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The Phenomenology of Time in Classical Tamil Poetry

Abstract

This essay explores the ways in which the human experience of time is articulated in the *akam* or love genre of *caṅkam* or classical Tamil poetry (ca. 100 BCE-450 CE). In particular, it focuses on the use of images from five landscapes (*tiṇai*) of the Tamil countryside to convey the impact emotion has on the phenomenological experience of time. I argue that the images used in the poems of this highly conventionalized genre express an experience of time that is either protracted, compressed, or somewhere in between depending on the emotional wellbeing of the heroine. The translations and discussion of six poems posit the notion that *akam* poetry is as much about the experience of time as it is about the experience of emotion, as they are not entirely distinct.

Scholarship on the *akam* (“inside”) or love genre of *caṅkam* or classical Tamil poetry (ca. 100 BCE-450 CE) has focused primarily on a scene’s spatial organization. The poets used images of flora and fauna from five Tamil regions or landscapes (*tiṇai*) as a “comparison by means of a hidden meaning” (*uḷḷuṇai-y-uvamam*) to convey different emotional contexts (*tiṇai*).¹ The analyses of this important and unique poetic system have highlighted the subtle, indirect ways in which early Tamil poets conveyed meaning.² What is largely absent from these studies, however, is an analysis of a scene’s temporal organization. I argue that *akam* poems are as much about time as they are about emotion. Or put another way, the poets explored the impact of emotions on the experience of time, and specifically how that experience is a response to the sequence of events framing a poem. In this article, I will analyze six *akam* poems to understand the ways in which the experience of time is conveyed. While these poems represent a very small fraction of the total 1,859 *akam* poems collected in the five anthologies,³ they demonstrate well the ways in which time and space operate within the *caṅkam* corpus. *Akam* poetics were highly

¹ There are actually seven emotional contexts or moods. Two of them, however, do not have a *tiṇai*. These are *kaikkilai* (“minor relations”) and *peruntinai* (“major context”) and are concerned with unrequited and abnormal love (i.e. forced union, excessive lust) respectively. As these moods do not evoke a particular *tiṇai*, they will not be engaged in the current study.

² See, for example, Hart (2015), Ramanujan ([1967] 1999; 1985), Selby (2000; 2008; 2011)

³ The *akam* anthologies are *Aiṅkuruṇūru*, *Kuṇṭokai*, *Naṇṇinai*, *Akaṇāṇūru*, and *Kalittokai*.

conventionalized and the poets adhered to a strict set of rules governing a poem's composition. Each *akam* poem, then, is a sort of microcosm of the larger collection.

Although time was not a subject of rigorous inquiry in the *akam* poetry, a reader will at least intuit that the concept is vastly more complex than the poets express. Time is unlike elements in the foreground of the poems in that it is not tactile or perceptible, except perhaps through its attribute transformation, which manifests in decay of natural surroundings, the aging of bodies, death, and birth, to name a few. While the poets grappled with some of the "big questions" in life, such as ethics and morality and what constitutes a good and just society, they were not philosophers in the formal sense. They made observations and comments as a means to contextualize and explore human experience but did not conduct systematic investigations. The *caṅkam* poets, however, understood the experience of time to be elusive as different modalities of it are operating within a single poetic field.

Tolkāppiyam (ca. 1st-6th centuries CE),⁴ the earliest extant text on Tamil grammar, syntax, and poetics, details the five *akam* emotional contexts that evoke a specific landscape: lovers' union, pining, sulking, quarreling, or separation. Interestingly, however, the bulk of poems tends toward separation more than union. Martha Ann Selby (2000, 17) notes that of the 1,859 *akam* poems, 1,137 are associated with a landscape that conveys the anxiety or pain of separation. *Tolkāppiyam* (3.1.26-35) lists the duties that cause separation. These are: education, fighting in battle, functioning as a king's ambassador, and pursuing wealth; but there are other reasons that force separation, such as the man spending time with a mistress, the woman's family or other circumstances preventing a rendezvous, or a man's lack of interest and enthusiasm, to name just a few. In analyzing the preponderance of this mood, Selby explains that this body of literature is addressing power and dominance in the ambiguity of human experience rather than focusing on love or lust. In fact, as I detail below, poems conveying lovers' union are either implicitly or explicitly expressing some degree of separation, and thus are exploring the realms of power and dominance that Selby describes. While sexual union is indeed woven into the emotional fabric of *akam* poems, there are no overt descriptions of the act, only references, suggestion, and innuendo. Thus, poems conveying union are set after a sexual encounter and the narrator is typically worried that another tryst might not be arranged or the ultimate goal of marriage will not be achieved. If poems expressing union are rather about the anxiety endemic to separation, then this has implications for understanding how a *tiṇai* or landscape conveys the experience of time. I hope to show that *tiṇai* in *akam* poetry expresses a moment in the cycle of an emotion, with all its layers of complexity, that is a reaction to the events framing the narrative. They reflect the impact that emotions have on the experience of time, which is not quantifiable in the same way as time measured by sequential events because

⁴ For a discussion on the dating of *Tolkāppiyam* see Takanobu Takahashi (1995).

emotions are not linear or logical; they do not follow a predictable, calculated trajectory but are subjective and cycle through experience randomly and at different paces.

