ARABIC-TAMIL IN SOUTH INDIA AND SRI LANKA: LANGUAGE AS MIMICRY

M. M. M. MAHROOF

Arabic-Tamil was, and vestigially is, the kind of Tamil language written in the Arabic script. It was used by the Muslims of Sri Lanka. And was also current in parts of South India. Arabic-Tamil was a part of the language-spectrum of the Muslims of Sri Lanka.

Tamil written in the Arabic script is the standard definition of Arabic-Tamil. This term is also used, somewhat imprecisely, for Tamil written in its own script but containing a large number of loan-words from Arabic, Urdu, Persian and Turkish. In this article, the second definition is subsumed under the former.

The purpose of this article is to sketch some of the mechanics of Arabic-Tamil, its historical role and its societal form and focus.

THE MECHANICS OF ARABIC-TAMIL

The Tamil language is generally considered to be the most ancient and the most intricate of the languages of the Dravidian group to which it belongs. Its phonology is equally convoluted. As with all languages, there are vowel and a consonantal system. The vowels (called in Tamil uir eluthu i.e. life-letters) are paired (short and long), viz. a, aali, ii/ey, eyy/o, oh. The unpaired ones are ai and aw (diphthongal).

Tamil groups its consonants (termed mei eluthu i.e. body-letters) in three divisions; vallinam (hard consonants), mellinam (soft consonants) and idai inam (in-between consonants). Each vowel has a ‘sign’ which attaches itself to the consonants and so ‘generates’ letters. It is the elaborateness of the vowel signs that adds so much to the Tamil script, in complexity and articulation. Every sounded consonant (e.g., ka, ki, ko, ki, ku, kai, kau) has its separate letter. Hence the total range of the Tamil alphabet is 246.
In some ways, the consonant of Tamil is specialized. There are two \( n \) letters (the tongue placed just above the back of the front teeth; and in the next, cacuminal); two \( r \) sounds (the tongue poised on the gums just back of the front teeth; and the other, cacuminal); there are three \( l \) sounds too (one with tongue behind the gums back of the front teeth; the other, cacuminal and the third, almost gurgling.

In addition, Tamil has borrowed immediately from Sanskrit, three letters (for words which are not germane to the Tamil language). These are \( sh\) (as in \textit{Shams}); \( k\)\( sh\i \) (as in \textit{pakshi}); \( sa \) (as in \textit{samarpanam}). The last is important because the native \( sa \) in Tamil cannot be used as the end of words and if it were used, it has to be pronounced as \( cha \). Another Sanskritic loan-letter is \( ja \) (as in \textit{jam}). Of course, for indigenous Tamil words, these letters are unnecessary.\(^8\) At any rate, when the alphabet is known, Tamil is easy reading for beginners or advanced users.

The immediate mechanics of Arabic-Tamil consists in adapting the phonology of Tamil to the script and hence the phonology of Arabic. However, Arabic script and phonology have developed, naturally, on different lines. There is \( k \) and \( q \) (of which sounds only \( k \) is known to Tamil). The range of \( t, d \) sounds is equally unfamiliar to Tamil. At least, eight letters in Arabic have descenders; Tamil has fewer, such as \( th\)a, two \( r \) sounds, and one \( l \) sound; but unfortunately all Tamil consonants with vowel sign \( u \) have descenders.

In discussing the work of a French Arabist, H.K. Sherwani wrote:

Then there is a profusion of dots which are the only means by which we can differentiate certain letters from one another. The \( i\)\( r\)\( ā\)\( b \) find a place sometimes above and sometimes below the words which they help to pronounce. Although the Arabic script occupies a smaller space lengthwise compared to the Latin or Roman script, taken breadthwise the space taken up is more than double that script \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots [The author of the book reviewed goes on to say] the shape of most of the letters changes according as they are isolated, initial, medial or final, with the result that for just 28 letters the standard Amiriyah Press has as many as 470 characters.\(^7\)

This brings out the difficulties of adjusting the script of Arabic to a language which depends on precise ‘pointing’.

The practitioners of Arabic-Tamil took steps to accommodate Arabic script to the requirements of Tamil phonology. These could be summarised schematically.
(a) The diphthongs of Tamil (non-existent in Arabic script) \( ai \), \( aw \) were written synthetically, e.g. \( aw \) by aliph and waw.

(b) The Tamil consonants (non-existent in Arabic), as \( sa \), \( nga \), \( ta \), \( pa \), \( nna \), \( rra \), \( nja \) were produced by modifying Arabic letters. For instance the Arabic \( j \) with two additional dots became the Tamil \( cha \); the Tamil \( ta \) was the Arabic \( d \) with a dot below; a dot under the Arabic \( f \) made it the Tamil \( pa \).

(c) By these means, seven letters were added to the Arabic alphabet of twenty-eight letters.

(d) The graphemes in Tamil and Arabic could not be completely matched in all cases, however. This is because in Tamil, in accordance with an auditory convention, certain combination of letters are softened in speech. e.g., \( kaakam \) (Tamil for ‘crow’) becomes when spoken \( kaaham \). Hence in Arabic-Tamil, this convention was adhered to.

(e) Unlike in normal Arabic writing, letters could not be piled on top of one another nor telescoped but had to be spaced out. Else, the profusion of diacritical marks, not to speak of the dots, would make the Arabic-Tamil script unreadable.

(f) Arabic-Tamil had to be in bold writing for legibility.

