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Before Provençal: Alba Poetics in Second-Century Tamil Literature

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Abstract: *Tamil is one of the world's oldest classical languages, with a literary tradition extending back over two millennia. This paper proves that Kuṟuntokai poems contain the characteristics of the alba tradition of love songs approximately 1,300 years before the first documented Western albas. This paper (1) investigates the Western canonical literature's claim that the alba genre is a tradition of medieval verse originating in twelfth-century France and (2) provides evidence that Kuṟuntokai poems 107 and 157 exhibit all the essential features of the alba genre, predating the Western tradition by over a millennium.*

Keywords*: Alba, Kuṟuntokai, Talaivaṉ, Talaivi, comparative literature, dawn songs, caṅkam poetry*

Introduction

Alba songs refer to dawn songs. These are erotic in nature, sung by women and are considered an outpouring of the pain experienced by lovers who have to part at the approach of the dawn. The female character plays a significant role in this genre; she is not passive like the canso lady. The characteristics that define this genre are all in attendance in the *Kuṟuntokai* poems 107 and 157: the disruption by dawn's light of a passionate love tryst, dramatic eloquence and musicality. The picturesqueness, intensity of language, originality and lyricism merit special distinction; the female voice which is typically restrained can be found to be its true self here. "The troubadours created their female characters ex nihilo – out of their own vivid imaginations", says Gale Sigal (i). This reference needs re-reading: this article demonstrates that poems with these characteristics can be traced back to the Tamil caṅkam poetry collection *Kuṟuntokai*, composed between 200 BC and 300 AD.

This paper argues that *Kuṟuntokai* poems 107 and 157 contain the defining characteristics of the Western alba genre that would emerge in medieval France. The analysis reveals that similar poetic forms might have emerged independently given that lovers parting at dawn after a secretive tryst is a universal human experience, or that through ancient trade routes connecting Tamil regions with the Mediterranean world would have enabled the transmission of the poetic forms. Although direct influence cannot be established with literary,

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archaeological or documentary evidence, the chronological precedence as well as remarkable similarity of structures crave for serious scholarly attention.

A notable figure in English Medieval Studies Gale Sigal, in *Erotic Dawn-Songs of the Middle Ages: Voicing the Lyric Lady* (1996), endeavours to establish that troubadour lyric is a traditional medieval verse. This paper examines this Western claim that the alba songs have originated in southern France around the middle of the twelfth century. In that effort, the paper crosses a number of disciplinary borders including that of comparative literature, medieval studies, and women's literature. The first part of the article introduces the Western alba genre and the second part shows how *Kuṟuntokai* poems fit in it neatly and hence can claim to be the literary predecessor.

Although far fewer albas are to be found in *Kuṟuntokai*, they are masterpieces and are the forerunners to the dawn songs of the world. Great love poems of all time, their elegance, expressiveness and characters are a momentous gift to the Western poetic canon. Perhaps the later European poets had picked up this motif to produce sophisticated songs with brilliant effect. Providing not just aesthetic delight, these songs appeal to the heart, human psyche, senses as well as the intellect of the readers. A.K. Ramanujan's translation of select caṅkam poems received rave reviews and has proven to the European scholars that the claim of Tamil classical literature to international recognition and eternal fame is based on solid grounds.

K. Ayyappa Paniker wonders whether Indian scholars and theorists are still caught in the colonial hangover. He laments that *Tolkāppiyam*'s "Porulatikaram" – the earliest form of eco-aesthetic theory – is not receiving a fraction of the attention that the literary world showers on Western theoretical traditions (101). Through a close reading and detailed commentary on the lyrics from *Kuṟuntokai*, this paper intends to expose the reader to the poetic virtuosity and originality of the ancient Tamil lyrics and hints that the troubadour's theme had originated in the caṅkam period and over the years came to reverberate across literatures.

