A New Interpretation of the “Sangam Legend”

TAKAHASHI Takanobu

1. Introduction

There is a famous account of the ancient Tamil academies mentioned in Nakkirar’s commentary (around the 8th century CE) on the Iraiyaṉar Akapporuḻ, alias Kalaviyal. It is said that poets studied “treatises” (nūl) and composed poems in the academies. The academies are called Caṅkam (<Skt. saṅgha) in Tamil and Sangam or Šangam in English. The account, therefore, is widely known as the “Sangam legend,” and many authors have referred to this legend. Among these, the works of Aravamuthan [1930], Zvelebil [1973 (a)], Buck and Paramasivam [1997], and Takahashi [2004] will be briefly mentioned below.

Aravamuthan [1930] is an excellent paper dealing adequately with Nakkirar’s commentary on the Iraiyaṉar Akapporuḻ concerning the Sangam legend. Zvelebil [1973 (a)], following Aravamuthan’s paper, refines his arguments with much new information. Without Zvelebil’s paper, Aravamuthan’s paper might have attracted less interest in studies on the history of Tamil literature. Buck and Paramasivam [1997] is historically the first full translation of the Iraiyaṉar Akapporuḻ and its commentary by Nakkirar in lucid English. It is an outstanding work and provides us with invaluable information. Takahashi [2004] deals with the relative chronology of the Tolkāppiyam and the Iraiyaṉar Akapporuḻ, focusing on the technical terms of love (akam) poetry used by them, and comes to an opposite conclusion from that of Aravamuthan [1930] and Zvelebil [1973 (a)].

There are, however, many issues concerning the legend that remain unresolved. One of these is the identity of the unidentified works of the “last academy,” namely, the Kūttu, the Vāri, the Cīrīcaɪ, and the Pērīcaɪ. The focus of this paper is the identification of these four works.
2. The *Pattuppāṭṭu* and the Sangam Legend

It has been widely believed that the *Pattuppāṭṭu* is not referred to in the Sangam legend. It is natural that the name *Pattuppāṭṭu* is not referred to in the legend since the name occurs very late: according to Zvelebil [1973 (b): 25–26], the names of the *Pattuppāṭṭu* (hereafter, *Pattu*) and *Eṭṭutokai* "occur for the first time only in Pērācāriyar’s commentary to *Tolk. Porul.* 362 and 392," where Pērācāriyar refers to them as *pāṭṭu* and *tokai*. This means that even in the 13th–14th century CE the present names might not have been firmly established; they occur still later. However, it seems strange that none of the works in the *Pattu* are referred to in the legend as contrasted with its reference to the *Kalittokai* and the *Pari-pāṭal*, whose dates are obviously later than most of the works of the *Pattu*.

I have been reading the *Pattu*, for the past few years. While doing so, I have often given consideration to the dates of the ten works of the *Pattu*, and the meanings of their titles. In this connection, it is indispensable to re-read the Sangam legend just to make sure of the date of the *Pattu*. In 1991, I translated into Japanese the parts pertinent to the Sangam legend, that is, "the history of the three Sangams," "the history of the treatise of ‘secret love’ (*Kalaviyal”), “determining the commentary of the *Kalaviyal,” and “the transmission of the commentary,” but then, like other critics, I did not think that the *Pattu*, is referred to in the legend.

This time, however, almost as soon as I read the legend I noticed what three among the four unidentified works in the "last Sangam" are: the *Kūṭṭu*, the *Cirricai*, and the *Pēricai* are the *Kūṭṭar-ārruppatāi*, the *Cirupāṇ-ārruppatai*, and the *Perumpāṇ-ārruppatai* of the *Pattu*, respectively. The relationship between the former and the latter is a "performance" and a “performer” as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Performer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>kūṭṭu</em> (dance)</td>
<td><em>kūṭtar</em> (dancers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>cirr-icai</em> (small instrumental music)</td>
<td><em>ciru-pāṇ</em> (bard with a small harp)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pēr-icai</em> (large instrumental music)</td>
<td><em>perum-pāṇ</em> (bard with a large harp)</td>
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</table>

The notes that no one has so far noticed such a simple structure will be seen later, but two points should be added here: one is that *icai* is not “sound” but “instrumental music” (*narampiṟ pirakkum ēcai* [TL], which means “music produced by a stringed instrument”), and the other is that the stringed instrument is a *yāḷ*, which is not a “lute” but a
"harp" in the *Pattu*.  