As I have written elsewhere:

. . . the differences between short and long vowels are vital in Tamil; mostly due to the presence of vowel in every word because variations of meaning follow from variations in vowel-placement (for instance \( kathir \) is crop or grain; \( kuthir \) is ‘broken-down wall’). Writing such a language in Arabic script needed many modifications. The specialities of Arabic such as the triliteral noun; the variety of stem verbs and vowels determined by cadence are unknown to Tamil. Arabic-Tamil writers adopted certain modifications in Arabic orthography. . . . The upshot of this whole exercise was that a page of Arabic-Tamil looks at best, complicated; and at worst, hopelessly cluttered. (Reading Arabic-Tamil gives a curious, nervous feeling as, say, reading English in Cyrillic script.)

A case could have been made for Arabic-Tamil if, for instance, Tamil did not have a script of its own or the rest of the users of that language could be induced to take over the Arabic script. Lacking neither situation, Arabic-Tamil in Sri Lanka and South India became, in course of time, subject to several sociolinguistic pressures which sapped its vitality.
ARABIC-TAMIL: RATIONALE AND LOCALE

A dominant motive for the invention of Arabic-Tamil was the traditional belief of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and South India. The oral tradition says that some Muslims of peninsular Arabia were dissatisfied with the policies of (the Caliph) 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwân in the eighth century and they decided to leave that land.9 Wrote a nineteenth-century authority who had access to the minds of the people with long memories.

[The Muslim refugees] proceeding from the Euphrates southward made settlements in the Concan, in the southern parts of the peninsula of India, on the island of Ceylon and at Malacca. The division of them which came to Ceylon formed considerable settlements along the north-east, north and the western coasts of that island, one at Trincomalicee, one at Jaffna, one at Mantota, one at Manar, one at Coodramallee, one at Puttalam, one at Colombo, one at Barberyn and one at Point-de-Galle.10

All these places still have concentrations of Muslims.11 Even modern official documents endorse this view. The Superintendent of Census and Director of Statistics, writing in 1922, while discussing the Muslims of Sri Lanka, said:

During this period, the Arab or Moor traders—from whom the Ceylon Moors of to-day are said to be descended—increased greatly in number and importance and Colombo appears to have become their chief trade centre.12

That he is a part of the Arab Diaspora is a powerful inducement for the average Muslim of Sri Lanka to have recourse to the Arabic language in Arabic-Tamil, however vestigial its role and function in current practice.

The societal role of the Arabic language was equally intense in South India (in the former Madras Presidency with epicentres in the Ramnad, Tinnevely, Madurai and Tanjore localities). Several reasons have been noted. One authority writes:

In the south, the social relations between the Arabs and the Indians were cordial and friendly, different from that of Sindh and Multan and the peoples of north-western India. In the south, the Arabs settled as merchants, travellers and seamen while in the north, they were military conquerors with political authority. . . . An important factor which contributed to the development of good relations in the south was the policy of tolerance of the native rulers of the southern and
coastal regions towards the Arab settlers.\(^\text{13}\)

A survey of available evidence shows that Muslims (i.e. Arab settlers and their progeny) were established in South India by the time of the rise of Islam in the Arabian mainland. It is recorded that the graves (tombs) of Damīm al-Anṣārī and Abū Waqqāṣ, Companions of Muhammad (peace be upon him) are found in Tamil Nadu (south India).\(^\text{14}\) It is also stated that an Arab missionary and scholar, al-Ḥājj ‘Abd Allāh ibn Anwar came to Trichi, when the Cholas were in power and he built a mosque there in CE 738.\(^\text{15}\)

On certain occasions, a new dimension was given to the Muslim presence in South India. One such occasion was in the twelfth century. In 1182, Sayyid Ibrāhīm from Arabia arrived in Cannanore (on west coast of South India) with his retinue and came over to (the present) Tamil Nadu. Sayyid Ibrāhīm was forced to fight with the ruling Pāṇḍyan princes of South India. He was victorious, and making Powthira Māṅnikapatanam (Melai Pattanam) his capital, he ruled over the eastern coast of South India for twelve years.\(^\text{16}\)

It is possible then to surmise that the Muslim presence in South India by that time was firm, regular and well-established. The invention, the acceptance and the growth of Arabic-Tamil should be assessed not only in terms of historical events but also as a dynamic relationship between itself and the Tamil language proper. Such an analysis would apportion Arabic-Tamil into three phases.

Phase I: Beginnings and growth.
Phase II: Maturity.
Phase III: Decline and marginalization.

Since the locus of Arabic-Tamil was co-extensive with Tamil language and literature, an attempt at analysis of the scope and societal role of Tamil language and literature seems necessary.

Just as in the case of many Asian languages, the study of the Tamil language and, inevitably, of its literature, was an elitist exercise. Right up to modern times schools, even primary schools, were never thick on the ground. The incidence of caste system made schooling unnecessary for a large number of people.\(^\text{17}\) Those who took to schooling, generally, learnt under a single teacher (the gurukula system). The gifted boy (it was hardly ever a girl) of the right social connections went up the educational ladder by shifting from one expert teacher to another, till he became an expert teacher himself.
Then, there was no strict barrier between teaching and literary creativity. Education meant the careful elucidation of grammatical texts and literary classics. Scholars of Tamil language, throughout the centuries, have cultivated, analysed and documented Tamil grammar assiduously. And as the study of Tamil grammar involved a mastery of prosody; every scholar was ipso facto a poet.

