization of Sanskrit textuality failed to appreciate Dravidian achievements. The vision of Tamilness they presented to this broader world, ranging over literary classics such as *Maṉōṉmaṇīyam* to bookish histories, was suffused with language devotion. For many, *caṅkam* verses seemed a revelatory key to the society that they described, and the heights this society attained spoke most persuasively on behalf of the call to recognize Tamil cultural dignity. The Tamil language had assumed a visionary mantle, but one that gazed proudly back in order to move forward.

Place this state of affairs against Pollock’s critique of a generalized linguism, and his appraisal holds up well. His position is a strong one:

> The fact is, the affective attachment that produces linguism—or that can be deployed to produce the illusion of linguism—and all the associated varieties of social-political belonging based on language are not universal features of human existence at all. There is no evidence whatever for linguism in South Asia before modernity. (2006: 508)

*Maṉōṉmaṇīyam*, as has often been observed, arose in the wake of Caldwell’s *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* (1856), which did much to contrast Brahmins with those whom Caldwell termed “native Tamilians.” This could arguably be singled out as the first textual articulation of a collective Tamil identity to assume an ethnic hue, advanced as a function of language. Yet should we move beyond *caṅkam* literature, and the cultural struggles in which it was most prominently wielded, I hope to refine Pollock’s contention that before modernity, “people were simply bearers of language, they were not defined by language” (2006: 510), by exploring moments in early Tamil literature in which we find people making themselves
modern in just this way, trying to leave behind others whom they wished to commit to the past.

The *caṅkam* literature that proved such fertile soil for erecting a triumphalist Dravidian identity bears out Pollock’s argument impressively. There is no evidence, as I shall argue, that in *caṅkam* verses “Tamil” refers to anything more than a language. Yet *caṅkam* literature’s role as wellspring for the primacy of Tamil culture was in large part the result of the environment in which those texts were published, where claims to antiquity and independence from Sanskrit ruled the day. If we turn to other Tamil literary works, ones that did not align well with the non-Brahmin politics of the time because they spoke in praise of Brahmanic rituals and temple practice, I believe we find compelling evidence that the Tamil language indexed a cultural character. This essay is not comprehensive on this score, as I will focus on Śaiva materials, but even this brief glimpse of the situation reveals how the link between Tamil and a community has been made with an eye toward power, at times when Tamil was not simply what people spoke, but what they were, a way to establish who was ascendant and who was being cast aside.  

*Caṅkam* Tamil, *Caṅkam* Tamils?

We begin long before the rise of modern Tamil language affinity, a period that has enjoyed a relatively good amount of scholarly attention, and before seventeenth-century texts, such as *Tamilvitutūtu* (Tamil Sent as Messenger), that uphold Tamil as a marker of identity in plain terms. Prior to the tenth-century thesaurus *Piṅkalam*, moreover, where the word Tamil is glossed as *iṉimai* (sweetness) and *nīrmai* (orderliness), Tamil had no clearly demonstrated extension beyond the proper noun (*Piṅkalam* 10.580). There is no verbal root in the language from which the word is obviously derived, and attempts to provide an etymologically sound origin of the term involve acrobatics precarious enough to keep their conclusions tentative. In its first regular occurrences in *caṅkam* poetry, the term Tamil takes a specific referent, and the first task is to determine if it ever refers to anything beyond the language itself.

Although this seems a daunting task, it is not actually that trying, simply because the term occurs so rarely. In *Eṭṭuttokai*, the eight texts that comprise the accepted core of *caṅkam* literature, the word Tamil occurs but eleven times. Within this diminutive range, it is regularly paired with the prefix *taṇ*, meaning “cool” or “pleasant.” Such, for example, is the usage in *Patirruppatu* 63.9, *taṇṭamiḻ ceṟittu*, “having obstructed [those of] pleasant Tamil,” whose use of the prefix *taṇ* leaves no doubt that the term Tamil refers to the language that these (doubtlessly unpleasant) enemies speak. In other cases in which
the word Tamil is not preceded by tan, the situation is not so clear. Akanāṉūṟu 31.14–15 gives us the phrase tamiḻ keḻu mūvar kākkum | moḷi peyar tēetta paṇ malai iranē, “crossing the mountain range, to a land alien to the language the three Tamil kings protect.” The challenge in reading caṅkam texts often lies in a highly elliptical syntax that demands real interpretive responsibility from its audience, creating Delphic moments of quandary for modern eyes. Yet nothing here demands broadening the basic extension of the term supplied by taṇṭamiḻ, “the pleasant Tamil language.” The term mūvar invariably refers to the three crowned kings of the region, Cēra, Cōḻa, and Pāṇṭiya; it has no need of the descriptive term Tamil to achieve reference as a putative ethnonym. Given the clause’s stress on a language that the mūvar protect, it seems wise to take the attribute Tamil as identifying the language itself. What impresses instead is the royal protection of the language and what this might imply. At stake is royal involvement in the prescriptive conservation of a literary medium, an exceptionally early instance of this phenomenon for a deśabhāṣā (regional language) if the caṅkam literature’s prevailing date in the early centuries CE is at all close. Lacking clear-cut substantiation, however, this must remain an intriguing possibility.