3. What is the *Vari*?

Once the three works mentioned above have been identified, it would be natural to imagine that the *Vari* might be the *Porunaraarppaat* (hereafter, *PAP*). This is because, first, among the four early "guides" (*aarppaat*) only the *PAP* is not connected with the work in the Sangam legend and, secondly, the contents of the theme "guide" are mentioned in *Tol. Porul*. (Nacc.) 91:3–6, where four types of performers, i.e., *kuttar, pannar, porunar*, and *virali*, are referred to. 2) We can also suppose that the relationship between *vari* and *porunar* would be that of a performance and a performer.

It is, however, far more difficult to identify the *Vari* as the *PAP*, compared with the identification of the other three works (*Kuttu, Cirricai, Pericai*), and this is due to two reasons. First, it is no easy matter to find a meaning of *vari* pertinent to the work *Vari* in the Sangam legend. The term *vari* has many meanings along with its basic meaning "line" (cf. *DEDR* 5263). One might attempt to link each of the eighteen meanings listed in the *TL* with the *PAP* along with the other works of the *Pattu*, or even post-Sangam works to find a relationship between them. All efforts, however, would be in vain. The second reason is the difficulty in finding a suitable meaning of *porunar* in Sangam literature.

For convenience' sake, the meaning of *porunar* will be discussed first, and this will be followed by a discussion of the appropriate meaning of *vari* in the context of the Sangam legend.

3.1. What are *porunar* in Sangam Literature?

The *TL* contains two entries for the word *porunay* (singular form of *porunar*): *porunay* (1) is "warrior, king," etc., derived from the verb *poru* "fight, engage in battle" (cf. *DEDR* 4540) and *porunay* (2) is "1. One who dances and sings on the battlefield and on the threshing-floor. 2. Actor, dancer" [*TL*], derived from *poru* "join (tr.), unite, combine" (see *DEDR* 4541). In our context, *porunay* (2) should be examined. Its first meaning in the *TL* is cited from Nacc.'s commentary on *Tol. Porul*. (Nacc.) 91:3–6, where Nacc. cites *PAP* ll. 1–2 as an example of "one who dances and sings on the threshing-floor" and cites *Pur*. 394 as an example of "one who dances and sings on the battlefield." The latter type of *porunay* (2) is often referred to as "war-bard" in influential works such as Kailasapathy [1968: 97] and Zvelebil [1973(b): 14], and this rendering makes the issue more complex.
In the Sangam poems, there are around 58 examples of porunay, porunar, and poruna (vocative of porunay). Among them, 44 cases refer to porunay (1), i.e., "a chief or a king, or a warrior" (34 examples) and "enemy" (10 examples), and only 8 cases refer to porunay (2). Among the eight poems, however, there is no instance indicating that the porunay is such a "war-bard" as mentioned by Kailasapathy. He cites the phrase porāa porunar-ēm in Pur. 386:19 and states that "the expression means 'non-combating warrior,' i.e., 'war-bard' who travelled with warriors" [1968: 97]. However, he commits two mistakes: first, porunar is not a "warrior" but "a kind of bard and/or actor," and, secondly, no evidence shows that bards or minstrels travelled with warriors.

As is mentioned by Kailasapathy [1968: 97 fn. 8], wordplay such as porāa porunar is common in Sangam literature. Examples other than those mentioned by him are vil il tālai (Perumpāṇārppathai 357), vāṭa vaṇci (Pur. 394), ṛṇa illā amai varu varu vāy (PAP 12), and the like. In these three instances singers play on two meanings of tālai, vaṇci, and vāy. Tālai means both a fragrant screw-pine (pandanus) with aerial roots and a coconut tree, vaṇci means a vaṇci song and a vaṇci plant (glabrous mahua of the Malabar coast), and vāy means two meanings, that is, a mouth and a hole. Thus the literal meaning of the first example is "a tālai without aerial roots," but it actually signifies a coconut tree. The second example literally means "unfading vaṇci"; that is, the vaṇci is not a plant but a song. The third case literally means "a well-shaped empty mouth without a uvula," i.e., it says that the mouth is not an ordinary mouth with a uvula but a sound-hole [of a yāḷ].