Everydayness: Modalities of Time in *Akam* Poetry

At issue here is the longstanding concern with the human experience of time. The early Tamil poets were not heavily influenced by Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain spiritual traditions that, generally speaking, investigated this experience as it related to *saṃsāra*, the turbulent cycle of rebirth and re-death, on one hand, and *samādhi* (absorption), a liberating experience of consciousness beyond time and space attained through meditative practices, on the other. As George Hart (1999 [1975], 67-68) notes, notions of rebirth are present but scarce in early Tamil literature, and there is no indication that exercises aimed at experiencing non-duality were practiced. Certain constraints endemic to these cosmologies, such as the urgency for liberation from *saṃsāra*, did not encumber the imagination of the early Tamil poets. In other words, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thought was not directed at experiences of everydayness beyond the implications for liberation. For the *caṅkam* poets, however, time was a dimension of the world and the experience of it created disjunction in an individual's lived experience and was thus important to explore.

The early Tamil poets' interest in everydayness is more a type of phenomenology in that they were studying experience and the conditions that gave rise to experience.⁵ As they were poets, not philosophers, they utilized female and male narrators as their voice in exploring such questions as: What is the range of emotional experience in interpersonal relationships? What sorts of contexts elicit specific emotional responses? What are the hierarchies of power in a relationship? How do objects of perception in the natural world relate to emotional experience? What are the physio-psychological responses to emotion? And how does the psychological response to an emotion impact the experience of time? These and other related questions form the foundation upon which the five anthologies of *akam* poetry are based. As I will discuss in further detail, the goal of *akam* poetry is not to provide resolutions to these questions but rather to explore their contours and develop a framework within which the audience is able to grapple with them. As the poets make apparent, there are no neat and tidy answers to these questions.

As I suggested above, there is a convergence of different temporal modalities in an *akam* poem. There is time governing sequential events that frame the narrative, such as a hero returning or a beloved waiting. This mode of time is theoretically objective and measurable. There is also a subjective time expressed through the *tiṇai* or landscapes. This is not measurable

⁵ I am not using the concept "everydayness" in the Heideggerian sense, which implies, among other things, despair as a person confronts her or his own inauthenticity so as to become authentic, a being-in-the-world, in the face of the malaise of death; however, "everydayness" can simply mean the activities of a person in search of meaning in the everyday world, and I use it in this sense.

in the same way that observed events are measured. This phenomenological experience of time might seem elongated or compressed in relation to objective time. In his monumental three-volume work, *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur (1984), the French philosopher and literary theorist, attempts to resolve the inconsistency between the human experience of time and the movement of planets and ticking of clocks. For Ricoeur (1984, 6), “speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond.” He (1984, 65-67) argues that narrative activity, and particularly emplotment or the assembly of events into a narrative with a plot, allows heterogeneous factors of life—agents, goals, means, unexpected results, temporality, etc.—to be brought together and synthesized. Narrative activity, Ricoeur believes, orders the discordance experienced in life through creating a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the act of reading or hearing a narrative allows the story or poem to be refigured in the consciousness of the audience in such a way that it not only forces the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader but also reveals potential and possibility through an alteration of consciousness. As will be discussed below, the same holds true for the ability of narrative activity to articulate the experience of emotion.

To enter the world of *akam* poetry, it is important to understand the poetic system that takes as its building blocks elements operating in daily human experience: time, space, nature (plants and animals), other people, negotiation, sexual politics, taboo, emotions, and so on. These narrative elements form what Ricoeur (1984, 64) refers to as the preunderstanding of human action and the world. Action, which is different than physical movement, and the surrounding world have a culturally agreed upon semantics, temporality, and symbolic structure that the poets configure and that the audience understands prior to engaging a poem; without this preunderstanding, Ricoeur argues, literature would be incomprehensible.

In configuring these building blocks into narrative form, the poets developed a means of articulating those aspects of human emotion that are not easy or impossible to describe. Emotions are not pure and discrete but fraught with traces of other emotions and mired in context. They always exist in an individual’s inner domain and can never be made entirely public. When a person experiences sorrow, for instance, the statement “I am sad” does not actually reveal much about the speaker’s emotion. As sorrow is part and parcel of human experience, however, it does provide a general sense of her or his state of being with which others can analogically identify, but the statement does not bridge the gap between public and private dimensions of the speaker’s sadness. In response to this impasse, *caṅkam* poets catalogued a litany of images borrowed from the Tamil country side to articulate the private contours of emotion in (public) narrative. As A.K. Ramanujan (1999 [1967], 107-108) famously stated, “the actual objective landscapes of Tamil country become the interior landscape of Tamil poetry.” As there is no uniform emotional response to an event, the poets explored an array of

emotional scenarios to elucidate the diversity of human experience. Narrators expressing sadness in poems about love-in-separation, for example, might simultaneously display varying degrees of anxiety, melancholy, hope, anger, and uncertainty. As I will show, traces of these minor or secondary emotions within the dominant one were articulated with organized combinations of images from the various landscapes within a single poetic field.

In addition to the survey of emotional nuance through imagery, the genius of these early Tamil poets is further demonstrated in the ways the narrative structure conveyed the impact of emotion on the experience of time. The beginning point of an *akam* poem is implicit and not stated. In other words, there is no “once upon a time” that marks the opening. The poems were composed as responses and reactions to events and are, to borrow from Erich Auerbach (1991 [1946], 12), “fraught with background.” In other words, events surrounding a narrative are hidden and unexpressed in the foreground of the poem; rather, the *caṅkam* poets used suggestion and ambiguity to direct the audience’s experience into a sort of alternate dimension that is the landscape. If a poem is set in the hillside region expressing lovers’ union, for instance, the audience would know that a sexual encounter preceded the narrative. They would not know any particulars about the specific event, just that it happened and that it frames the poem. This ambiguity served as a catalyst for grappling with the rich layers of emotion born of but ultimately detached from the events. I describe them as detached because the psychological qualities associated with emotion could overshadow an “historical” event. As will be seen below, an emotion could be strong enough for a narrator to misjudge or reinterpret the intentions informing a lover’s action. Since the audience is not privy to events leading to the narrator’s response, all that remains is the narrator’s perspective. Consequently, the poems explore the psychological qualities of emotion because the “historical reality” in literature “fraught with background” is, as Auerbach describes, neither fully externalized nor completely fixed in time and space.