A phrase such as Akanāṉūṟu 227:14, tamiḻ akappaṭutta imiḻ icai muraciṉ, “the roaring war drum made Tamil’s own,” introduces further complexities. The phrase seems to invoke Tamil as an abstraction of social character, which could subsume not just the drums of enemies but the people who wanted to take them. There is a fair amount that stands in the way of this interpretation, however. Let alone the rarity of the term Tamil itself, nowhere else in Eṭṭuttokai do we find an explicit instance of such a usage, nor anywhere else, as far as I can discern, in the broad view of caṅkam literature that includes the later anthology Pattuppāṭṭu. More palpably, the telegraphic nature of the grammar in caṅkam verses lets the word comfortably refer to a Tamil-speaking commander, through a process of secondary signification (termed ākupeyar by the tradition) that is a regular feature of this poetry. The ambiguity here should not be minimized; such a phrase can indeed be taken to project Tamil as an important attribute of self or group. What I want to emphasize, however, is that nothing compels us to make this move, and imputing such a consequential abstraction to this single occurrence demands that it bear an awful lot. Even in the well-known case of Puṟanāṉūṟu 168.18, the only instance of the term tamiḻakam (the Tamil interior) in caṅkam literature, the verb that anchors this expression recommends taking the term Tamil as language, no more. The phrase reads vaiyaka varaippil tamiḻakam kēṭpa, “so that the Tamil interior hears to the edge of the earth.” Again, even granting the ambiguity, the word
Tamil best serves by identifying how the message will be heard.

What gives all this a significance that extends beyond the texts themselves, with their inexorable questions of provenance and date, is their later compilation into anthologies by people who found them relevant to their own lives. Even without venturing to identify those who carried out this anthologizing work, the scant mention of Tamil in what we today know as the cankam texts suggests that “Tamilness” of any sort was not their concern. Of course there is no knowing what and precisely how much was discarded, but given what we have, the term’s sparse use and insignificant role in developing the verses’ themes speak forcefully against proposing it as any sort of organizing principle in the cankam texts’ collation.

Tolkāppiyam, that lionized treatise on Tamil poetics, reveals no further broadening of the referent. In its section on poetry’s subject matter, the Poruḷatikāram, where one might expect to find a discussion of how the term Tamil relates to the people the poetry describes, were it at issue, the word is not used. Tolkāppiyam’s section on morphology, the Eluttatikāram, employs the term just once, and obliquely at that, stating, tamiḻ en kilaviyum attaṉ ōrarrē (1.8.90), “the word ‘Tamil’ is of the same kind as that,” thus establishing the rule that the inflectional increment akku may optionally intercede when the lexeme Tamil is placed in compound before a consonant-initial lexeme. This is pretty arcane stuff, so let us turn to the section on syntax, the Collatikāram, where the use of the term Tamil gives real weight to the view that it refers purely to language. Here we find the very first instance of the term centamiḻ (proper Tamil). The issue at stake is the typification of different sorts of words, which Tolkāppiyam lists as standard, idiomatic, Sanskritic, and synonymous/homonymous. The definition of a standard word is given as follows: avarṟul iyarcol tāmē centamiḻ nilattu vaḷakoṭu civaṉi tam poruḷ vaḷāmai icaikkum collē (2.9.2), “among these [types], a standard word (iyarcol) is a word that accords with usage in the land of proper Tamil, and preserves the integrity of its meaning in use.” An idiom, by contrast, is defined in this way: centamiḻ cēṛnta paṉṉiru nilattum tam kuṟippiṆavē ticaiccol kiḷavi (2.9.4), “An idiom is a word that assumes significance in [any of] the twelve areas identified with proper Tamil.” In both cases, Tamil is related to place (nilam, cited obliquely as nilattu) because the language attributed to this place is proper, grammatically sanctioned. As Vaiyapuri Pillai pointed out, the term for this kind of Tamil, centamiḻ, corresponds precisely with the term saṃskṛta, further discouraging the extension of the term Tamil in Tolkāppiyam to anything beyond language.13 There were no Centamiḻ people any more than there were Sanskrit people; what Tolkāppiyam cared about was Tamil’s literary worth and prestige.14
The great works that followed caṅkam literature do not meditate on what Tamil means in any direct way. The didactic texts Tirukkuṟaḷ and Nālaṭiyār, for instance, make no mention of Tamil, and given their exhaustive pedagogic thrust, ascribing this term to an educated understanding of self does not seem to have been an issue. In the textual shadows, however, glimmers of a more penetrating idea of Tamil do begin to arise. At first sight, the long narrative poems Cilappatikāram and Maṇimēkalai, which—taking a healthy reserve about date—may be placed in the second half of the first millennium, do not stray much from earlier usage. Taṇṭamiḻ still rules the day, as we observe in Maṇimēkalai 19.109, where we find the expression taṇṭamiḻ viṉaiñar, “workers [who speak] pleasant Tamil.” Yet Cilappatikāram also starts to do something more, reminiscent of Akanāṉūṟu’s description of the “language the three Tamil kings protect,” when it further associates the word Tamil with the men who had the power to assert its use.