Alba: Background Study

The alba or dawn song takes the name from the time at which it is sung. The Western literary canon claims that this genre appeared around the middle of the twelfth century in Southern France and talks about the pains of parting lovers. "The alba is the only genre in an emerging vernacular lyric corpus whose focus is reciprocal romantic love" (Sigal, jacket leaf). The alba genre has characteristics of double entendre: it narrates passionate memories from the sexual union the previous night and the excruciating pain that results with the passing of night. The darkness, that is, the night, and the secluded place, serves as the perfect setting for the romantic lovers to reciprocate their desire and passion; the dawn might part the lovers at any time; the dawn brings a denouement to their sweet love; the dawn circumscribes their tryst; it signals parting; the female protagonist is reluctant to part and is expressive of her plaint as well as passion.

The Old Provençal word *alba* stands for the white brightness of dawn in contrast to the darkness of the night. The word is frequently used as the generic designation for all medieval dawn songs, although each language has adopted its own linguistic form for the term. Sigal comments that these poetic forms can be found in Old Provençal, Old French (*aube*), Middle High German (*tageliet*, day strophe) and Middle English (12). The alba poems from these various cultures sport common characteristic features such as voice, structure, plot, theme, characters and setting (Sigal 14). Their lyricism, elegance, musicality, dramatic power and expressiveness have made this form of poetry an endearing form.

The alba genre introduced into the Western poetic tradition an eloquent female voice in opposition to the demure, discreet and patient silence of the second sex. The genre made itself

flexible and found variety in no time, with Boccaccio making use of it in *Il Filostrato*, Chaucer in *Troilus*, Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* (Sigal 15). Later on, John Donne exploited this form in the famous poems "The Good Morrow", "Break of Day" and "The Sunne Rising". After a brief hiatus, this genre resurfaced again in Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne as well as in Housman, Yeats, Sitwell, Auden, Williams, Shapiro and Wilbur (quoted in Sigal 14).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century critics who rediscovered medieval vernacular poetry found the alba especially enchanting. For Saintsbury, the alba song was the "most famous, peculiar and representative of Provençal forms" (Sigal 7). Musicologists, historians and literary scholars have been highly critical of the Middle High German *tageliet* (Sigal 9). Friedrich Angels admired the kaleidoscopic nature of the alba genre. Sigal quotes how Jeanroy counts eight albas, Woledge scores nine Old Provençal and four Old French lyrics as albas (Sigal 9). Saville counts nineteen Old Provençal and five Old French albas (Sigal 10). She also mentions that more than a hundred Middle High German dawn songs are quoted in Hatto's *Eos: An Inquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry* (Hatto provides the exact number, original poems, their translations and amusing commentaries) (16).

Of all the contributions of the alba genre, its most momentous and original gift to the Western culture is its emboldened female voice. It marks a watershed in the history of the poetic idealization of the female figure in literature. The lady of this poetic form is eloquent and documents a strong, tough, and dynamic female figure. Through her, male poets experimented brilliantly and audaciously with nuances of female characterization. The clear, defiant voice of the alba lady cries out against the conventional, confining stereotypical roles that her gender has been forced to play so far. The silent courtly lady of the *domna* is outwitted by the wilful and eloquent alba lady who enjoys a passionate rendezvous forbidden hitherto.

Since there is female narrator, the alba poetry is considered a "woman's song". Theodor Frings comments: it must have evolved from an unrecorded tradition of women's oral folk poetry: *Frauenlieder* in the vernacular Middle Ages (quoted in Sigal 20). Baskerville in "English Songs on the Night Visit" wonders how a genre of intricately wrought poetry appears in Middle France and not in England or why English poetry has lagged behind (Sigal 23). Dronke suggests that the alba must have developed from the roman oral folk poetry, from Romance patois (Sigal 55). The dawn songs of Ambrose and Prudentius must have been a learned and sacred rejoinder to a vogue of profane albas that have not survived in writing (Sigal 24). Rieger says the alba is the blending of the folk and the courtly (Hatto 95).

Caṅkam Poems and *Kuṟuntokai*: A Background Study

Caṅkam poems are extremely sophisticated; understanding them or enjoying them is a challenging task because of their underlying codes of writing. The literary conventions are followed in toto as set in *Tolkāppiyam* (earliest surviving Tamil text of grammar and literature that discusses in detail the letter, phoneme, sound, word, subject matter, including prosody, rhetoric, and poetics).