The phrase porāa porunar-ēm, therefore, literally means "we are porunays who do not fight (porāa)"; in other words, although porunay has two meanings, i.e., porunay (1) "a warrior-hero" and porunay (2) "a kind of bard and/or actor," the phrase means that "we are porunays (2) who do not fight." Hence this porunay should not be translated as "warrior." Once, however, an attractive but misleading translation has been established, the "war-bard" appears to accompany kings or warriors to the battlefield and applaud them in the battlefield. This interpretation is actually made by Kailasapathy when he refers to a "war-bard who travelled with warriors" [1968: 97] and states that "they (war-bards) accompanied the warriors to the battle-fronts, stirring them up with their martial songs" [1968: 99]. There is, however, no description of such a scene in Sangam literature, including several poems cited by Kailasapathy. They only describe needy bards or performers wandering from village to village who are at the gate of a chief or elsewhere, praise him,
have a feast, and/or receive some gifts.

If we clear up the misleading term “war-bard,” poruna could be someone who sings, acts, or dances. This type of bard is undoubtedly depicted in PAP. Its first three lines read: “O poruna [vocative of porunag] knowing a contrivance who has thought of another place, and who has not had desire for boiled rice on the next day of the festival of the large village having a wide place and unceasing fresh income.” In the subsequent 245 lines of the PAP, the porunag is described as follows: He wanders accompanied by large and black kinsfolk suffering ravenous hunger (ll. 61–62); among them there is a songstress (pātīni, l. 47) who plays a pālai harp elegantly and sings beautifully (ll. 23–24); he has mastered various types of songs with a musical instrument (vāḷ according to Nacc.) and is called a “chief of professional dancers (kōtiyar talaiva)” (ll. 56–57); he is also addressed as a “master of seven [gamut] (ēlig kilava)” (l. 63); someone who guides him to the Chola king Karikāl tells him that the king will give a feast (ll. 148–58) and gifts to him and his kinsfolk (ll. 159–78), just like the guide and his kinsfolk were given by the king (ll. 65–129).

It should be noted here that the porunag has nothing to do with war, and he is skilled in music and a musical instrument (probably, a harp) and is called “a chief of professional dancers.” That is, he is a dancer-cum-musician, at least as far as the PAP is concerned. Pur. 394, on the other hand, which is cited by Ilampūraṇar and Nacc, as an example of the first meaning of porunag (2), i.e., “one who dances and sings on the battlefield and on the threshing-floor,” appears to be an apposite illustration of a “war-bard,” but the poem does not mention who sings. This indicates that it is not obvious whether the singer is a professional “war-bard” or another kind of performer such as a pānay, musician, dancer, or actor, G. Hart says that “the Pāṇḍas, the concert-givers (leaders of a group of performers), and the dancers all resembled one another in that they sang and performed in the various pāṇs, or modes” [1975: 143] after having conducted an accurate analysis of the types of performers and their interrelations in the Sangam poems. His statement is absolutely right in the case of Pur. 394. Therefore it is better to avoid using the misleading word “war-bard.”

3.2. What is vari?

Once porunag has been identified as a dancer-cum-musician, it is rather easy to recognize the proper meaning of vari in the Sangam legend, that is, “dance.” Although the TL lists only one word, varikkūtu (a kind of masquerade dance), in connection with dance,
the Cilappatikāram (ca. 5th cent. CE), one of the post-Sangam works, often uses the term vari for dance; for example, eight kinds of dance (vari) are referred to in Cilappatikāram 8:77–108. The recent dictionary TIP lists natippu ("dancing, acting") under the entry vari. It is, therefore, safe to say that vari in the "last Sangam" is dance and porunar of PAP is a dancer-cum-musician and that the relationship between them is that between a performance and a performer, which leads us to the conclusion that the Vari in the Sangam legend is the PAP.

4. Reasons Why the Four Works Have Remained Unidentified

There may be several reasons why the four works Kūttu, Vari, Cirricai, and Pēricai in the "last Sangam" have remained unidentified. Some critics may think that the Sangam legend is a mere legend and so does not merit a proper analysis. Others may underestimate the historical fact that titles of works are changeable; for example, the original title Kaḷaviyal has been changed to Iraiyar Akapporu, and the Maḷaiṭuṇḍakāṭam was called Kūṭtarāṟṟuppatai at least until the 14th century, since Ilampūṉṭāṟ of the 12th century refers to it as Kūṭtarāṟṟuppatai in his commentary on Tol. Pol. 534, and the same is true in the case of Cēṉavaraiyar's (13th cent.) and Nacc.'s (14th cent.) commentaries on Tol. Collatikāram 462.

The basic and crucial reason, however, must be a total disregard of the tradition of ilakkaṇam (<Skt. laksṇa) and ilakkiyam (<Skt. laksya). Although words like ilakkaṇam and ilakkiyam do not occur in the Sangam legend, the ilakkaṇam–ilakkiyam tradition is unquestionably exhibited in the legend when it says, "they say treatises for them (poets) are [names of grammatical works]" in "the first Sangam," "the middle Sangam," and "the last Sangam." The chart below illustrates the essence of the Sangam legend, including the "treatises" of the three Sangams.

