Historicity in the Tamil Grammatical Tradition: A Study of IraiyanārAkapporul

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Abstract

Ancient texts are often considered an ideal window into the past, and essential for an understanding of cultures. In the context of the Tamil language and literary culture, such an understanding of the past is considered particularly important as the existence of an uninterrupted literary culture is one of the linchpins of the identity formation of the Tamil people in modernity. This paper therefore looks at one of the key texts of the Tamil grammatical tradition, Iraiyanār Akapporul and its commentary, and some of the issues around its interpretation and reception by modern scholars. Through this, the paper attempts to distinguish two different modes of association with the past, one that is typical of pre-modern commentators and writers, and the other a typically modern one that is based largely on the principles laid down by classical philology.

Keywords: Indian Grammatical Tradition, Tamil grammar, philology, modernity.

Iraiyanār Akapporul

Iraiyanār Akapporul, also known variously as *Kalaviyal enra Iraiyanār Akapporul* or simply *Iraiyanār Kalaviyal* (henceforth IA) is a treatise on the akam conventions of poetry in Tamil literature, composed around the fifth century CE by Iraiyanār, an author whose identity is unclear. The text itself consists of sixty *nūrpas* or formulaic verses which talk about love poetry of the akam genre, which is the interior landscape as expounded first in the *Porulatikāram* (henceforth TP) of the *Tolkāppiyam*. The IA as it exists in its modern form has certain problems with its exact dating, as linguistic evidence dates different sections of the text to different eras. It is therefore now uncontroversially considered by scholars to be a layered text, with the main text consisting of the nūrpas, and its commentary and a set of poems consisting of the other two layers.

The poetry section, known as the Pāntikōvai, consists of poetry in the kōvai form, which refers to a collection of serially inter-linked poetry, about Netumāran, a 7th century Pantiya king. This work illustrates the conventions that the main text of the IA talks about and clearly preceded

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the commentary layer as it is often referred to by the author of the commentary. The final layer, the commentary, was authored by Nakkīranār, likely in the 8th century CE. It is also not free of later interpolations, and its author is named by the text itself. The commentary is considered a very important work of its own right for its explication of the *akam* poetics, and for the fact that it is the earliest surviving prose commentary in Tamil. It is also a valuable though fragmentary source of medieval texts as it is full of references, quotations and illustrations.

IA has received a lot of attention from modern scholars for various reasons. This paper will take up two main issues around it in order to examine the idea of tradition and history as reflected in the commentary and contrast it with modern interpretations.

The first issue is related to the commentary as it contains a tale regarding the origin of the main text of the IA that has come under scrutiny:

At that time, the Pāntiyan suffered from famine for twelve years. And as the famine increased with time, the king called together all the learned men and said, "Come, I cannot protect you; my country suffers greatly: go and be on your way according to your knowledge; when the land becomes (again) a (habitable) land, remember me and return." Thus, after all of them left the king and went, twelve years passed by uncounted. After such a lapse of time, abundant rain fell on the land. When the rain had fallen, the king sent men all around saying, "Now, since the land has become a land, bring back the learned," and they returned bringing scholars learned in Phonology (*Eluttatikaram*) and Grammar (*Collatikaram*), declaring, "We have not found anywhere scholars in Subject-Matter (*Porulatikaram).*" When they came, the king was greatly distressed and kept saying, 'What to do? Are not Phonology and Grammar explored merely in order to expose Subject-Matter? If we do not obtain the science of subject matter, even though we may have these it is as if we did not have them.' The flame-hued Lord of Alavay in Maturai thought, "What a pity! The king's anguish is tremendous! And, since this is moreover and impediment to knowledge, it is proper that I deal with it," and he composed those sixty aphorisms, inscribed them upon three leaves of copper, and placed the under the altar.

The story goes on to describe how the copper plates were found by the Brahman priest of the temple and brought to the king, who worships the lord in joy and gratitude. The story thus ascribes

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the composition of the Iraiyanār Akapporul to "the flame-hued god", i.e., Śiva himself. The origin of this story is unclear as the main text of the IA makes no mention of its own authorship, and this is a new concern introduced by the commentary. Zvelebil speculates that the bare facts of the story might in fact be true, and that the copper plates might have been written and placed in the temple by an unknown author, later to be discovered; it is quite conceivable that this discovery might have been interpreted as a divine gift. The name Iraiyanār, normally referring to Śiva himself, also adds to this mythical origin tale, although there are older poets named Iraiyanār. It is only possible to speculate on the ideological reason behind this newly acquired aspect of the text: by the time of the commentary's composition by Nakkīranār, i.e., 7th to 8th century CE, Saivism was at its heights and this reflects in various aspects of the literature of the era, including this particular story about the authorship of the IA.