The social and cultural past of any race lives in its arts and literature. One has to know the past, the roots, well in order to plan the future because what came before influences what comes after. A culturally rich country like India has much to boast about in the realm of literature. The caṅkam corpus has in its possession 2,381 poems written by 473 poets around 2,000 years ago, which documents their celebration of love, life and tradition. *Kuṟuntokai*, a collection of short lyrics consisting of 4–8 lines each, is a Classical Tamil poetic masterpiece. It forms the second book of *Eṭṭuttokai* (*The Eight Anthologies*) of caṅkam literature. It has 402 poems written by 205 poets. The poems in the collection are believed to have been written

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between 200 BC and AD 300 (Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*). The anthology was compiled by Poorikko sometime before the ninth century (Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape*). These poems belong to the *akam* category (which deals with the emotions, conduct and behaviour with regard to courtship and marriage) and are set against the backdrop of Tamil landscapes (*tinai* – code of behaviour and physical region, that is, geographical landscapes mirroring specific mindscapes).

The *akam* poetry of *Kuṟuntokai* follows strict conventions established in *Tolkāppiyam*, particularly regarding *iravukkuri* (night tryst) and *pagarkuri* (day meeting) (Zvelebil 21; Reddiar 45). These conventions resemble the alba's fundamental structure: secret nocturnal meetings, the approach of dawn as a threat, and the necessity of parting. Tamil literary theorist Tolkāppiyar recognized these themes as central to love poetry centuries before the emergence of Provençal lyric.

Detailed Analysis of *Kuṟuntokai* 107 and 157

***Kuṟuntokai* 107, Mathurai Kannanār, Marutham**

What the heroine said

O rooster with a flock
adorned with huge, red combs
that look like pointed clusters
of glory lily blossoms!
You woke me from my joyful sweet
sleep with the man from the
prosperous town with deep ponds.
May you suffer greatly and become
food eaten little by little by a wildcat
cub that searches for house rats in
the pitch darkness of night. (Translation by Vaidehi Herbert)

This is a statement by the protagonist who is called Talaivi in caṅkam **poetry. She is extremely angry with the rooster** because it disturbed her when she was enjoying sexual union with her husband who has returned home after a long time after his voyage to garner wealth. She curses the rooster that it be eaten by a wildcat which haunts houses in search of rats. The rooster functions as the herald of dawn, similar to the watchman figure in French alba poetry who warns lovers of approaching daylight. However, unlike the watchman who serves as protector, the rooster becomes the object of Talaivi's wrath – an enemy that must be destroyed for interrupting her happiness.

The rooster is described in the first section of the poem; it has a flock that resembles the petals of Malabar lily which are red. The bright red colour is set in stark contrast against the pitch darkness of the sweet night. Red is suggestive of negative, dangerous-bearing emotions: anger, heat, fire, blood and poisonous and dangerous animals.

The intensity of Talaivi's curse is shocking. She does not merely lament the dawn's arrival – she actively rebels against it through violent imagery. The specificity of her curse ("eaten little by little") emphasizes prolonged suffering, which suggests the prolonged agony of separation she must endure. This active, even aggressive female voice contrasts sharply with the passive, idealized ladies of courtly love poetry and aligns perfectly with the alba lady's defiant eloquence.

Her anger as well as disappointment that the dawn has approached and hence Talaivi will have to part from her husband/lover is expressed in the severity of her curse. The rooster heralds the dawn and so it deserves to be killed; it cannot be gobbled up at a single swallow; it

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has to be eaten little by little; it has to experience excruciating pain. This description gives food for discourse. **Talaivi** enjoyed being with her lover/husband to such an extent that separation because of dawn makes her cruel; she is no more the refined and silent iconic lady that she has been portrayed so far. She seems to be an epitome of cruelty now. She sees the animal that takes her away from her sweetheart as the most unpleasant species that has ever walked the earth and deserves to be killed right away. She looks at it with hatred. Her soft, feminine bearing gives way to unimaginable cruelty.

The poem's structure follows the alba pattern precisely: (1) description heralding the dawn, (2) acknowledgment of the night's passionate union, (3) expression of anguish at separation, and (4) curse/lament against the forces that end the tryst. The compressed seven-line Tamil original achieves what later Western albas would expand into elaborate stanzas.