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The Three “Academies”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Seat</th>
<th>No. of years</th>
<th>No. of poets/ (Academicians)</th>
<th>Grammar (Treatise)</th>
<th>Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Sangam</td>
<td>(Southern) Madurai</td>
<td>4440</td>
<td>4449/ (549)</td>
<td>Akattiyam</td>
<td>Paripāṭal</td>
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<td>Mutunārai</td>
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<td>Kalaiyāviraí</td>
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<td>Middle Sangam</td>
<td>Kapāṭapuram</td>
<td>3700</td>
<td>3700/ (59)</td>
<td>Tolkāppiyam</td>
<td>Kali</td>
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<td>Vīyālamāli Akaval</td>
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<td>Last Sangam</td>
<td>Northern Madurai</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>449/ (49)</td>
<td>Tolkāppiyam</td>
<td>Neṭunтокai 400</td>
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<td>70 Paripāṭal</td>
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<td>Kūṭtu</td>
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<td>Vari</td>
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<td>Cirricai</td>
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<td>Pēricai</td>
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The above chart explicitly shows that the Kūṭtu, Vari, Cirricai, and Pēricai are not treatises but literary works. In spite of this clear indication, the TL and other critics have interpreted them as treatises. The Pēricai, for example, is mentioned as “a treatise on music, of the last Saṅgam, not now extant” by the TL, as “lit. ‘Major melody.’ A treatise on music?” by Zvelebil [1973: 131], and as “the Greater Musical Treatise” by Buck [1997: 6]. If the false impression that these works were treatises had been cleared up, no one would have clung to basic meanings such as “sound” for icai and “line” for vari and would have found more appropriate meanings.

5. Concluding Remarks

The above hypothesis should become more convincing if the reason that only the four works of the Pattu, are mentioned in the Sangam legend could be explained. For this, an analysis of differences between the four works and the other six works will need to be con-
ducted with respect to dates, styles, contents, and the like. We should also make a study of the replacement of the titles of the four works in the Sangam legend with the present titles. In this regard, it is quite clear that the theme āḷṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟ所所, the theme āḷṟṟṟṟṟṟṟ所所 was known but the term āḷṟṟṟ所所 had not been established in an earlier stage of Sangam literature since, unlike other puram or heroic themes that are often described along with technical terms in the Purattinaiyiyal of Tol. Porul, (Nacc.) 91:3–6 alias Tol. Porul. Purattinaiyiyal 36:3–6. According to Takahashi [1995: 20–24], the Purattinaiyiyal belongs to the latest layer of the Tol. Porul. This leads us to the tentative conclusion that the term āḷṟṟ所所 is of comparatively late origin.10)

Notes
1) I will analyze in a separate paper whether yāḷ in the Pattu. is a “lute” or a “harp.”
2) It should be noted here that Tol. Porul. (Nacc.) 91:3–6 does not mention the term āḷṟ所所 but describes only its contents. It was commentators in the middle ages who connected the sutra with the theme āḷṟ所所.
3) Akanāṉyuru 13:10, 173:13, 296:10, 6 instances in Patiṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟ所所, 26 in Pur., Tirumurukāḷṟṟ所所 69, 276, and Maturaikkāṇci 42.
4) Akanāṉyuru 25:18, 76:5, and 8 examples in Pur.
6) The poems cited by Kailasapathy as examples to support his arguments are Pur. 394:1–7 (sic, correctly 382), 397:1–10, 384:1–10, 396:10–14, and PAP 1–3.
7) arāṇa yāṇar aṉṟṟṟṟṟ所所 talaip pēr ľrc // cāṟu kalī vaḷī nāḷ cōṟu nacai uṟṟṟu // vēṟu pulam mūnṟyā vir-āku arī poruṇa.
8) avarkku niṟ [names of grammatical works] enpa.
9) Wavy underscores indicate works the title or parts of which are known, while underlines indicate works the full texts of which have survived.
10) I am preparing a paper on the reason for the use of the term āḷṟ所所 in Tol. Collatikāram (Nacc.) 462.

Abbreviations
Nacc. Naccūēkkuřiři/Naccūēkkuřiři.
PAP Porunaṟṟ所所.
Pattu. Pattuṟ所所.
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**TL**

**Tol. Porul.** Tolkāppiyam Porulatikāram.

**TPI**

**Texts and References**


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