Tamil has always insisted on the meticulous following of established procedures of its poetic modes, of which it has an endless variety. By the tenth century, the mode of the kapyam (the classical epic in Tamil) was established in literary circles. The kapyam is the poetic celebration in detail of a chosen hero, a paragon of courage and virtue along with descriptions of his country, city, birth and heroic deeds. Kapyam which follow the above rules without the slightest deviation are classed as Perum kapyam (great epics) and are five in numbers Chinta mani; Chilappatikaram, Manimekalai, Valayapati, and Kunoelakesi. Kapyam which lack any of the set descriptions are termed chiru kapyam (lesser epics). These, too, are five in number viz. Chulamani, Yasodarakavyam, Udayanakumarakavyam, Neelakesi, and Nagakumarakavyam.

The modalities of these kapyam are probably derived from Sanskrit originals. An important book on prosody in Tamil, popular from the Middle Ages onwards, is the Thandy Alankaram composed by the Tamil poet, Thandy, as a direct translation from the Sanskrit work on prosody, Kavyadharsha. Tamil prosody continued to proliferate in its literary modes, based on the type of (poetic) meter, stanza formation, subject-matter and celebratory occasion. These literary modes (styled prabandam in Tamil) became ninety-six in number. Certain modes became popular in certain times. In the period between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the literary modes much in use were parani, ulaa, kalambam, pillai thamil, nanmani malai, mummani kovai, and thuthu.

The elitist nature of the themes in pastoral poetry matched that of the kapyam. There was the noble-born hero and the equally noble-born heroine. These poems treated with the theme of departing of the hero for the wars or on employment, the resulting pining away of the heroine and the final return of the hero. The poetry was basically of the upper-classes for the upper classes.

The modes of publication were, likewise, selective. After composing the poem or epic, probably the author or others would copy it down, working ola leaves. Later there was the arangetram, where the poet would publically declaim it in the presence of his peers and the nobility (a princeling or prince). If none present could fault it, the poem was accorded acceptance.
Since the assembly was convened by the ruling prince or princeling, the successful poet would receive substantial gifts. It was part of the duties of rulers to support and encourage literary efforts. The technology of those days did not afford the possibilities of mass publication. Hence, if the poetic work was one of declared merit, it survived in a few copies or in the form of oral transmission. If it was an indifferent work, it sank into obscurity and disappeared.

There were two elements which dented the hermetically sealed atmosphere of the medieval Tamil literary world. One was the oral repetition by the few educated (i.e. schooled) ones to formal or informal assemblies or gatherings of those not literate. The second element was the existence of folk literature, never written, never conforming to the rules of prosody. This folk literature took the form of occupational songs such as those of fishermen, carters, and those grinding rice. Some of these were ballad-like in nature—robust, earthy but poetic because of the intensity of the human experience underlying it. One variety of statement and refrain is called themmanku. Speaking of medieval English ballads, M.J.C. Hodgart wrote:

A ballad is a narrative song which bears the stamp of folklore. . . . They are impersonal in their attitude, and there is little comment or moralizing. They are free from the rhetorical devices of most ‘learned’ poetry but possess a rhetoric of their own . . . and a stylized description of heroes and heroines—all this in common with folk-literature of other kinds and of other peoples. Their special narrative technique carries a folk-view of life, an ironic acceptance of tragedy, and a rich background of popular myth. . . . The result is often poetry of a high order.26

This is also true of the folk poetry, ballads, in Tamil.27

It is in this environment of an elitist literature, of elitist control of Tamil grammar, that Arabic-Tamil had its origins.

ARABIC-TAMIL: THE FIRST PHASE

It is plausible to hold the view that Arabic-Tamil was found out or rather invented as a matter of necessity. When Arabic-speaking ship masters, seamen and traders came to South India, they would have had to make records of their commercial transactions. By necessity, names of commercial goods, locations, names of persons, articles of food, clothing, would be in the local language (in this case, Tamil) recorded by Arabic-speakers in Arabic with some modifications. Hence, it would be the nouns of the local language which would be written down in Arabic. In course of time, common verbs and common sentence patterns would be transcribed in Arabic, too.28 At
first, each individual Arabic-speaker would do the transliteration on his own. But in course of time, this coding of Tamil words in Arabic would become standardized. Thus a common Arabo-Tamil script emerges.

Another powerful element is at work here. All Muslim activities concerned with religion involve the use of Arabic language and the use of Arabic material (whether in the form of Holy Qur’an, the Hadith or other respected works). Hence, in such places as the mosques, madrasahs, it was convenient to use local language material written in Arabic.

Another notable place of Arabic-Tamil was in the funerary sphere. Sometimes it became necessary to note the name and other details of the dead person on his tombstone; some of these details could be comprehensible only in the phonology of the local language (Tamil). It has been stated that a tombstone in Arabic-Tamil dated H 137 (corresponding to CE 755) had been found in a mosque in Galle (an important city in south Sri Lanka). It is probable that the use of Arabic-Tamil on tombstones pre-dates its other uses.

Another was personal use. The keeping of diary entries, commercial information, notes and messages to one’s commercial partners and employees, notices in front of mosques, personal invitations and private letters were some uses to which Arabic-Tamil easily lent itself. In all these uses, an element of secrecy (the refusal to transfer information to the ‘other-group’) exists.

Other uses of Arabic-Tamil such as translation of the Holy Qur’an and the Hadith literature; prose and poetic works; dictionaries and thesauri, were specialized processes, which called for a prior decision on the precise role of Arabic-Tamil.

The period from the eighth to the eleventh century might be thought of as the formative period of Arabic-Tamil, for it was in the latter period that the first available Islamic Tamil literary work was written. That is the Palchanda Maalai of which at present only eight verses are extant. Palchanda Maalai “must have been a literary work of repute dealing with love themes”. It was composed before the twelfth century. As its title maalai indicates, it is written in a classical Tamil literary mode, meticulously following the appropriate prosodic pattern.