***Kuṟuntokai* 157, Allūr Nanmullaiyār, Marutham**

What the heroine said

Coo,
crowed the rooster and my
pure heart pounded in fear,
since dawn struck
like a sword to separate me
from the embraces of my lover. (Translation by Vaidehi Herbert)

The hen cried cuckoo. Hearing that, Talaivi realizes that the dawn has come. Her husband/lover who has been lying on her shoulder now will wake up and part from her. The dawn is personified as an active agent of violence – it "struck / like a sword to separate" the lovers. This metaphor of dawn-as-weapon appears throughout alba poetry, where daylight becomes the antagonist that violently severs the unity of lovers. The sword imagery particularly resonates with the alba tradition's militaristic metaphors for separation (dawn as enemy, love as battle, parting as wound). Talaivi's physical response – "my pure heart pounded in fear" – captures the bodily reaction to dawn's approach. This is not abstract philosophical musing on love's impermanence; it is immediate, physical terror at the loss of the beloved's presence.

The brevity of this four-line poem demonstrates the sophistication of Tamil poetic technique. Through the literary device of *ullurai* (inset), the poem evokes an entire night of passion, the approach of dawn, the moment of realization, the physical embrace, and the impending separation – all in laconic evocative language. In other words, this song can be directly interpreted as expressing the disappointment that the wife, who was sleeping happily hugging her husband's shoulder, could no longer do so because it was dawn.

Comparative Analysis: Western Alba and *Kuṟuntokai* Features

To establish the relationship between these traditions, we must examine their shared characteristics systematically:

Alba Feature	Western Tradition	Kuṟuntokai 107 & 157
Night setting	Secret nocturnal tryst	Explicitly stated: "sweet sleep" through the night
Dawn as antagonist	Dawn ends the encounter; often personified	Dawn personified as sword (157); rooster heralded dawn (107)
Female agency	Woman speaks, laments, protests	Talaivi curses (107), expresses fear and loss (157)

Sexual intimacy	Explicitly referenced or strongly implied	Suggestive, never overt: "joyful sweet sleep" (107), "embraces of my lover" (157)
Herald figure	Watchman warns of approach of day	Rooster crows to announce dawn
Separation anxiety	Central emotional focus	"heart pounded in fear" (157); violent curse (107)
Curse/lament	Woman protests against dawn, fate, or circumstances	Elaborate curse on rooster (107); sword metaphor (157)

Western and Tamil Caṅkam Genres: Contextual Comparison

Meeting by day (*pagarkuri*) and trysting by night (*iravukkuri*) are some of the conventions underlined in *Tolkāppiyam* in the *Kalaviyal* chapter:

> The rendezvous is
> The trysting spot
> Where the hero and heroine meet
> By night and by day
> By mutual acquiescence. (Sutra 1074, Translation by Murugan 451)
>
> Trysting by night occurs
> In the precincts of the heroine's house
> A spot within hearing of the household,
> And it occasions
> Before the hero finds access into her house. (Sutra 1075, Translation by Murugan 452)

Without taking into account the dangers that might lurk in the dark in the form of reptiles and wild animals, nature's hurdles in the form of rain, thunder and lightning or disturbance from humans such as parents, siblings or villagers, Talaivaṉ and Talaivi meet in the night to strengthen the bond they share. This is typical of the Western troubadour poetry that Gale Sigal talks about. The *Tolkāppiyam* sutras codify what later alba poetry would practice: clandestine night meetings near the woman's dwelling, the risk of discovery by family members, and the primacy of mutual desire over social convention. That these conventions were formalized in Tamil poetic theory by the early centuries CE indicates a mature tradition of such poetry.

The watchman is a recurrent figure in the French vernacular poetry; in caṅkam poems, it is the Talaivi's confidante who helps Talaivaṉ and Talaivi meet and express their love. Although the confidante is the ally for Talaivi in many a poem, in poems 107 and 157, the rooster becomes the confidante, or rather, the "watchman" – but transformed into an unwelcome announcer rather than a protective ally. This variation demonstrates the genre's flexibility while maintaining its core structure.

The binary oppositions are its fundamental features: presence of night/day, sleep/wakefulness, union/separation, joy/sorrow, sweet/bitter memories; separation and promise to be together before soon (Hatto 145). These binary oppositions structure both the *Kuṟuntokai* poems discussed in the paper: night's pleasure versus dawn's melancholy, union's sweetness versus separation's anxiety, sleep's peace versus waking's yearning.