Take, for instance, Cilappatikāram 26:161, viruntiṉ maṉṉar . . . aruntamiḻ āṟṟal aṟintilar. Taken literally, the phrase reads, “kings newly made, who did not know the might of elegant Tamil.” Once more, the qualification of Tamil as elegant (aru) shows that language is at stake, with secondary signification at work to denote the king who speaks it. We appear to be on the same ground as Akanāṉūṟu 227.14, with its “roaring war drum made Tamil’s own.” With each repeated identification of this sort, however, in which language stands for the people who advance it over outsiders, the bond between language and the political order that conserves it is tightened. The understanding of language as a cohesive whole—a foundation on which discussion of literary merit is even possible—appears to be a labor completed, and at this point the glimmers in caṅkam literature that align this labor with kingship have become resounding echoes. As it successfully achieves reference, the Tamil language conditions the warring king in this passage; through the bond between the two, we find a veiled suggestion (if no more than that) that his royal station also conditions Tamil. His persona is the physical embodiment of a successful whole, not a scatter of expressions that has no edge. We might also note that in contrast to earlier usages of the word Tamil in caṅkam literature, the phrase in question offers its audience an imagined sense of the outsiders’ view. What they see is aggressive: Tamil, proud and conquering, the hallmark of those who would ruin them. Take the above phrase, for instance, in light of Cilappatikāram 25.165–67, where the Cēra king is informed, “If you have it in mind to turn the entire sea-girt earth into the Tamil country bounded by the roaring waters, there is no one to withstand you” (imiḻkaṭal vēliyait tamiḻnāṭ’ ākkiya | itu nī karutinai yāyiṉ ēṟpavar | mutunīr ulakiṉ muḻuvatum illai). Tamil country (tamiḻnāṭu),
the land where Tamil is spoken, has come to involve far more than words. A cultural order is in effect here, and Tamil is its emblematic standard.

The Future Lies in a Tamil Past: Śiva and the Heartland

The roughly contemporaneous poetic treatise Iṟaiyanār Akapporuḷ (also known as Kaḷaviyal) takes up this point and makes it its own. This text addresses what the Tamil literary tradition saw as its greatest treasure, the style of verse known as *akam* poetry, or what we could call “poetry of the heartland.” The study of *akam* constitutes a good share of scholarly research on the language (and happily so, for it is good poetry), so let us limit the discussion of this vast subject to emphasize that *akam* was appreciated as unique, a literature with its own poetic conventions, which place high demands on a competent readership. Yet when the text’s commentator, Nakkīraṉār, begins to describe this poetic world, he does not call it *akam*, choosing in its stead a far more evocative appellation. “Next, the subject matter,” he declares, “which is to say the contents of the text. What does this book consider? It considers Tamil.”

Tamil is *akam*, and *akam* is Tamil, the world of the heartland, from a shared culture to the deepest levels of human feeling. This world, however, does not embrace everyone, for Iṟaiyanār Akapporuḷ keeps some people out when it describes a literary tradition it takes as synonymous with Tamil itself. This is a Śaiva text, a point that is not separable from its discussion of poetry. As Nakkīraṉār tells it, the text’s sixty sūtras on which he bases his commentary were composed by Śiva himself. The story is worth telling, for in it lies much to shed light on what Tamil represents, and to whom.

In those days, the Pāṇṭiya country was afflicted with famine for twelve years. As hunger continued to worsen, the king summoned all learned men, and said, “Heed me, I can no longer sustain you, for my land suffers grievously. You must take refuge somewhere in a place familiar to you, and once the country returns to normal, remember me and come back.” After they had taken their leave of the king and set off, twelve years passed without incident, and fertile rains once more fell upon the land. The king dispatched men far and wide, telling them to bring back the scholars now that the country had returned to normal. The king’s men found scholars competent in the fields (*atikāram*, Sanskrit *adhikāra*) of morphology, syntax, and prosody, but when they returned, they said that they could not find anyone competent in the field of poetry’s significance (*poruḷatikāram*) anywhere at all. The king was overcome with worry, and said, “There is no point in studying the fields of morphology, syntax, and prosody except in service of the field of poetry’s significance! If I cannot acquire that, acquiring the others gains me nothing!”
And he went to the temple in Maturai to meditate on the god who is red as fire.