The Ideological Underpinnings of the Story

Blake Wentworth argues that the introduction of this story by Nakkīranār into a text that is otherwise rather lacking in religious overtones is ideologically motivated and results in the erasure of the likely true origins of the text, from Jain and Buddhist scholarship. He is particularly interested in the portrayal of the idea of Sangam here as a group of scholars under the king, interpreting the words of the god Śiva with divine guidance:

> But the term Cankam, 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. Sanghas 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...
> Here they are thrown aside, for Jains have no part in IraiyanārAkapporul's sense of
> Tamil, cleanly placed in the Śaiva fold... its sūtras were the work of Śiva, and its
> exemplary verses, the PāntikKōvai, praise Netumaran , the Pāntiya king held to have
> been converted from Jainism to Śaivism by the great saint Ñānacampantar.

While Wentworth's assertions about the ideological underpinnings of Nakkīranār's story are insightful, one might also be tempted conclude that the medieval commentator took liberties with the truth in order to deliberately impose such an origin story on the text. However, what must also be noted is the difference in understanding between a modern reading and that of a medieval author such as Nakkīranār. Nakkīranār's departure from the non-religious tone of the original text and his imposition of Saivite values on the IA is not an outcome of inauthenticity, but a creative reimagining of the past that is free of a monolithic idea of identity and culture that had to

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preservedin its "original" spirit. Therefore, despite the fact that Nakkīranār, dwelling at a time when the language and literature was already hugely transformed by the bhakti movement, "dealt with a 'classical' heritage... which belonged to another age" (Zvelebil, 1973), the licenses he took with the history of one such text does not have the same implications that a modern view would conclude.

Dating of *Iraiyanār Akapporul*

The next issue that concerns us is the controversy around the dating of the IA, which also provides insight into how grammatical traditions are conceived of in modernity. As mentioned previously, the relative dating of the IA and the TP has also been a source of some debate. The TP is considered to be the oldest section of the Tolkāppiyam, thus allowing the space for this debate. However, the main controversy arises from the IA's self-identification (through the commentary) as a mutanūl or first text (mutal or first + nūl or text). This has been interpreted by some as reasonable proof that the IA was the first text of its kind on the subject matter of grammar or porul. However, Takahashi suggests that this is a misinterpretation of the term mutalnūl, which simply refers to "a treatise having no lineage, or... the first treatise in a lineage" (Takahashi, 2010), thus concluding that interpreting this as statement on the text's historicity is "far-fetched and incorrect" (Takahashi, 2010).

This debate is based on one of important distinctions regarding treatises found in the commentary portion of the IA, viz., that of mutanūl, valinūl and cārpunūl or, the first/original text, the derivative text and the offshoot respectively. The mutanūl, as just explained, refers to an original text that has no "lineage", just the opposite of a valinul (vali = way/path or lineage), which is a derivative text based on an existing lineage of works, the cārpunūl (cārpu = related or associated) being a text that is neither an original text nor a part of the lineage of an original treatise but an independent but related text. The term lineage is key here, as it is important to note that this is not a historical understanding of a textual tradition: a lineage refers to a manner of organizing treatises that follow from a certain original text, and while these are obviously ordered chronologically, the central idea of lineage is in following conventions. Thus, the IA can be a mutanūl, despite the fact that, even internal to the story quoted in the commentary, a treatise on poetics already existed, and was lost. The lineage is therefore not a historical idea, with a text having to be the first of its kind in order to be considered an "original" treatise.

Philology and the Reconstruction of the Past

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These two issues around the authorship of the IA and its commentary suggest that the relationship between the commentator, author and text has evolved in new directions with the coming of colonial scholarship and modernity. It has often been noted that this new direction came in the form of a new relationship with the past, and it was the very basis of colonial disciplines such as philology. Most recently, James Turner suggests that it was only in the Renaissance that an epistemological break with the past occurred, making it possible for philology to emerge as a discipline that would be able to reconstruct this past. Thus, the philologist "treated his text as a historical and an anthropological document, the much-altered remnant of an early stage of development of human culture..." (Grafton & Glenn, W. 1985)and a new historicity began to be associated with philology.

Sense of Historicity

The issues with the IA discussed so far are precisely an illustration of this sense of historicity, although in different ways. In the case of the criticism of Nakkīranār's account of the origins of the IA, viewing it from the realm of a historical perspective creates the impression of inauthenticity in the commentator's work. It precludes the understanding of a different relationship between commentator and text, one that did not treat the original text as a distant historical and philological document, but as one that whose relevance could be found in contemporaneously, thus rendering the tales in circulation regarding its authorship a valid and authentic account. The second issue of the term "mutanul" and the misinterpretation around it also arises from the imposition of a historical view that does not exist in the original term.

To Conclude

In conclusion, the idea of a grammatical tradition is not a monolithic one. While the practices of textual analysis and philology in modernity rest on the mode of historicity, this relationship with the past in not necessarily shared by pre-modern commentators, and a critical understanding of this difference is necessary in order to reach a true and holistic understanding of the idea of a grammatical tradition.

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