Notes and News

Obeisance to Viṣṇu-Tirumāl: Vaiṣṇava Transmission for a Cankam Manuscript

Among the roughly 150 surviving manuscripts on palm-leaf and paper of the earliest Classical Tamil literature, the Cankam corpus (consisting of two hyper-anthologies of erotic and heroic poetry which dates back perhaps to the beginning of the Common Era), the larger part appears to have been transmitted in a Saiva surrounding. Well-known is the role of such institutions as Tiruvilāyadūṭa Mutt, a Saiva monastery in the Tāḻuṟavār area, played for Tamil literary history. But even though the exact provenance of many manuscripts is not known today, their Saiva affiliation is visible in the numerous small invocations of Saiva deities predominantly at the end, but also in the margins of manuscripts. The function of these invocations is not immediately obvious, but it stands to reason that, apart from being simply auspicious signs, they might have been seen as a minimal justification of copying a secular text in a religious institution. Sources from the 18th century onwards testify to a rather militant consciousness of religion which had in the past to say in favour of older Saiva poetry. Quite frequently, the invocations are also marked by a change of script, while the poetic text and its colophon are written in Tamil, what follows is written in Grantha script.

However, in a number of cases the short invocations and blessings are not of Saiva, but of Vaiṣṇava denomination. Next to nothing is known about the share that Vaiṣṇava institutions might have had in the transmission of the corpus. The following case is noteworthy, for it is the case that the manuscript survives (not ends) with four fully-fledged devotional verses in various metres, followed by the usual series of minimal invocations. Secondly, the manuscript in question constitutes the major witness of a second strand of transmission available for one of the old anthologies, the Aṭṭukadigal, the 400 long Alai (love) poems. Since the manuscript is on palm-leaf, well-preserved and beautifully written, and is stored at the U.V. Swaminatha Iyer Library in Chennais [no. USVL 107] (abbreviated as C3 in the critical edition prepared by the Cankam Project). The four verses, on a first, separate leaf, are dedicated to Nārāyaṇa (the most important of the early Vaiṣṇava poet-saints), to the spiritual teacher, to Viṣṇu-Tirumāl and to a goddess (Śrī or Sarasvatī), in a row with several short prose invocations of various Vaiṣṇave entities (among them again Namālūrai). This part ends with some minimal information on the copying of the manuscript and a short characterisation of its content, naming as the title of the anthology 'nettikottai' and referring to the miniature commentary, traditionally named Adi, by the term nāṟṟi. This shows that

Apart from the well-attested vāllum, mostly transmitted in Śaiva institutions (such as Tiruvēnāḻūṟu mutt), there is a second line which appears to have been transmitted in a Vaiṣṇava context. As is usual, the manuscript is not dated, but both the script and the state of preservation make a date before the early 19th century look improbable.

In what follows metrical script and translation of the four stanzas are presented. The first among them finds is found in the landau topological treatise, the Mīlāgaṅalakāram (16th c.). The others are not yet identified and, to my knowledge, have not been printed before. The slightly irregular metres are presumably Acīrya Vīruttam (72), then two four-line Venpas, finally an Ālāyiram. 1

Despite the fact that a number of major languages of sub-Saharan Africa have a long and rich history of writing in Arabic script (Ajamī), ancient manuscripts written in local languages are extremely rare. However, in the late 1950s, some copies of the Qur’an were discovered in northern Nigeria, written in Arabic, with commentaries in an archaic variety of Kanuri-Kanembu, an important West African language spoken around Lake Chad, dating back to the 16th century and representing one of the earliest written examples of a sub-Saharan language. Apart from this variety of Old Kanembu, now represented in a corpus of 3,200 digital pages, there is another variety known as Tarjum, which is regarded as sacred and survives in local (i.e. North-East Nigerian) Islamic recitations. The aim of the project is to document and analyse this virtually unknown African manuscript culture in its linguistic and sociocultural setting, and explore previously unrecorded phenomena, i.e. how Old Kanembu and Tarjum relate historically to linguistically distinct modern Kanuri-Kanembu, and what they can tell us about the migrations and linguistic-cultural assimilation and integration in the Lake Chad basin. The project is drawing on preliminary results from an earlier AHRC-funded project ‘Early Nigerian Qur’anic manuscripts’ (http://africanmanuscripts.ouh.ac.uk), and cooperates with the research group ‘Manuscript cultures in Asia and Africa’ in Hamburg.

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Comparative Oral Manuscript Studies (COMST)

In June 2009, the European Science Foundation launched a five-year Research Networking Programme in Comparative Oral Manuscript Studies. The idea is to bring together European scholars working on manuscripts from different branches of Oral studies (with a focus on the Mediterranean and North African cultural areas of the ‘codes’ manuscript culture) in order to compare experiences and research results in the history of written civilization, manuscript cataloguing, textual and material analysis as well as issues of manuscript preservation, conservation and restoration. The ensuing cross-cultural academic dialogue will increase awareness of what is being done in the field and make it possible to elaborate unified methodologies in Oral manuscript studies.

The COMST network is guided by a Steering Committee formed by the representatives of all ten funding countries and chaired by Professor Dr Alessandro Bausi of the University of Hamburg. It is coordinated by Evgenia Sokolinskaya of the Hoh Ludolf-Centre for Ethiopian Studies at the University of Hamburg. More than sixty scholars from fifteen countries currently involved in the network work in five teams: (1) Material aspects: codicology and palaeography, (2) Manuscripts as text witnesses: philology as textual criticism. (3) Digital approaches to manuscript studies. (4) Manuscript cataloguing. (5) Manuscript preservation. The teams meet in regular workshops, and there is also an ongoing cross-team discussion. Two larger conferences are also part of the programme: the Launching Conference which took place in Hamburg on 1-3 December 2009, and the Closing Conference that will be held towards the end of the project in May 2014.

For more information, please see: http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/COMST/
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CONTENTS

ARTICLES
1 | Ordered Disorder: Vestiges of Mixed Written and Oral Transmission of Arabic Didactic Poems, by Tilman Seidensticker

5 | Scriptal Notation in Medieval Chinese Manuscripts: The ived (Ligature) and the changwen (Duplication) Marks, by Imre Gálambos

10 | Liage—a Chinese Ligature in Uighur Manuscripts from the 13th and 14th Centuries, by Peter Zieme

13 | Of Critical Editions and Manuscript Reproductions: Remarks apropos of a Critical Edition of Pūmiyotinīkṣaya Chapters 1 and 2, by Hananagä Isaacson

21 | Tai Manuscripts in the Dhamma Script Domain: Surveying, Preservation and Documentation, Part 2, by Harald Hundtus

NOTES AND NEWS
26 | Obedience to Vīṣṇu-Turāmā: Vaiṣṇava Transmission for a Cañikam Manuscript

27 | A Study of Old Kanembu in Early West African Qur'ānic Manuscripts and Islamic Recitations (Taṣjam) in the Light of Kanuri–Kanembu Dialects spoken around Lake Chad

27 | Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (COMSt)

28 | The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts (DLLM)

28 | Ethno-SPIRE: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia: Salvation, Preservation and Research

INSIDE MCAA
29 | MCAA People 2009
30 | MCAA International Conference On Colophons 3rd–5th December 2009
31 | MCAA Calendar 2009
34 | MCAA Essentials