“This is terrible,” thought the god, “the king is consumed with worry! But since his worry is centered on knowledge, I shall put an end to it.” And he inscribed the sixty verses of this text on three copper plates, and placed them under his throne.

The story continues as a Brahmin, divinely guided by Śiva’s hand, chances on the plates and recognizes them for what they are.

Seeing them, the Brahmin thought “Our Lord must have made these, knowing how worried the king is because he lacks the field of poetry’s significance.” Instead of returning home, he went to the main gate of the palace and presented himself to the door wardens. The king called for him to enter, and the Brahmin came forward to show him the plates. After the king took them and looked them over, he exclaimed, “Here is the field of poetry’s significance! Our Lord must have made this after seeing me so despondent,” and he turned in the direction of the temple and worshipped.16

This rich passage marks a turning point in Tamil literary history. Land and literature are mapped onto each other, as the country must thrive for its literature to be sustained by its masters. Once the famine has passed, and the land has returned to normal—literally, once the “country has become a country” (nāṭu nāṭāyirru)—making cultural attainment possible, the king earnestly seeks to regain his scholars. But the linchpin has been lost, for the poruḷatikāram, the proper significance of Tamil entire, has not been regained, and the formal features of the Tamil language, from the articulation of its words to the variety of meters, lie impotent. This poor state of affairs, the tale stresses, is not ancillary to royal obligation, for the king is absolutely bereft (puṭaipaṭak kavaṉṟu). He proceeds to his own lord, Śiva, to worship, and the god graciously bestows the requisite verses through the mediation of a Brahmin servant: a heavenly king maintaining his subordinate, through the proper intermediary, so that Tamil itself is preserved. Fragmentary on its own, each act joins to create a cohesive whole, binding literature, country, king, and god to a Tamil nexus that magnifies them all.

A struggle for cultural identity, loss and recovery, written texts discovered: we have seen this pattern before in the press to establish a robust Dravidian identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when caṅkam poetry assumed such a pivotal role. And just as this modern campaign sought to excise the Aryan Brahmin from any participation in Dravidian authenticity, Iraiyanār Akapporuḻ’s early tale of cultural peril and glorious resolution also
had its Other, totally cut out from the tale but quite visible from the shadows. Once the Pāṇṭiya king has recovered the *porulatikāram*, he seeks its correct interpretation from a conference of scholars, a *caṅkam* (Sanskrit *saṅgha*), which, as the text informs us, studied Tamil in Maturai for 1,850 years. This is the final *caṅkam* of three, convened under the patronage of the Pāṇṭiya kings. The prior two reach back to an antediluvian past, in cities that “the sea took” (*kaṭal koṇṭatu*); prominent members of the first were Agastya (author of the first Tamil grammar, lost to the extant tradition), Śiva’s son Muruṅaṅ, and “the god with fanning dreadlocks, who burned the triple city” (*tiripuram ettiṭa viricaṭaik kaṭavul*), Śiva himself. This is the *caṅkam*, *Iraiyaṉār Akapporuḷ* declares, that produced what we today know as the *Eṭṭuttokai: caṅkam* literature.

But the term *caṅkam*, as has regularly been observed, was not first associated with a literary conference, particularly one that produced its masterpieces with a fideistic dependence on Śiva. *Saṅghas* were Jain, or Buddhist, and it is Jains in particular who are credited with writing some of the most renowned works of early Tamil literature, including grammar (*Tolkāppiyam*), didactic verse (*Tirukkuṟaḷ*), and long poetic narrative (*Cilappatikāram*). Here they are thrown aside, for Jains have no part in *Iraiyaṉār Akapporuḷ*’s sense of Tamil, cleanly placed in the Śaiva fold. In this tale, the “our” in “our Lord” is not an idle gesture: it calls to an audience who would know who was in and who was out.

*Iraiyaṉār Akapporuḷ* erases the Jains from view; its *sūtras* were the work of Śiva, and its exemplary verses, the *Pāṇṭik Kōvai*, praise Neṭumāṟaṉ, the Pāṇṭiya king held to have been converted from Jainism to Śaivism by the great saint Ēṭṭutōkkantar. As for Nakkīraṉār’s commentary, let us continue with the story, where we find the members of the *caṅkam* unable to ascertain the true meaning of Śiva’s verses. Perplexed, they appeal to the god for help.

They said, “Didn’t the god with lustrous dreadlocks, who lives in the temple, compose these *sūtras*?” So they went and prostrated themselves before him, hoping he would give them a judge as a boon. At midnight, the voice that rings through the three folds of time gave its agreement, saying, “A boy named Uruttiracāṉmaṉ, the son of Uppūri Kuṭi Kiḻār, lives in this town. He is a bright-eyed child with lank hair, five years old, and he is mute. Do not scorn him for that, but take him and place him on the throne. When a *sūtra* is explained in his presence, his eyes will flow with tears and his body will quiver if the correct explanation is heard; if the explanation is mistaken, he will remain impassive. He is the god Kumāra, who was born in that body because of a curse . . .”