What is interesting about this in terms of narrative structure, then, is that the beginning point of an *akam* poem is not revealed until the landscape discloses it.⁶ It is the narrator’s emotional response to the event that evokes the *tiṇai* with all its trappings. Each poem picks up in the middle of an event and typically reveals an epiphany about the nature of the relationship. Exploring the complexity of reconciling the past with the present also means that resolutions, such as reuniting after separation, are unexpressed; but if the function of *akam* poetry is to

⁶ I base this on the notion that the poems were recited, not read. Would the poet or orator have announced the mood of the poem prior to recitation? It is unclear but my sense is that they would not, particularly since the rules and systematization of the poems was coeval with and in some cases subsequent to the production of the poems. There is little doubt that the rules were understood prior to their systematization in *Tolkāppiyam*; unfortunately, there is not a treatise that details how the recitation of the poems should occur.

explore emotion, then the conclusion or end point is the act of ordering emotional disorder, not the resolution of events framing the narrative.

This narrative structure and imagery conveys time in several ways. On a basic level, the particular landscape informs the audience as to the event that transpired in objective time. Thus, the *tiṅai* contextualizes the narrative and sets the mood. The landscape also expresses the time passed since the lovers' last meeting. The more verdant the landscape, for instance, the more recent the contact; and a wasteland or desert *tiṅai* suggests the encounter occurred in the remote past. But there is no determined amount of time in terms of days, weeks, or months ascribed to any of the five landscapes. This suggests that the relationship between lapsed objective time and the evocation of a particular landscape is contingent upon the narrator's emotional perception. If the encounter was in the recent past, the narrator is not focused primarily on herself or himself; but when enduring separation, the focus shifts to the narrator's personal plight. These scenarios have an impact how time is experienced, which the activity within the landscape conveys. When there is little movement, it is experienced as protracted or elongated, such as in a wasteland tract, and compressed when activity is frenetic. To think about this another way, the activity in the *tiṅai* serves as an internal clock: the clock hands move quickly when there is a lot of activity and very slowly when there is a near standstill.

Akam Poetics: Temporal and Spatial Setting

In the introduction to his recent translation of *Akanāṅūru* (ca. 100-250 CE), one of the five *akam* anthologies, Hart (2015, i) invites the reader to view the poems as Indian miniature paintings. It is the inclusiveness in the compositions that he sees as the shared principle; the painters and poets evoked the cultural, political, and social forces operating in their particular historical milieu by detailing the surroundings of their subject. This approach placed the subject as one piece in the larger picture, so to speak. The spatial context in which an action was being performed, for instance, was as significant as the action itself; and details of the flora and fauna among other things established the narrative's emotional context and mood for the audience. In likening a poem to a miniature painting, Hart (2015, i) writes that “[i]t may have a central idea, but in expounding that idea, it touches upon many different elements of the culture and landscape, always suggesting how they all fit together with its theme.”

Hart's comparison emphasizes the importance of spatial organization in providing multiple perspectives, meanings, and experiences. The details of a landscape, for instance, convey the tenor of an event, historic, imagined, or otherwise. On following “visual” cues in *Akanāṅūru*, he (2015, xiii) writes, “[e]verything in the poem becomes relative, and one sees the events from different perspectives as one moves through the tableaux that the poet creates.” As

one digests this in company with close readings of the poems, it is clear that temporal organization plays a significant role as well. In *Akattiṇaiyiyal* (“Chapter on Interior Context”), the first chapter of *Poruḷatikāram* (“Section on Poetics”) in *Tolkāppiyam*, the author states that wise men understand *mutal-poruḷ* (“first” or “primal elements”) to be aspects of land and time. This verse (3.1.4) unites both time and space into a single unit. *Mutal-poruḷ* provides dimension for the “native elements” or *karu-poruḷ*, which are things like forest flowers, war generals, waterfalls, fishmongers, villages, herons, and monkeys, to name a few. In short, *karu-poruḷ* is the flora and fauna of a *tiṇai*. The quality that ultimately enlivens a poetic landscape is *uri-poruḷ* or “behavioral elements,” which are emotion and mood. In other words, a poem’s *uri-poruḷ* animates the flora and fauna of one of the five set topographical regions or *tiṇai*, which enact, through the use of *uḷḷurāi-y-uvamam* (“comparison by means of a hidden meaning”), the narrator’s experience of romantic love whether that be of her or his own or of someone else. Interestingly, *Tolkāppiyam* is rather silent on the nature of time; the six verses (3.1.6-3.1.12) that outline the appropriate seasons and times of day for each of the five regions conclude much of its discussion. The following table lists the mood and temporal setting associated with the five landscapes:

Region (<i>Tiṇai</i>)	Mood	Time; Season
<i>Kuṟiṇci</i> (hillside/mountain slopes)	Lovers’ union	Night/Midnight; cold season
<i>Mullai</i> (forest meadow)	Patient waiting for lover’s return	Late evening; rainy season
<i>Pālai</i> (wasteland)	Prolonged Separation	Midday; late frost and summer season
<i>Neytal</i> (seashore)	Lamenting lover’s absence	Nightfall/dawn; all seasons
<i>Marutam</i> (paddy land)	Jealous quarreling	Morning; all seasons

The relationship between these three categories is interesting. Lovers’ union, for instance, conjures the hillside or mountain slopes while separation evokes the wasteland; the topographical features of each mirror the emotional context. The *kuṟiṇci tiṇai* is verdant and fertile while the *pālai tiṇai* is harsh and dangerous. The temporal setting of the former was prescribed as night or midnight, a choice time for clandestine meetings, and midday, when the sun shone bright across the desiccated wasteland, was designated for love-in-separation. *Tolkāppiyam* also posits that while only one region can appear in a poem (as it conveys the primary mood), aspects of land and time associated with another tract may appear without deviating from *akam* convention. For example, a tiger, which is native to the *pālai* or desert

region that conveys prolonged separation, could appear in the hill setting of lovers' union, indicating a tinge of anxiety and sadness exist within the dominant mood of joy in union. This technique highlights the liberty that poets used in selecting imagery to convey the complexity of human emotion.

***Tiṇai*: the Impact of Emotion on the Experience of Time**

Emotions are not fixed in time in the same way that action is in the poems. I read the *tiṇai* as an alternate dimension that reflects on and processes events through its own spatial and temporal organization. In configuring the appropriate flora and fauna, poets used *uḷḷurai-y-uvamam* to explore the depth of emotional complexity and its impact on lived experience.⁷ Although the poets regarded the natural world as wild and untamed when compared to the order of a secure and healthy home and love life, they also saw regularity in its operations. A tiger, for instance, kills its prey because this is what a tiger does; a *kuṛiṇci* flower blooms every 12 years because this is what a *kuṛiṇci* flower does. *Uḷḷurai-y-uvamam*, then, is a detour into a parallel world that is at once localized and transcendent, and in this context the objective time governing events is experienced as protracted or compressed, thus echoing the narrator's emotional state and perception of time. Consider the following *neytal* poem as an example:

They say:
 on the screw pine with
 aerial prop roots, a plump bud
 blossoms in its leaves that spread out
 like the feathers that herons preen;
 in the front yards of the small village
 nestled in the sea-shore grove
 waves come and go. He is close to my
 heart although he has left
 for a land far away in the country 5
 of the cool sea.⁸

(*Kuruntokai* 228)

This short poem demonstrates well parallel worlds and parallel times. The poet, Ceyti Valluvar Peruncātanār, opens with the seaside or *neytal tiṇai*, suggesting the narrator is separated from

⁷ For a list of flora and fauna native to the particular *tiṇai* or landscapes, see A.K. Ramanujan ([1967] 1999) and K.V. Zvelebil (1973).

⁸ All translations are mine.

her beloved. The *talaivi* or heroine posits the description of the coastline in an adage of sorts as she recounts what others have described, suggesting that she is not physically located in the landscape. In the lines following the imagery of the screw pine and waves in the small village in the grove, the heroine laments the hero's absence but states that he remains present in her heart. As will be seen in the following poem as well, the *neytal tiṇai* is frequently associated with loneliness, sadness, and doubt in separation. The caustic force of the ebb and flow of the waves in the small village and the sound of water lapping at the shore enhance the mood of isolation. The heroine's remarks seem merely observational, as this is a natural occurrence, and indeed they are, much like the blossoming screw pine; but there is subtle meaning being conveyed beyond what occurs to coastal villages. These lines indicate that despite the coming and going of the waves (and their corrosive effect) the village remains intact; its longevity in the face of persistent peril is reminiscent of the heroine's emotional endurance in the hero's absence. Pillai and Ludden (1976, 338) suggest that the waves are carrying messages to the hero in the land by the cool sea to decrease the distance between the two. While this is an interesting suggestion, I am less inclined to read the waves as messengers but rather as underscoring the tedium of waiting for the hero's return.

The *tour de force* of this short poem is the image of the blossoming screw pine (*tālai*). A screw pine (*pandanus*) is a palm-like tree with roots that emerge out of the trunk and shoot into the ground to provide stability, something particularly important for those growing in the ever-shifting sands of a coastline. It is a dioecious plant; the flowers of the male and female varieties differ in appearance. The male flower is fragrant and long and spikey. The female flower, on the other hand, produces a spherical fruit that can be a vibrant orange or red with washes of yellow. The *talaivi* refers to the blossoming of plump (*koḷu*) buds which would seem to refer to the female variety. The leaves of the screw pine are thin and sword-shaped, resembling the wing feathers of a heron; and as the heron is a coastal bird—and the *neytal* bird *par excellence*—and the emblem of the hero, its presence here only reinforces the overarching mood of separation.

What becomes clear at the conclusion of the poem is that the image of the screw pine and its blossoming fruit are recapitulating the heroine. Selby (2008, 31) argues that there is an “explicit relationship between the physical surroundings of *tiṇai* and the emotional and personal traits of the characters.” This relationship is apparent in this poem. The image is, in one sense, conveying the ripening of her own body and sexuality in the man's absence;⁹ but, just as the aerial prop roots secure the tree in unsteady ground, the heroine too remains steadfast in a precarious situation, determined not to give up hope and holding her beloved close to her heart. The most compelling element is the correlation of the *talaivi*'s heart with the blossoming red or

⁹ I am grateful to Martha Ann Selby for suggesting the ripening fruit mirrors the ripening of the heroine's body and sexuality.

orange fruit, protected by the sword-shaped leaves (or heron's feathers); and furthermore, that the fruit can remain on the tree for up to a year broadens the emotional tenor surrounding her beloved's absence. The beauty and poignancy of this simple image comes to bear when the screw pine is regarded as an echo of the heroine and her emotional state.