During the three centuries after the eighth century, the practitioners of Arabic-Tamil (in South India and Sri Lanka) had the following theoretical options.
(a) They could have siphoned off the vocabulary of native Tamil words, except for key verbs and particles. Thus the language would be mainly Arabic under-pinned with a Tamil grammar. It would be a symbiotic language with an Arabic (Semitic) word-stock on a skeletal Tamil (Dravidian) grammar frame. A similar process, it seems, has taken place in the case of Urdu. Theoretically speaking, Urdu might be looked upon as a jettisoning of most Sanskritic words in favour of Turko-Perso-Arabic words, while retaining an eroded Sanskritic grammar (itself a 'softening' of Vedic grammar). Though Persian and Sanskrit belong to Indo-Aryan Proto-Aryan language stock, their respective phonologies are disparate enough for them to sound different.

(b) The practitioners of Arabic-Tamil could go further. In addition, they could have pruned verb proliferation in Tamil. For instance, the Tamil verb in the present tense has nine different forms, depending on person and number. This pruning will be in accordance with Arabic practice. There is a precedent in Sri Lanka, in the case of the Sinhala (Sinhalese) language. A modern grammarian writes:

The verb in colloquial Sinhalese considerably differs from that in the literary language. Generally we can say that it is simplified. . . . In the Present tense, for both the numbers and all the three persons, the form in-‘anava’, ‘—inava’, ‘—enava’ is used.34

(c) On the other hand, the practitioners of Arabic-Tamil could keep the study of Arabic separate from the study of Tamil. And yet, they could acclimatise Tamil letters to cater for Muslim needs by incorporating new letters (by modifying extant Tamil letters) for sounds unknown to Tamil such as b, f, g, z. It is needed even today. For instance, ‘Pakistan’, ‘Baluchistan’ and ‘Farukabad’ are written in Tamil as ‘Pakisthan’, ‘Paluchisthan’ and ‘Paarookapath’ respectively.

(d) The Arabic-Tamil practitioners could write Tamil in the Arabic script by modifying some Arabic letters to accomodate sounds non-existent in Arabic.

The practitioners of Arabic-Tamil chose the last and the most ineffective mode. By doing so they developed a sterile discipline, i.e. Arabic-Tamil (actually, Tamil mimicking Arabic) and dismissed the study of Arabic proper (confining it to a reading ability of accented texts). It should be remembered that the study of Tamil did not suffer, keeping in mind that it was an elitist discipline in the upper reaches. Those Muslims who were innately gifted in learning Tamil went up the usual educational ladder, shifting from teacher to teacher and themselves becoming teachers and scholars in due course.
There was total co-operation between the Tamil-speaking Hindus and Tamil-speaking Muslims in this respect. Learning and scholarship were recognised in the world of Tamil letters, whatever the religious or ethnic affiliation of the practitioners. Some Muslims became accomplished scholars, recognised and patronized by the affluent elite. Nonetheless, religious scruples demanded that Muslim scholars and poets confine themselves to Islamic themes.

The basic educational facility of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and South India was the Qur'än school. It had various names: among them were 'verandah school', 'mosque school', Maktab pallikkoodam (Tamil for 'school'). Essentially, it was a one-man school where instruction was given in the Qur'anic recitation, Arabic-Tamil reading, some Tamil, and a little Arabic. The pupils were from age five to age fifteen bracket (and in the case of girls, up to puberty). It could not be said that every child in the village came under the net of the Qur'än school. Social status and some financial ability mattered. What was inculcated was the reading of accented Arabic texts. And, of course, every Arabic-Tamil text was accented.

ARABIC-TAMIL: PHASE II

The second phase of Arabic-Tamil might be said to last from the end of the fourteenth century unto the first part of the twentieth century. This was the period of growth of Arabic-Tamil in so far as a sterile language could develop.

This phase naturally falls into two divisions: the period upto the mid-nineteenth century and the period thereon to the early twentieth century. The early part of this phase saw the entry of the European powers—mainly the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British—into the Indian Ocean. Subsequently, the Portuguese, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, had headquartered themselves at Goa (in the south of India) and had managed a toe-hold in the west of South India. The later centuries were to ensure the presence of the British East India Company and the French in South India. The Carnatic became the mise-en-scène for the struggle of the British and the French. However, the presence of the poligars in South India in a sort of client-relationship with the British and the sheer inability of the British (or the French) because of the vastness of the region, to hold the people in total subjection, allowed indigenous institutions, including literary activity, to develop.

By the seventeenth century, Muslim poets had established their significance in the literary milieu of Tamil. Apart from Palchanda Maalai, to
which reference has been made earlier, other literary work of those times have stood the test of time. Second in time, are the poems of a scholar and poet who called himself Yakoob Chittar, who flourished after the twelfth century. Vanna Parimala Pulavar composed a didactic poem called “Aayiram Masala” (thousand queries) or “Athisaya Puranam” (Wonderous story), probably in 1572. Alim Pulavar wrote the poem, “Mikurasu Maslaa” celebrating the Mi’rāj of Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the last part of the sixteenth century. A poetical catechism called “thiru nerigathad” (teaching of the right path) was written in 1613 by the poet, Pir Muhammad. The first kapyam written by a Muslim is the “Kanakabisheka Maalai” (the Ode of the Golden Consecration) written in 1648 by the poet Kanakavirayar whose real name was Sheik Naynar. Varisai Muhideen Pulavar wrote the “Sakoon Padaigor” (the Battle of King Sakoon) in 1686.37