When Nakkīraṉār, the son of Kaṇakkāyaṉār, gave his explanation, every
word made the boy's tears flow and his body quiver, and they shouted, “We have obtained the true explanation of the text!”

The Tamil Country: Maturai Poems

A text that professes to lay down rules for literary success is one thing, of course, and a work of literature another. The choices made by people who care about words shape what counts as literature more than blunt prescription, and I think it fair to say that successful prescriptive texts understand this quite well. I profess no exhaustive knowledge of Tamil's literary masterpieces, but it is quite impressive how major texts in the Tamil literary tradition confirm Iraiyanar Akapporul's view of Tamil: a vehicle of cultural authenticity bounded by religion. I would like to take two texts as cases in point, Paripāṭal (Tender Songs) and Muttoḷḷāyiram (Nine Hundred Verses on the Three Kings), both of which rest in the penumbra of akam poetry. These texts have enigmatic histories, but my reticence to assign them a specific date will not, I hope, preclude worthwhile analysis, for both inhabit a literary vein that Iraiyanar Akapporul helps locate.

These texts predate Iraiyanar Akapporul, if not by much. Paripāṭal is one of the texts in the Eṭṭuttokai, named by Iraiyanar Akapporul as a product of the final caṅkam (though in style and theme it is clearly later than other texts in this anthology). Both Paripāṭal and Muttoḷḷāyiram employ a rare coinage, “threefold Tamil”, the first occasions of this term in the literary record. “Threefold Tamil” designates literature (iyal), music (icai), and the performing arts (nāṭakam); its relevance is thrown into question by the fact that no specimens of the latter two fields exist, which makes the inclusion of this term in both texts all the more representative of a shared literary environment. Thematically, they both laud deities who, like the Śiva of Iraiyanar Akapporul, bear a Brahmanic imprimatur but also have a noticeably southern character: Paripāṭal praises Cevvēḷ (Murukaṉ, an ancient Tamil god who becomes identified with Skanda) and Tirumāl (a Tamil god identified with Viṣṇu), while Muttoḷḷāyiram praises Śiva, Murukaṉ, and a southern rendering of Kṛṣṇa. And perhaps most important, all three texts share an abiding interest in the Pāṇṭiya country centered around Maturai.

In one of its paeans to Murukaṉ, Paripāṭal refers to Tamil in a way that powerfully resonates with Iraiyanar Akapporul's blending of Śaivism and the literary. Speaking of the god's mountain abode at Tirupparaṅkuṇṟam, just outside of Maturai, the hymn proclaims, “Those who have never studied pleasant Tamil, whose significance endures, do not gain the reward of this mountain.” The Tamil described here, tāḷāp poruliyalpir raṇṭamil, is...
precisely what the Pāṇṭiya king of Iṟaiyaṉār Akapporuḷ was so desperate to recover, a Tamil that has poruliyalpu, a definitive significance (i.e. porulatikāram). But what reward does Murukan's mountain confer on those who have this Tamil? The thirteenth-century commentator Parimēlaḻakar interprets this phrase as follows: “The men who do not study Tamil, which possesses an established significance involving this kind of sex, will not grasp the ways of clandestine love.”23 This reading focuses on the role of the mountain slopes in akam poetry’s figurative scheme, the secluded domain of the kuṟiñci flower where premarital affairs take place. The men who do not know that, Parimēlaḻakar argues, will not know their joys. This illuminating reading sets the knowledge of akam poetic theory against real-world ability, a vivid alignment of theory and practice in which having Tamil conditions what you can be. Should we be bold enough to differ with Parimēlaḻakar, however, we might take the “reward of this mountain” as an allusion not just to clandestine love, but to Murukan himself. The god is the soul of this hymn, the sum and substance of the mountain where human love carries on its way.

We have, if we accept this relationship, a beautiful confluence, where Tamil, fully realized in the conventions of akam poetry, grants pleasure, which is itself a revelation of Murukan’s divine favor. Like the tale of Tamil poetry’s recovery and authoritative exposition in Iraiyanar Akapporuḷ, Tamil connotes an involved cultural synthesis with a religious apex.

The mentions of Tamil in Muttoḷḷāyiram do not make similarly overt appeals to the literary, but they are nonetheless suggestive. Consider a verse in praise of the Pāṇṭiya king, here called by the royal title Māṟaṉ, and how it aligns the use of Tamil with the worship of Murukan.

The song I sing, using lovely Tamil,
for Māṟaṉ, his gleaming spear full of victory
shining as it holds fast in advancing battle
is like the kaṭampa flower offered in the day’s worship
to the youth who rides an unyielding peacock.24

Tamil is the right way to praise, just as the kaṭampa flower is the right flower to give to Murukan, the youthful god (so much so that Murukan is also known as Kaṭampaṉ). Tamil words give a lord public affirmation of fidelity to—and participation in—his dominant stature, the marked testament of involvement in a distinct sociopolitical order. When this order is realized, and Māṟaṉ sits at the axis of a flourishing land where all its parts are being played correctly, everything is as it should be, and no rival can hope to touch it.
Tamil, this verse urges, is as organic to this blooming world as its natural treasures, and just as emblematic.