These images were plucked from the Tamil coastal region but it is not the uniqueness that gives meaning; rather it is that the screw pine, the village, and the waves are in their natural habitat or place and doing what they do, *i.e.* blossoming, ebbing and flowing, etc. As Selby (2008, 29) further argues, they also represent the poet's desire for continuity of the physical body with the natural environment. As discussed above, the evocative image of the blossoming screw pine stands for the heroine; it is her body. As these and other images recur in different configurations throughout the *caṅkam* corpus, they form a world that exists outside of the linear narrative. This world is at once local (physical landscape) and universal (interior landscape and emotion).

The images also exist in a time that seems unhurried; the activity is not frenetic but conveys the slow process of ripening as waves methodically lap at the shore. The activity within a landscape expresses something about the impact of emotions on the narrator's experience of time. As we will see in the remaining poems, the flora and fauna become less active and energetic the longer lovers are separated. This suggests the experience of time becomes protracted because the beloved is focusing primarily on her personal hardship. Let us consider another poem set in the *neytal tiṅai*. Note here that the poet captures the winding down of the day's activities. What is interesting is that this poem is about transitions and crossing into different space and time.

The sun dims, the hills change colors,
 a swarm of bees amasses on flowers and drinks,
 a flock of herons cries from the tops of screw pines in the seashore grove,
 crabs playing in water return to their holes,
 the sound of the waves stops, fishing boats are put to rest, 5
 the sky turns red, a pair of partnered *aṅṅil* birds
 nest in the leaves of a Palmyra tree in a sand dune,
 the sweet-smelling flowers of the saltmarsh close, and in the garden
 near our house the fragrant *puṅṅai* flowers turn golden.
 The day slowly passes as night arrives. 10
 How will I flourish? The owl, screeching
 as it roosts, never leaving the old tree,
 suddenly cries at midnight when spirits wander.
 I greatly desired the *wise* man with no love for me,

who caused the anguish that bruised my heart.

15

(*Akanānūru* 260)

The continuity between this and the previous poem is apparent as herons, screw pines, and waves, among other things, heighten the heroine's sense of isolation and melancholy. The formal temporal setting of nightfall for the *neytal tiṇai* is explicit here in the first, sixth, and tenth lines. As the day dwindles, the sky is turning red with the twilight. The looming darkness is inauspicious as there is a lack of clarity and malevolent spirits are preparing to wander. The poet, Mōcik Karaiyaṅār, has captured well the bustle that occurs with the setting sun: crabs are shuffling into their holes, saltmarsh flowers are closing their petals, birds are gathering on tops of trees, and the fisher folk have retired their vessels. The activity of the day is slowly coming to a standstill as the sun dims, reflecting the *talaivi's* emotional world. There is a very smooth transition between the *tiṇai* and the heroine's physical surroundings. Note line nine and ten in which she describes the fragrant blossoms of *puṇṇai* flowers (*calophyllum inophyllum*) turning gold in color in the garden next to their house. As these flowers are native to the coastal region, the poet beautifully blurs the boundaries between the narrator's emotional and physical landscapes. The fragrance of *puṇṇai* flowers in the garden—her domicile—unexpectedly conjures lack of clarity and uncertainty, not domesticity. In one sense, the fragrance causes a momentary return to “normative reality” that prompts an emotional shift, as suggested in the reappearance of the *tiṇai* after the question in line eleven.

The owl screeching at midnight as spirits wander is an ill omen foretelling death. This association is most apparent in *Puranānūru* (*Pur.*; ca. 100-250 CE), a collection of *puram* (“outside”) poetry that deals with public life, war, politics, kings, and so on. The poets describe owls congregating near battle grounds (*Pur.* 280, 370) and in cremation grounds (*Pur.* 240, 362, 364) with ghouls and spirits (*Pur.* 238, 356, 359) and eating the corpses of the dead (*Pur.* 260).¹⁰ Its presence in this poem is jarring and ominous. While the owl and spirits serve as associates of death, they are not actual threats. Death is prolonged but the sense of its immanence provokes the sardonic comment on the hero's wisdom for leaving.

As I mentioned above, elements from the various *tiṇai* can and do appear outside their native habitat. This allowed poets the means to layer poems with emotional complexity. Note the reference to the hills in the first line. While *Tolkāppiyam* suggests topographical features such as this should not appear in different landscapes as it dilutes the overarching mood, there is little doubt that their presence here is an oblique reference to lovers' union (*kuṟiṅci*) as the hills are the setting of that mood. It is also important to note that they are changing colors as the sun sets and will soon be shrouded in darkness. The inclusion of emotion relating to lovers'

¹⁰ See George Hart and Hank Heifetz ([1999] 2002).

union is further enhanced in the second line as bees throng flowers for pollen. The seashore is not their primary locale; they are native to the hill tracts. Another *kuṛiñci* element is the evocation of the midnight hour, as the dark of night provides cover for trysting couples, in spite of wandering spirits and hooting owls. That the heroine mentions these alludes to a happier time of union, but the *neytal* context and the presence of the owl dilutes the joyful, transmuting love-in-union to melancholy. In light of the heroine's concluding remarks, these *kuṛiñci* elements insinuate that the lingering vestige of hope for union or return has just vanished.