The crown and flower of Muslim poetic achievement in Tamil is the Seera Puranam, which celebrates in magnificent detail and poetic skill, the life of Muhammad (peace be upon him). Umaro Pulavar, the author of Seera Puranam was born in 1642 in what is now called Ramnad district of Tamil Nadu. Gifted with poetic talent from birth, he later became the court poet of Ettayapuram, held by a princeling. He decided to write a religious poem and so sought the help of Muslim theologians.38 The Seera Puranam is accepted as a great kapyam. It has three parts; “Viladath Kandam”, “Nubuwwath Kandam”; “Hijrath Kandam”. These three parts altogether have ninety-two divisions.39 Seera Puranam is still a popular and respected work among the Muslims of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu.

The acknowledged ability of the Muslims in the field of Tamil classical verse (Tamil prose was yet to become respectable) was to depress the role of Arabic-Tamil. There was no impulse to make it a viable language. It was allowed to remain at the level of script. Muslims had become adept at the use of Tamil. Words of Turko-Perso-Arabic origin were, with some modifications, used in Tamil; these changes were to make them less exotic in Tamil. In any case, the Muslim reader of Tamil could (mentally) read p as b or f, as these two latter letters do not exist in the Tamil language. Thus, one reason for the existence of Arabic-Tamil disappeared.

Conditions in Sri Lanka were somewhat different. The country was much smaller and the Muslims were much fewer. The European Powers—the Portuguese and the Dutch—who controlled the littoral of Sri Lanka, were much harsher.40 The Portuguese and the Dutch looked upon the Muslims of Sri Lanka as their religious opponents and commercial rivals.41 For instance, one Governor of Dutch Ceylon, Rykloff van Goens ordered his subordinate, the Dissawa of Matara, to register the Muslims of his area and ordered him, not to:

[Continued]
... permit the Moors to perform any religious rites not tolerate their priests either within or outside the gravets. He must guard against their entering the country from the outside, and deliver up for punishment anyone who should be caught doing so contrary to orders with a view to setting an example to others.\textsuperscript{42}

In these circumstances, Muslims of Sri Lanka adopted a low-profile. They, naturally, eschewed all kinds of literary activity, then mainly done in Tamil. Their Qur'\'an madrasahs confined themselves to teaching Qur'\'anic recitation, H\'adith literature, some arithmetic and, perhaps, Arabic-Tamil only.\textsuperscript{43} Only in this period and perhaps at no other time in Sri Lanka was the role of Arabic-Tamil so positive and dynamic. It formed a palpable symbol of the identity for the Muslims in Sri Lanka. And since none could read or write it except those Muslims qualified in it (and repeat it to other Muslims), it was an effective instrument of secrecy.

By the first half of the nineteenth century, the British had strengthened their hold on the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka they had introduced a mono-culture (first, coffee and then tea) export economy which provided some opportunities for the trading sections of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. There was a high level of imports and equally a high level of exports in Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{44}

At that time, however, most Muslims kept themselves aloof from state education, which they thought would be destructive of their culture.\textsuperscript{45} They retained their affection for their Qur'\'an schools or verandah schools which gave them a basic education in Qur'\'anic recitation, some Tamil and some arithmetic.\textsuperscript{46} In some verandah schools, there was some Arabic-Tamil as well. Religious teachers took to Arabic-Tamil because it gave them some confidence in a rapidly changing world.

A fillip to Arabic-Tamil was given in the second half of the nineteenth century because of the arrival of Muslim missionaries of South India. They set about helping the establishment of mosques in Sri Lanka, establishing branches of thariq and instructing Muslims in the hinterlands of Sri Lanka. An important personage in this respect was Seyed Mohamed Bin Ahmad Lebbe, popularly known as Mappillai Lebbe Alim. born in 1817 at Kayalpat-tinam in Tinnevelli district (Tamil Nadu), he arrived in Sri Lanka in 1835. Abandoning the commercial intentions of his visit, he decided on Islamic missionary activities in Sri Lanka. He helped to establish some six mosques in Colombo, about seven in the south of Sri Lanka. He also composed several works on Islamic law and ritual, in Arabic-Tamil. Among these were, Magh\'an\'i; Fath al-Day\'an; Fath al-Sal\'am; Fath al-Matin; Ghanimat al-Sali-k\'in.\textsuperscript{47} In his activities, Mappillai Lebbe Alim seems to have the services of
Sheik Abdur Rahman ibn Meeran Lebbe of Colombo, better known as 'Colombo Alim'.

This revival of Arabic-Tamil as a viable vehicle in Sri Lanka appears to have stemmed from two impulses. One was that religious discourses should be written in Arabic-Tamil only. The other was that somehow or other Arabic-Tamil led to the mastery of the Arabic language. This belief was reinforced by the fact that in verandah schools boys who took four years in learning to read accented Arabic did so in the belief that they had had gained some mastery of Arabic. Auxillary to this belief, was that there should be some known identifying language at hand at the time (1860s) when English was rapidly coming to the fore in Sri Lanka.

Some of the Arabic-Tamil works published during this period were commentaries on the holy Qur'an (tafsir) and didactic works on Islam and its practice. Some of these works were:

1. Work of Sheik Mustapha (vali) of Beruwela (Sri Lanka), *Mizan Maalai* (1868).
3. *Deen Maalai* (Kandy, 1878) by Sheik Mohamed Lebbe Alim (Kasawatte Alim Appa).