**Śiva and the Tamil Masters**

Retaining our focus on Tamil Śaivism, we conclude with a brief look at poems from three of the great leaders of the faith (nāyaṉmār), Ēṉaṉaṉacampantar, Nāvukkaracar, and Cuntaramūrtti, names usually shortened, respectively, to Campantar, Appar (father), and Cuntarar. Their hymns compose the anthology Tēvāram, and singing them has been an essential feature of Śiva worship in Tamilnadu since at least the tenth century CE. They spring from a time when the flickers of religious practice evident in Iṟaiyaṉār Akapporuḷ, Paripāṭal, and Muttoḷḷāyiram had become powerful social forces, and the saints sing exultantly of the thrilling presence of Śiva in temples set throughout the Tamil heartland. In his praise of the temple at Maṟaikkāṭu (Sanskrit “Vedāraṇya”), Appar sings:

He seemed to you like pounding water,
a god with a body of raging fire
robust as a brimming lake
cultivating joy for loving devotees,
you saw an Aryan, a Tamil,
your Lord who lives on Aṇṇāmalai
like an elephant pouring with rut,
the bridegroom himself
home in Maṟaikkāṭu.26

We find here a most interesting description of Śiva, āriyaṉ kaṇṭāy tamiḻaṉ kaṇṭāy, “you saw an Aryan, a Tamil.” Śiva, that is, is realized through Sanskrit, a tongue central to the temple worship that Appar hails, but he is also realized through Tamil; he has become Tamil’s own. Jainism, if we take the hymns of the Nāyaṉmār at their word, has not.27 Appar was once a Jain, a period of his life that his hymns lament, and the passage of years that his verses chart leave Jainism rusting in the past, spurned in favor of a Śiva grounded in the Tamil language and on Tamil soil.
This is a message that Appar’s partner in travel, Campantar, forcefully affirms. As for Appar, Jains are a regular target, and Campantar is if anything more forceful in his rejection of this creed. This bitter hostility to Jains, as is well known, is a central aspect of his persona in the Tamil Śaiva tradition, for Campantar is said to have effected the impalement of eight thousand Jains after he converted the Pāṇṭiya king Netumāṟan to Śaivism. When we attend to Campantar’s expressive style, however, we find a very deliberate technique used to elevate the knowledge of Tamil as a language into something more, a Tamil identity. Campantar employs a distinctive style of verse set (patikam, Sanskrit padya), in which the poet jumps from praising Šiva and the rewards he gives to his devotees to a description of himself that brings the verses to a close. His dismissals of Jainism immediately precede the final verse of a patikam; we leap with him from a rejected simulacrum of faith to its majestic consummation, where he—and Tamil—stand proud. And here we find a remarkable pattern, for 213 of his 384 patikams use the word Tamil in their final verse, when Campantar is rendering his own self-portrait. This is more than an issue of language use, for there are only a handful of occasions when he mentions the term in any other context. Tamil, more than something he uses, is something he wants to foreground with regard to who he is.

These celebrated worshippers of Šiva are tamiḻvallār, masters of Tamil, authentically Tamil to the Jains’ detriment, and the extent to which the immense cultural achievements of Tamil Jains have long lain in the shadows gives a good sense of how thoroughly they succeeded.28 If Śaivism in Tamilnadu portrays Jains as a minority who could participate in Tamil but were not of it, what, then, were the stakes? When Cuntarar, here called by his birth name, Ārūraṉ, speaks of Tamil, they could not be higher.

Masters of the sweet Tamil verse
sung on Kētāram, holy town of the Lord,
set by Ārūraṉ
a slave in service of Navakkaracar, the Tamil king of words,
the Tamil Šaiva, and any worshipper of Šiva,
will live in the highest world.29

“Viewed from a slightly different angle,” as Sheldon Pollock puts it so well, “linguism may be seen as an element of modernity creating the very past modernity claims to overcome” (2006: 507). I hope to have shown that we also find this happening in a time long past, when adherents to a theistic creed saw themselves as new and different and embraced Tamil as an exclusive mark of
self to make this contrast hold. And like the modern partisans of Tamil who spurned the Aryan Brahmin their politics envisioned, Tamil was not what they had but what they were, a way of being that—when we look at the sources—had to be manufactured every step of the way. A poem attributed to Cuntarar’s friend, the Śaiva saint Cēramāṉ Perumāḷ, describes a beautiful woman in Śiva’s heavenly city who becomes overwhelmed with love for the god. She is, the verse declares, “the divinity of shining, polished Tamil embodied, an ingénue full of perfected virtues.” The woman is Tamil, perfect and young, perfectly in love in a perfect world that no one else can touch.
Notes

1 Maṉōṉmaṇīyam, Pāyiram, v. 1: nīr āruñ kaṭal uṭutta nilamaṭantaik keḻil oḻukum | cīr ārum vataṉam eṉat tikal parata kaṇṭam itil, | takka ciṟu piṟai nulam taritta nāṟu nilakamumē | tekkanumum aṟiри ciranta tiraviṭa nal tirunāṭum; | attilaka vācaṉai pōl aṉaitt' ulakum inpam uṟa | etticaiyum pukal maṉakka irunta perun tamiḻanakē!