The heroine's realization that the man's absence is a fundamental change in their relationship evokes the *tiṇai*. As in the previous poem, she is not literally located in the landscape. She is figuratively present in it, or rather it is present in her as her emotions animate the landscape. The bustle at the day's end culminating in the presence of death's associates at midnight reflects the heroine's withdrawal into emotional isolation. The caesura in the *uḷḷuṛai-yuvamam* is an interesting pivot in that objective time interrupts subjective time and sends the inner monologue in a new direction, as the presence of the owl and spirits suggest. It also reflects her experience of time. As the activity in the landscape slows, time also seems to slow and elongate. It has not completely stopped but the messengers of death are a stark contrast to the commotion under the setting sun.

Let us turn to a poem expressing prolonged separation. Of the five *tiṇai*, the *pālai* landscape expresses the most protracted experience of time. It is a dangerous and desiccated wasteland that typically emerges from the ashes, so to speak, of the sun-scorched hillside (*kuṛiñci*) or forest meadow (*mullai*). That these *tiṇai* can be transformed into the *pālai* tract suggests any relationship is subject to the hardship of prolonged separation.

O friend, live long!
 Will he traverse
 the rugged path devoid of water
 with tall, desiccated bamboo
 where harsh-eyed elephants roam the forest
 and hostile Maṛavar with barbarous bows
 outrival travelers along the path and feast
 together on the spoils
 as your beautiful body, the color
 of a young shoot on a mango tree
 with fragrant tender fruit, turns pale?
 And all for the purpose of wealth
 more precious than us?

(Kuruntokai 331)

In this poem by Vātā Prapantanār, the friend or *tōli* is addressing the hero's judgement and motivation for leaving and the visible effects both are having on the heroine's body. As with many *pālai* poems, he has departed in search of wealth. The landscape is clearly inhospitable. The path is rugged, there is a lack of water, wild and dangerous elephants stomp about, and the Maravar, a notorious group of fierce bandits, are robbing those who travel the region. Collectively, these elements evoke a sense of danger and concern for his wellbeing but also reflect the heroine's condition in his absence. Near the end of the poem, the *tōli* comments that the color of her skin is turning pale—the youthfulness of her body is fading. In the two previous poems, the narrators' melancholy and isolation had yet to manifest physically as in this *pālai* poems. As shall be demonstrated below, the manifestation of lovesickness on the body is not the exclusive domain of prolonged separation as emotions cycle through at different rates and intensities depending on the actor. This *tiṅai* suggests that the lapsed time since the lovers' last encounter is evoking the unsympathetic terrain and that the ensuing despair of prolonged separation has caused not only a physio-psychological impact but also a shift in the perception of the hero, whether accurate or not. The withering and dying elements within the landscape gives the sense that time is passing slowly.

The next poem is set in the *tiṅai* expressing lovers' union. This particular poetic landscape is named after the *kuṛiñci* flower (*strobilanthes kunthiana*) that is native to the Nilgiri and Palani hills in the Western Ghats. It is unique in that it only blooms once every twelve years. As Selby (2011, 84) notes in her translation of *Aiṅkurunūru*, this purplish blue flower is likely a metaphor for a young girl experiencing the onset of puberty and sexual awareness. In this poem, the heroine's friend or *tōli* is informing her that her lover has returned. The formal temporal setting assigned to the *kuṛiñci tiṅai* is night; however, there is little here that indicates a particular time. This poem is minimal and still conveys the frenetic activity of the hillside with a single image.

Look! Live long, friend!
 As a bee moves from place to place,
 drinking nectar from clusters of fragrant glory lilies
 on the cool, fragrant hills of our mountain,
 he has vexed your strong, victorious beauty.
 This man devoid of affection
 has returned just now!

(*Aiṅkurunūru* 226)

They are bewildered to see
 a peacock on the bamboo hill,
 like a dancer's entrance on a stage.
 He had a beautiful, strong bow 15
 and an arrow chosen.
 He inquired about which path
 the elephant he was fighting took.
 He stood with a flowering garland on his chest
 on one side of a ripe millet field. 20
 Of those who saw him there,
 friend, why am I the one who lies
 on my bed in the difficult darkness
 with tears flowing from my eyes
 and shoulders growing thin? 25
 (Akanānūru 82)

The *tiṅai* in this poem is teeming with life and activity. The poet, Kapilar, provides a lush description of the hillside where the sounds of the flora and fauna coalesce into something like a symphony; however, things are not quite as they initially appear. Following the frenetic imagery of the hillside and the coming of the hero chasing the elephant, the pace slows considerably in the last five lines as the *talaivi* reveals to her friend that she lies in bed at night tormented as her body withers from lovesickness. Similar to the previous poem, this one is not about union per se but conveys anxiety in separation. While the hillside landscape does indicate that a sexual encounter has occurred in the recent past, there are clues in the *tiṅai* that foreshadow the 'difficult darkness.' Note the reference to the summer wind in the opening line. The summer season is associated with the *pālai* or wasteland tract. As I mentioned previously, the *pālai tiṅai* emerges from the desiccated hillside or forest meadow during the hot months on the subcontinent. It creates an inhospitable environment (as detailed above in *Kuṟuntokai* 331). The summer season is the time of the *tiṅai*, not necessarily the season when the hero appeared on the side of the millet field or when the heroine is conveying the news to her friend. Couching the landscape in the summer, then, reveals portents of things to come, namely that the 'slopes of mountain flowers' are in danger of being reduced to a wasteland. A second element that contributes to the heroine's emotional context is the presence of stags. These are the only creatures in the poem foreign to the hills or mountains; the bees, the monkeys, and the peacocks are indigenous to the *kuṟiñci tiṅai*. The stags populate the forest meadow tract (*mullai*) and thus infuse a hint of waiting-in-separation.