As a rule, these works would be read out to a group of people, at home or elsewhere.

Even the Muslim intelligentsia of that time might have played with the idea that Arabic-Tamil could be a viable language. Mohamed Cassim Siddi Lebbe, a prominent advocate of Muslims' entry into special Government schools (learning Arabic and Tamil), was, perhaps, not without such aims. A polymath of dazzling brilliance, he managed to published a grammar of the Arabic language written in Arabic-Tamil. A book of 112 pages, it was published in 1892 and was called *Tuhfat al-Nahw*.

The central role in the educational progress of the Muslims of Sri Lanka, played by Siddi Lebbe is a matter of common knowledge in Sri Lanka. A textbook read by every school-going child in Sri Lanka says:
M.C. Siddi Lebbe was a Muslim leader who worked for the independence of Sri Lanka [then known as Ceylon]. He was born in Kandy in 1838. . . . He worked in the interest of Muslims in Sri Lanka and was active in education, politics and culture. He founded a number of Muslim schools in Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{53}

In 1882, following the defeat of the Egyptian patriots in the Battle of Tel el Kefir, the British authorities then in control of Egypt, exiled Col. Orabi el Misri and his supporters to Ceylon.\textsuperscript{54} Col. Orabi el Misri (generally known as Arabi Pasha in Sri Lanka) had been the leader of the forces arrayed against the British. Arabi Pasha, whose sojourn in Sri Lanka lasted till 1901, was influential in presenting a high-profile of Arabic language in Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{55} That glamour, perhaps, rubbed off on Arabic-Tamil, too. However, the Sri Lankan Muslim leaders were more interested in bringing into existence an educated Muslim middle class. Hence, an explicit decision on the role of Arabic-Tamil went by the board.

The situation of Arabic-Tamil in South India was more complex. Towards the mid-nineteenth century, the poligars had been suppressed. The complaisant ones among them had settled down as zamindars and mirazdars. They had considerable disposable income. They could help traditional poets and literary scholars. The British had created an infra-structure for administration and a foundation for Western education. Christian missionary efforts had created a group of young men of education (even with university education). They were interested in up-dating the higher criticism of Tamil. They edited Tamil classics, after consulting several recensions. They wrote histories of Tamil literature; collected biographies of Tamil poets, and compiled Tamil dictionaries. Some of these scholars were from Sri Lanka, mainly the alumni of the Jaffna College of the American Mission (now called, the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India). They included C.Y. Thamotherm Pillai, Carroll Viswanatha Pillai, A. Muthathamby Pillai, There were also men of traditional scholarship such as Kumaraswamy Pulavar, Sabapathy Navalar, Kanaka sunderam Pillai.

At the same time, the traditional Hindu temporalities in South India became active in supporting literary scholarship. The atheenams (\textit{math} or Hindu religious fraternities) of Dharmapuram, Thiruvavaduthurai, Thirupalnthal were among those dominant in this field. Meenakshi sundaram Pillai of Madurai, an important Tamil grammarian of the last quarter of the nineteenth century and his pupil, U.V. Swaminatha Aiyer who has collated and edited many classical Tamil texts, had been associated with the \textit{atheenam} of Thiruvavaduthurai.\textsuperscript{56}

The upsurge of Tamil literature (and Tamil scholarship, generally
Saivite in tone) stimulated the literary activities of the Muslims of South India and Sri Lanka. Though in the mainstream of classical Tamil literature, their religious commitment made them avoid certain themes and certain literary modes. Thus a specific literature of the Muslims was being created.

These years also saw the attempts to provide 'back-bone' for Arabic-Tamil literature through language tools such as lexicography. It is stated that the first Arabic/Arabic-Tamil dictionary was compiled by Moulavi Mohammed Ibrahim of Ramnad District (Tamil Nadu) in 1913.57

During those years (and sometimes, adventitiously, even today) there was a special place for Arabic-Tamil. It was in the field of mowlid, rathb and manaqib literature.58 These terms are used to describe celebratory verses in praise of Muslim saintly persons. Frequently these are composed in Arabic bay forms, alternating with Tamil verses in the (practically) same meter. Sometimes, there were long sections of Tamil prose. Since formerly it was considered injudicious to write Arabic and Tamil side by side or one after another, there appeared to be a rationale for this use. A number of mowlids and qasidas have been composed by Mapillai Lebbe Alim.59

ARABIC-TAMIL: THE THIRD PHASE

By the first quarter of the twentieth century, the situation of Arabic-Tamil in Sri Lanka and South India was on the decline. Economic and social changes were intrusive; they could not be denied. Elementary education was on the uptake largely owing to government efforts.60 The importance of English could not be denied. In the circumstances, learning yet another script (Arabic-Tamil) was not to be thought of, except by those particularly inclined.

On the other hand, publication of books was becoming a costly enterprise. At any rate, circulating a few copies, laboriously written by hand, was no longer the done thing. The audience and the readership had changed. It was no longer viable to print and publish an Arabic-Tamil book.

A famous educationist and Muslim leader of Sri Lanka, Dr A.M.A. Azeez, pointed out sadly the social irrelevance of works written in Arabic-Tamil. While discussing the Fath ul Misr, a work in Arabic-Tamil written by Sheik Mohamed Lebbe Alim (Kasawatte Alim Appa), he said that none knew that it was based on the Arabic work on the same subject by Sheik Mohamad ibn Mohamed Ilmu Azh and that Kasawatte Appa's work was not noticed even when it was published and that kind of obscurity resulted because of the lack of concern among Sri Lankan Muslims.61 Dr Azeez also mentioned that while he learnt Arabic-Tamil books such as Iratna Muham-
There was another factor at work. Nearly all Muslims learn their Qur'ānic recitation at school mainly staffed by indifferent teachers. The child learns by accenting (saying aloud) every syllable in every word.