The few differences that can be found between the Western and Tamil genres can be excused based on Beneditto Croce's comment: "Every true work of art has violated an established genre, and in this way confounded the idea of critics who thus found themselves compelled to broaden the genre" (Sigal 11); semiotic codes and structures that frame and

inform texts for readers must always yield, bend, modulate themselves under the pressure of the individual creative writer (Sigal 13). The theme of separation, sweet memories, cursing the elements that herald the dawn are common definitive features between the Western and Tamil alba genres. Jauss says that a master work never stays wholly within the rigidly definable boundaries of a genre (quoted in Sigal 25) . Hatto registers only eighteen of the hundred Middle High German because the higher the number of the *tagelieder*, the more the absence of the charm and originality of the earlier ones. It should have undergone a number of changes as the striking contrasts among the members of the corpus prove (Sigal 38). Pope quotes that it has crossed across erotic, didactic, pious, burlesque stages (quoted in Sigal 43).

The detailed account of the pains of Western alba ladies are just an expansion of the love-sick but wilful Talaivi of the caṅkam period. They are very open about the agonies, sufferings and pleasures of the sexual union; the concept of *pacalai* (love sickness) from the *Akam* poems is the best example that proves this. The *pacalai* convention in Tamil poetry – depicting the physical wasting away of the lady love during separation – parallels the alba's embodied approach to love's suffering. Both traditions reject abstract idealization in favour of visceral, somatic experience.

The poems taken up for discussion are not long ones. In the original language (Tamil), these two run 7, 4 lines respectively. The caṅkam poems use the suggestive literary mechanism called *ullurai* that is connotative and enable semantic expansion. The semantic possibilities in turn endow the literary piece with generative features. This gives way to endless reinterpretations. It is time to appreciate the inventiveness and brilliance of the caṅkam poems. Many contemporary Tamil poetic models have their origin in *Kuṟuntokai* and the Western alba poems too can find their antecedent in *Kuṟuntokai*. These poems shed a different light on the *fin'amors*.

Conclusion

Kuṟuntokai has two wonderfully crafted lyrics of the alba genre. Their originality, intensity of language and picturesqueness of description make the poems more engaging, more perceptive and meaningful. This paper has demonstrated that poems 107 and 157 contain all the essential characteristics of the alba genre – nocturnal tryst, dawn as antagonist, eloquent female voice, curse/lament, and dramatic urgency – in works dating from 200 BC to 300 AD, over a millennium before the first documented Western albas.

Tracking down, surveying and classifying the prototype of the alba to the Tamil ancient corpus will prove a worthy academic enquiry, especially in the context of the recent Kīḻaṭi discoveries that proclaim the grandeur of the Tamil language, culture and its people. K. Ayyappa Paniker says that no one theory can be final. Often a single theory fails to analyse a literary work in its entirety (102). He opines that just as non-Indian theories are used in the study of Indian literature, Dravidian theory should be employed in understanding and appreciating non-Dravidian works (Paniker 103). This will enhance the meaningfulness, richness and relevance of any theory. This article has made an attempt at demonstrating that *Kuṟuntokai* poems record an early manifestation of the alba genre.

The evidence presented here invites several points towards further inquiry: (1) systematic analysis of the whole caṅkam corpora for alba elements, (2) investigation of possible transmission routes through ancient trade networks, (3) comparative study with dawn songs from other ancient literary traditions (Chinese, Sanskrit, Persian) to map the genre's global distribution, and (4) examination of how the *ullurai* technique in Tamil poetry might have influenced or paralleled European poetic strategies.

It invites the Tamil academia to understand their responsibility in providing further adequate literary evidence and comparative analysis so that caṅkam literature gains contemporary relevance and receives the international honour it is entitled to. Recognition of Tamil literature's contributions to world literary history need not diminish the achievements of medieval Provençal poets; rather, it enriches our understanding of how poetic forms addressing fundamental human experiences have evolved across cultures and millennia, sometimes in parallel, sometimes in dialogue, always revealing the creative genius of poets who give voice to the bittersweet experience of love and loss.

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