The *uḷḷurai-y-uvamam* here is allegorical. The sweet music from the ensemble of wind, bees, waterfalls, and stags, which excites a pack of female monkeys, announces the entrance of the peacock into the scene. His beauty and gait bewilders the monkeys. As the description of the *tiṇai* ends, the hero seems to emerge from the landscape. His body becomes the central image, transferring the audience's focus from the terrain to his physicality. In regard to *uḷḷurai-y-uvamam*, since the hero occupies the same poetic field as the peacock, this is an allegory and the peacock presages his appearance. This poem is about a missed tryst in the millet field. While the *talaivi* explains that many saw him standing there with a garland around his neck and a bow in his hand, she does not say who they are. As women typically guarded the millet fields from birds and other creatures searching for food and harvested the grain, the pack of female monkeys is likely an allegory for a group of women who witnessed the hero's arrival. That the monkeys were bewildered with the peacock that entered like a dancer suggests the hero's physique was striking and that the overall scene was in some way theatrical and dramatic—he indicates that he is fighting and chasing an elephant after all. His question, however, is likely a ruse and he was not actually chasing an elephant but coming for a clandestine meeting with the *talaivi*.¹¹ Hart (2015, 94) suggests that the heroine seeing her lover is such an intense experience that it is like watching a performance in that part of her mind does not regard what is happening as real. This is an interesting observation and suggests the narrator is having a dissociative experience. Given the progression of and elements in the poem, I am inclined to view it rather as an expression of her emotion in the moment she is recounting the event to her friend, but this recounting is rooted in memory—emotional, intellectual, or otherwise—which is by nature dissociative.

This poem underscores well the suggestion that the vibrant and verdant landscape is not evoking lovers' union. The emotion she experiences when seeing the hero is soon fraught with anxiety as she realizes there will be difficulty in securing another encounter. One choice time for unmarried couples to rendezvous was when the woman guarded the millet field; it provided the seclusion necessary to keep the tryst secret. In this scenario, the millet is ripe and the harvest is near, which is probably why there is a group of woman in the field, not her alone. The cause for the heroine's torment at night, then, and the reason her body is growing thin from lovesickness is that soon there will be no millet to guard.

The cover of darkness was another optimal time for clandestine lovers, which is why *Tolkāppiyam* set night as the official time for the *kuṟiṇci tiṇai*. Similar to *Akanānūru* 260 translated above, however, the heroine here has recast the night—it is no longer a time of joyous union, but allows her seclusion to mourn away from watchful eyes. The realization that a future encounter is unlikely has elicited an intense emotional response that, like the *pālai* poem above

¹¹ I am grateful to Martha Ann Selby for suggesting the hero's behavior is a means to distract the group of women from the real reason for his arrival, i.e. a sexual encounter with the heroine.

(*Kuruntokai* 331), is manifesting on her physical form. The difference between these two scenarios is that here the heroine's body is responding to the emotions of a recent event, not one of prolonged separation. As I suggested above, emotions cycle through experience at different rates and intensities and the physical effects of lovesickness can occur at different intervals depending on the actor. The reference to the summer wind in the *tiñai* suggests that the hillside is destined to be scorched under the midday sun, transforming the mood of lovers' union to prolonged separation. In addition to revealing that two events—union and witnessing the hero—occurred in the recent past, the *tiñai* conveys a distortion of time due to the *talaivi*'s profound anxiety. This is creating a hyper sense of time because her thoughts are on the hero, but the approaching summer reveals that soon time will feel protracted and she will turn inwards to gaze upon her despair and melancholy, such as the heroine in *Kuruntokai* 331, the *pālai* poem translated above.

This final poem by Erumai Veļiyaṅṅār Makaanār Kaṭalaṅṅār is also set in the *kuṛiñci tiñai* but is far more complex in regard to the flora and fauna than the previous two. While the imagery in the poem above suggests that prolonged separation is immanent, the imagery here insinuates the inverse, that the landscape is reverting back to the fecund hillside. The hero has returned and the heroine's experience of time is no longer elongated.

Darkness will be torn as lightning flashes
 when a rain cloud unleashes a downpour at midnight.
 Fireflies thronging the opening of a broken termite mound
 look like sparks discharged when iron is worked
 as a bear with his large claws 5
 scooping out its comb looks like a blacksmith.
 They who ponder the flooding river
 tremble from the fear of crocodiles,
 their poles vanishing as the rising water resounds,
 slapping against the rocks—
 he never says, "I am frightened." 10
 On the mountain slope pervaded with chaos,
 tall bamboo rattles as they brush a passing rain cloud.
 A large, ferocious tiger kills a giant boar
 to satiate the hunger of his pregnant mate
 as a fearsome cobra spits out a sharp ruby 15
 and in its light the tiger slowly drags its prey.
 The thoughtful fear the small trail thick with stones

because to walk this difficult path is like walking on swords.
 He came, holding a lance for protection, with a heart
 intent on pleasure.

He is not cruel.

20

You who are generous have no fault.

O Friend, the fault is on me,
 who caused you unlimited, intense misery.