2 Maṉōṉmaṇīyam, Pāyiram, v. 2: pall uyirum palav ulakum paṭaitt’ alittut tuṭaikkīnum őr | ellaiy āru paramporaḷ muṇ irunta paṭi iruppatu pōl | kaṉṇamum kāli telunikum kaviṉ malaivyāluṇam tuḻuvum | uṇ utaratt’ utit’ elunt’ oṟṟu pala āviṭīnum; | āriyam pōl ulaka valakk’ aṉi’ oḷintu citiyyā un | cīr ilamait tiram viyantu ceyal maṟantu vāḻttutumē!


4 Ibid., 12: paṉtait tamiḻarkalē mutaṉmutal nākarikkattir cirantavarāy, ēṇaip paḷaiya maṅkatēkkalē nākariattaika karippaṭavarāy irukkum unnai valiya cāṉṟukalē nilaiperuṭa kalṟu maṅamporēmal, avarai āṟiyarpē nākariṅ kāṟṟavar ēṇṟu colli avvenṇattai epaṭṭiyōvatu uṇṭākkīvitṭal, avvenṇam āṟācyeciyilēṟpēlē ēṇṟum paravi, āṟiya nākariṅkēmē ulaka nākiriikkattirk kāṟṟanē ēṇṟum oru pōlikkalēṟ paraviya vaḷakkākivītēm enk karutip pōlum… aṟiṉar aṁnaṉam valiya cāṉṟukāṭkēllēm māṟupēĉiṟar!

5 Tēvāram, a canonical treasury of poems composed by the three foremost Tamil Śaiva saints (Nāyāṁmār), Nāṉacampantar, Nāvukkaracar (Appar), and Cuntarar, was recovered by Nampiyāṇṭār Nampi through, the tradition holds, the divine intercession of Gaṇeśa and the three saints themselves. In the Tamil Śrīvaṁśava tradition, its first ācārya, Nāthamuni, received the hymns of the Āḻvārs from Nammālvār while in trance, and then instituted their recitation at the Raṅkanāta temple in Śrīraṅkam. See Cutler 1987: 40–50.

6 There are important exceptions to the racial tenor of Tamil literary histories, such as S. Vaiyapuri Pillai’s History of Tamil Language and Literature (1956) and T. P. Meenakshisundaran’s A History of Tamil Literature (1965).

7 As Arjun Appadurai has kindly drawn to my attention, an exploration of the Teṇkalai-Vaṭakalai distinction in Tamil Vaṁśnavism would be the first place to extend this discussion, from which we could begin to assess how broadly this argument could be generalized beyond the Śaiva materials I treat here.

8 See, for instance, Irschick 1969; Kailasapathy 1979; Nampi Arooran 1980; Ramaswamy 1997; and Sivathamby 1978.
Zvelebil’s avant-propos to his *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature* (1992) is a self-acknowledged case in point.

My translation follows the old commentary provided by the Cāminātaiyar edition of the text (p. 165), which reads “‘Tamiḻ cerittu’ means creating discord in all the Tamil armies of the enemies” (*tamiḻ ceritt‘ eṉṟatu māṟṟāratu tamiḻappaṭaiyaiyellām itaiyāṟap paṭūṭiy eṉṟavāṟu*).

See, for example, Wilden’s discussion of the grammatical uncertainties that make interpreting *Kuṟuntokai* 106 subject to such variation (2002: 115–18).


Vaiyapuri Pillai 1956: 76. Given its composite textual stratigraphy, dating *Tolkāppiyam* is a knotty task. Taken as a whole, the work postdates Nāṭyaśāstra and Kāmasūtra, and for the purposes at hand we may heed Vaiyapuri Pillai and assign the work entire to the fifth century CE at the earliest (12–14).

This is a feature shared by Pavaṇanti’s thirteenth-century grammar *Nanṕūl*, which only goes beyond replicating *Tolkāppiyam*’s mention of Tamil in the above circumstances to delimit the idealized boundaries of the language’s application: “Among the eighteen languages, in the vast sea of Tamil, its four borders the fine [eastern] sea, Kumari, Kutakam, and Venkaṭaṇam” (“mūvaṟu moliyulū | kūnakaṭal kumari kuṭakam vēṅkaṭam | eṉu ‘nāṉ’ ellaiyin iruntamilk kaṭalul,” Pāyiram 7–9).