Evidence exists that this was a temporary measure, till the child could pick up the Arabic alphabet. But later on, the practice was continued right through the child's scholastic career; it became a pseudo science in itself. It would take two or three years to learn to recite the Holy Qur'ān in this way. This methodology was, of course, a futile approach; and it chained the child to read accented Arabic only.63 Hence reading Arabic-Tamil was yet another hurdle in the educational 'progress' of the average Muslim. And so, easily dispensed with. When education in Sri Lanka became 'free from kindergarten to university' in the middle 1940s, Arabic-Tamil was still displaced.64

In the 1950s and 1960s, the case for Arabic-Tamil script had become hopeless. Some of its advocates preferred that Muslims should use a large number of Islamic (i.e. Turko-Perso-Arabic) words in their Tamil speech and writing. However, intelligibility to other users of Tamil was a permanent constraint on such use. When Tamil (along with Sinhala) became the medium of instruction in the 1960s, knowledge of Tamil became available to most Muslims; even those who would have preferred English as the medium were denied that option. This meant that the folk Tamil speech of the Muslims of Sri Lanka began to shed Islamic words (as defined above) and took up the correct Tamil equivalents.65 Nonetheless, in both South India and Sri Lanka, there is the vestigial role to which Arabic-Tamil is now constrained. This can be called, for want of a better term, hagiography. There is also a sub-group of instructive works on Islam, which, however, is vestigial, for Muslims prefer to read works in English or Tamil instead. The following is a list of Arabic-Tamil books which one usually comes across in South India and Sri Lanka.66 Nearly all of them have their exact equivalents in transliterated Tamil.

4. *Qasas ul Anbiyya* (Narratives of Prophets)
5. *Mihraj Naama* (Ode on the Mi'raj)
9. *Raas ul Ghaus Padaipor* (War Ballad of Raas ul-Ghaus)
13. *Suwarka Neethi* (Laws of Paradise)
15. As above for Ḥanafi madhhab.
16. *Tholukai Nama* (Discourse on Prayer)
17. *Noor Masala* (One Hundred Questions and Answers)
22. *Abu Shama Kissa* and *Kissa of Kafan Kallan* (Story of Abu Shama and the Story of the Shroud Thief).
24. *Kaliyarukum Kallanaklum nadanda Kissa* (Disputation between the Qazi and the Thief)
25. **Dameem Ansari Kissa** (Story of Damim Anšārī).


27. **Sham’oon (rali) Kissa** (History of Sham‘ūn (rali).


29. **Ma’rifath Maalai** (Verse Garland for Spiritual Awakening).

In brief, the role of Arabic-Tamil began and ended as Tamil mimicking Arabic.

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. It appears that Muslims of the Indian sub-continent had equivalent versions such as Arabic-Malayalam (in Kerala), Arabic-Telugu (in Andhra), Arabic-Bengali (Bengal). The Malays of Sri Lanka, sometimes, wrote Malay in Arabic script. This is called gundul. See, M.M.M. Mahroof, “Malay Language in Sri Lanka: Socio-Mechanics of a Minority Language in its Historical Setting”, in *Islamic Studies* (I/S) (Islamabad, Pakistan), vol. 31, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 463 seq.

2. The Muslims of Sri Lanka are the second largest minority in Sri Lanka. According to the last census (1981), Muslims formed 7.4% of the total population of 14,988,000. For census purpose, at least, Muslims of Sri Lanka are grouped into Moors (descendants of Arab settlers), and Malays (descendants of Malay/Indonesian settlers). Moors numbered 1,056,972 and Malays 43,378. For details of Muslims, see M.M.M. Mahroof and M. Azeez, *An Ethnological Survey of the Muslims of Sri Lanka* (Colombo, Sri Lanka Razik Fareed Foundation, 1986, pages 262. Maps. Bibl.) Sri Lanka was known till 1972 (when it became a republic) as Ceylon. In this article both terms are used, according to context. All dates are in Common Era.


4. Urdu is commonly known among the Muslims of Sri Lanka as Hindusthani.

5. In Chomskian terms, currently in favour among linguistic circles, the ‘semanal’ structure of Dravidian languages is the exact OV type with only one finite verb and with non-finite forms in embedded structures. Yet, Tamil (the most intricate of Dravidian languages, insists on the precise choice of verbs; a single sentence can be very long, indeed. Nouns phrases coming in front of a determining noun are akin to the ‘over-grown adjective’ in German. Tense signification in Tamil is temporal strictly; not aspectual as in Arabic. Tamil does not like compound sentences, unlike Arabic which frequently uses connectives such as wa and ja. Hence, learning strategies of Tamil (Dravidian) language and Arabic (Semitic) language call for different techniques. See, Herman Beytham, *Praktische Grammatik der Tamlisprache* (Leipzig, 1943); Sanford B. Steever (a) “Tamil and the Dravidian Languages”, in B. Comrie (ed), *World’s Major Languages* (New York, 1987), pp. 725 et seq; (b) Serial Verb formations in Dravidian Languages (Delhi, 1988); R. Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravi-
Islamic Studies, 32:2 (1993) 187


9. The best account of the traditional Muslim diaspora is that of Sir Alexander Johnston's article in the Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of India, vol. I, 1827, reprinted in I.L.M. Abdul Aziz, Criticism of Mr. Ramanathan's Ethnicity of the Moors... (Colombo, 1955 reprint), p. 52. Sir Alexander was the Chief Justice of Ceylon in early nineteenth century. He was also a student of Muslim affairs and other communities. He was the Sri Lankan version of 'Asiatic Jones', Sir William Jones in India.