(*Akanāṇūru* 72)

The landscape in this poem is pieced together with topographical features, seasons, and animals that correspond to different *tiṇai*. The reference to midnight, the mountain slope, and bamboo indicates that it is a *kuṛiñci* poem, but like the last poem it is not evoking lovers' union per se. References to the flooding river, the crocodiles, and the rain complicate the emotional context of this poem. Rivers mark the *mullai* landscape (patient waiting) and crocodiles are a common element in the coastal region (*neytal*) evoking lamentation-in-absence. The rain is also a feature not assigned to the mountain or hillside tracts but appears in the *mullai* and *neytal* landscapes. The overlap of imagery here enhances the complexity of the mood and provides a sort of emotional history to the narrative.

In the last four lines of the poem, the *talaivi* is consoling her friend for the undue grief the misperception of her lover has caused. The scenario suggests that, prior to the monologue, the hero had been away but returned unexpectedly for a tryst. During his absence the heroine grew increasingly distraught and unduly criticized his character and judgement. Absence does not necessarily make the heart grow fonder, but provides fodder for misperceptions and false judgements. There was a similar situation above in *Aiṅkurunūru* 226 when the narrator informed the heroine that her lover had returned, contrary to her belief that he did not care. The *tōḷi* or friend, who appears here and elsewhere as the empathic character *par excellence*, suffered heartache along with the heroine. The last four lines suggest that prior to his return and the romantic interlude, the heroine's emotional world was tenuous at best as she believed her lover to be cruel in deserting her.

The *tiṇai* reveals how the lack of attention—sexual or otherwise—caused the *talaivi* to descend into depression and sorrow, which accounts for the inclusion of elements from both *mullai* and *neytal* landscapes. As the imagery indicates, emotional worlds can change rather suddenly. In the opening line, the illumination of the night sky as lightning flashes suggests an unexpected shift in disposition; as darkness is dispelled momentarily, clarity too has returned along with the hero. The image of the lightning is followed with the swarm of fireflies that also underscores this shift as they too illuminate darkness. The bear digging in the termite mound is

interesting and the sense is that its inclusion has to do with its ferocity, which foreshadows the treacherous path the hero must traverse. This hardship is underscored with the flooding river and crocodiles that should instill fear in travelers, but the hero, out of a sense of duty, perseveres. The scene on the chaotic hillside is not inviting either as the bamboo rattles and a tiger kills a giant boar to satiate his mate and drags it in the light from a ruby that the cobra spit on the ground. In regard to *ullurai-y-uvamam*, the tiger is allegorical of the lover. As the tiger overcomes a monumental task of killing and dragging the giant boar to its pregnant mate, the hero too must survive an epic journey to satiate his lover. What makes this allegory compelling is that tigers are native to the *pālai* tract of prolonged separation, not the mountains or hills. That the tiger is nurturing his mate underscores the heroine's misperception of the hero's intentions during his absence. What is interesting about the *tiṇai* in this poem is that, unlike the previous one in which the mountains were under threat of becoming a wasteland, here they seem to be reverting back to the verdant setting that elicits the mood of union. The mountains and hills are typically not regarded as treacherous unless they have been transformed into a wasteland, as demonstrated above in *Kuṟuntokai* 331. There is a lot of activity in this poem, suggesting that the *talaivi* is no longer focusing on the pain of her separation, which makes the experience of time compress and pass quickly.

The scenario suggests that the narrator is speaking to the *tōli* shortly after a tryst has occurred. The friend is still experiencing the pangs of separation since she was not privy to the encounter. Her emotions lag behind and the narrator is attempting to soothe her in explaining that her judgement was wrong. The *tiṇai* captures the moment when the heroine is reconciling her misperception and sorrow in light of the hero's return and ensuing sexual encounter. What is interesting is that narrator's emotions have not quite yet caught up to the reality of the situation. Vestiges of sorrow and heartache over the hero's absence still linger despite his return, which explains the presence of elements in the landscape that signify suffering in separation.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown that *akam* poetry not only articulates aspects of human emotion that are difficult if not impossible to describe, but also the impact of emotion on the experience of time. I argued that this rich collection of poetry is just as much about time as it is about emotion. The inclusion of two temporal modalities in the same poetic field, I think, underscores this position. There is the objective time of "real-world" events that frames the narrative, which revolves around some form of separation. The absence of details about the instigating episode, however, ushers the reader into an alternate temporal and spatial dimension populated by the

flora and fauna of five regions in the Tamil countryside. The various *tiṇai* and combinations of images plucked from different landscapes articulate the psychological impact of emotion on an array of issues, including the phenomenological experience of time. As the narrator's emotions animate the landscapes, collectively the organization of this world conveys a realization as the narrator orders emotional discord. As I think the poems above demonstrate, the results are not always pleasant and there is frequently an underlying sense of uncertainty. As I mentioned at the opening, if the point of *akam* poetry is the exploration of emotion in all its dimensions, then the end point is the act of ordering emotional disorder, not resolution of events.

While it is not possible to measure the time within the *tiṇai*, the landscapes seem to convey the duration since the lovers' last meeting. The verdant and fecund *kuṛiñci tiṇai* indicates a recent encounter while the inhospitable *pālai tiṇai* conveys it was in the distant past. The activity in the landscapes also tells us something about the experience of time as it becomes less frenetic the longer the separation, culminating in the scorched desert region where the lack of water and bright sun would make time seem most protracted. This lack of activity stands in contrast to packs of excited monkeys and bees thronging glory lilies. The genius of *akam* poetry is that it creates a world that not only explores multifaceted emotional contexts but also captures their impact on the human experience of time.

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