Iraiyanār Akapporal, nūṟpā 1, p. 5: Ini, nutiliyaporal eṉpatu—nūṟporuḷaic collutal eṉpatu. innūl eṉ nutilirrō eṉin, tamiḻ nutilirirru eṉpatu.

Compare Aracanum, pūtaipatak kavaṇru ‘ēṟṟai eḷuttum collum yāppum āṟṟayatu porulatikārattin poruttaṉrē. porulatikāram peramēyeṉin, ivai perṟum perṟilēm eṉac collāniṟpa, maturai alavāyil alal niraṅkaṭavul cintippān: ‘ēṉai pāvam! aracarkku kavaṟci peritāyiṛu; atu tāṉum nāṟṟattaiyaṭaḻakān, yām ataṇait Türkarpālam eṉru, ivvaṟupatu cūttirattaiyuṇ ceytu māṉru ceppitāḻaktu eḷutip piṭṭātīn kīḷitāṉ... kāṭṭa, pirāmaṇā cintippān: ‘aračan porulatikāram inmaiyaṟ kavaṅkaṯṟāṇu eṉpatu keṭṭu ciałaṅṇirru raṇarttu namperumāṇu arulic ceyṭṇākam’ eṉru ταν akam pukuturaē, kōyir ralaikkāṭaic cenru niṉru, kaṭaiyāṟpākku unarttu, kaṭaiyāṟppār aracarkku unartta, aracan, ‘pukutra,’ eṉap pirāmaṇānaik kāvvač cenru pukkuk kāṭta eṛṛukkonru ṇōkkip, ‘porulatikāram! itu namperumāṇu namatu itukkan kanṭu arulic ceyṭṇākarpālatu!’ eṉru, atticai niṉki toḷutukonru niṉru.
The Muttoḷḷāyiram verse in question, which I shall discuss below, begins with the phrase pārpaṭupa cempoṉ patipaṭupa muttamiḻnūl (given its status as a recovered text, Muttoḷḷāyiram verses have no standard order). The Paripāṭal citation is a fragment (tiraṭṭu 4 in Gros’s edition), terimāṇ ṭamiḻmummait teṉṉam poruppaṉ | parimā niraiyiṉ parantaṉṟu vaiyai, “Like a row of horses, the river Vaiyai [Vaigai] opens out from the southern mountains, where the glorious threefold Tamil is known.” This fragment is not found in the Cāminātaiyar edition of the text; Gros explains its attribution to the text as follows: “l’identification de paripāṭal repose sur l’autorité du nuṇ poruḷ mālai, ouvrage consacré à élucider les subtilités du commentaire du KuRaḷ [Tirukkuṟaḷ] par P[arimēlaḻakar]” (Paripāṭal 1968: 305).

The text describes Kṛṣṇa as breaking the kuruntu tree, a myth unknown to contemporary northern texts (Hardy 1983: 169).

This is a city, moreover, that both texts refer to as “Kūṭal,” providing further evidence of their shared literary context.


Pār paṭupa cempoṉ pati paṭupa muttamiḻnūl | nīr paṭupa veṇ caṅkum nittilamum—cāral | malai paṭupa yāṉai vayamāṟan kūrvēṟṟalai paṭupa tāṉē.
Insiders, Outsiders, and the Tamil Tongue: 173

27 Peterson 1998 provides a broad discussion of how the Tēvāram hymns exclude Jains from “Tamilness.” See especially pages 168–73.

28 Discussing, respectively, the ongoing intellectual encounter between Jains and Tamil Śaivas right up through the twelfth century, the inscriptive testimony regarding the lives of Jain women in Tamilnadu, and the regular ostracization of Jains in Tamil hymns and hagiography, the contributions of Davis (1998), Orr (1998), and Peterson (1998) to the volume Open Boundaries all throw a rewarding light on these shadows for the period I am considering here. Monius 2004 brings the discussion to the high Cōḻa period, exploring the ways in which courtly Śaiva texts, particularly Periyapurāṇam, are indebted to earlier Jain writing in Tamil.

29 Tirumurai 7.78.10: Nāviṉ micaiy araṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟ resultSet | yāvar civaṉ atiyārkalukk’ atiyāṉ aṭit tonṭaṉ | tēvan tiruk kētārattai ūraṉ urai ceyta | pāviṉ tamiḻ vallār paralōkatt’ iruppārē. I follow the Tarumapuṟam Āṭiṉam’s commentary in taking the first instance of the word tamiḻ as tāppicai, an attribution that relates both to what precedes it and what follows it.

30 Tirukkailāya Nāṇa Ulā, vv. 111–112: oḷḷiya | tīn tamiḻin teyva vaṭivāḷ tiruntiya cīr | vāynta maṭantaip pirāyattāl.
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