10. Of these places, Jaffna is in the extreme north of Sri Lanka. Manar, Mantota, Kudramalai, Puttalam, Colombo, Beruwela, Galle are in descending order on the western sea-board of Sri Lanka. Kudramalai, Beruwela and Galle are the modern terms for Coodramalai, Barberyn and Pint-de-Galle. Trincomalkee is on the north-eastern seaboard. See map in M.M.M. Mahroof and M. Azeez, p. 39. Of these today, Colombo, the principal port and harbour and metropolis of Sri Lanka, has the largest concentration of Muslims.


14. M. Mohammed Uwise and P.M. Ajmal Khan, Islamiyya Thamil Ilakiyar Varalaru (History of Islamic Tamil Literature) (Madurai, India, 1986), vol. I (Beginnings to 1700), p. 15 (All English translations of titles of cited works are by the present writer).

15. Ibid. p. 16.


17. See E. Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India (Madras, 1909), passim.


20. Ibid. p. 160.

21. Ibid. p. 160. The Kavyadharsha of the Sanskrit grammarian Dandin (fl. 641) gave a 'recipe' for the sargabandha or maha kavya (great epic) which is exactly similar to the requirements of the Tamil kavyam (A. Berriedale Keith, Classical Sanskrit Literature [Calcutta, 1947], p. 123.


25. The melody and the simple phraseology of the themmanku is always attractive to the ordinary Tamil-speaker. Themmanku has had a revival in Tamil film music from 1975, starting from the village-based Tamil film “Annakili”.


27. In Tamil, folk poetry goes by different names. Among these are tiramiya padal (village songs), nattu padal (country songs), nadodi padal (minstrelsy).

28. This view is not so far-fetched as it sounds. Upto 1940s, young Englishmen coming out to
Sri Lanka as ‘green-horn’ managers of tea plantations (estate superintendents) were given printed brochures of useful sentences in Tamil (that language being the mother tongue of plantation workers). Some of these brochures were called naalaiku va (come tomorrow) books; that sentence was the first to be learnt.

29. M.M. Uwise, Muslim contribution to Tamil Literature (Kilakkarai, India, 1990), p. 233.
32. Ibid. p. 2.
33. The stock of Urdu (Turko-Perso-Arabic) words, other than those specifically involved in Islamic devotions (prayer), in current use among the Muslims of Sri Lanka is about 175. See, list in M.M.M. Mahroof, “Urdu”, I/S (Summer 1992), pp. 194–198.
37. S. Vithianandan, Preface to Uwise and Ajmal Khan, Islamiyya Thamil, pp. ix-xii.
38. Uwise and Ajmal Khan, Islamiyya Thamil, p. 413, seq.
39. Ibid. p. 407. Also, Chelvanayakam, Thamil Ilakya Varalaru, p. 244.
40. The Portuguese ruled the littoral of Ceylon from 1505 to 1656; the Dutch from thence to 1796. They were replaced by the British in that year and in 1815, the British annexed the indigenous principality of Kandy and ruled over the entire country. Ceylon gained independence from Britain in 1948. See. H.W. codrington. A Short History of Ceylon (London, 1939); S.G. Perera SJ, History of Ceylon for Schools (Colombo, 1949), Pt I (Portuguese and Dutch periods); Pt II (British Period).
42. Sophia Pietersz, Instructions from the Governor-General and the Council of [Dutch] India to the Governor of Ceylon 1656–1665 (trs. and ed. Sophia Pietszcz) (Colombo, 1908), p. 63. The Disawara was the term for a Dutch provincial administrator. Graves meant the boundaries of a township.
46. Ibid.
48. Colombo Alimi, himself, has written Arabic Tamil works such as Mihat ud Atfal (see. Kanaka Chenthinathan, Kathu Ilakya Valarchi (Development of Literature in Ceylon) (Colombo, 1964) p. 144 (based on the information given by late Mr. A.P.N. Allapichai).
49. The popular primer for Arabic used in Sri Lanka, Ta'llim al-Qur’âñ, had its notes for teachers in Arabic-Tamil.
52. Ibid. p. 31.
55. Ibid.
56. U.V. Swaminatha Aiyer had discussed the role of *uthknam* and literary encouragment in his *Maha Vidwan Meenakshi sundaram Pillai avarkalin Charithram* (History of the Learned Meenakshi Sunderam Pillai (Madras, 1940), two volumes. See also his *En Charitram* (My Story) (Madras, 1947) for his search for old MSS.
58. The most popular *mowlids* are *Subhano mowlid*, *Kilwi mowlid*, *waja Muinuddin mowlid*, *Harari mowlid* and *Sheikh Dawood mowlid*. Some popular *rathib* are *Rathib Muzhabwiya*, *Rathib Hadad*, *Rathib Addash*, *Rathi Jalaliya talai Faiha* (celebratory verses on Lady Fatimah), *Badr Shahaba mowlid*, *Rathib Jawfer Sadiq* are equally popular, specially among women.
60. Some representative Ceylon legislation are, *Town Schools Ordinance* (Ord. no. 5 of 1906). *Rural Schools Ordinance* (Ord. no. 8 of 1907).
66. Some of these items have been extracted from a catalogue 1862—1963 issued by a principal publishers and printers of Colombo and Madras.