

LANGUAGES IN CONTACT : THE CASE OF MUSLIM TAMIL

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This paper deals with Muslim Tamil, the dialect of Tamil spoken by the Moor community of Sri Lanka, and examines the impact of an Islamic culture on a Dravidian linguistic system. It sets out the linguistic traditions of the community and deals especially with the lexical and phonological diversity that marks Muslim Tamil as a variety distinct from the other varieties of Tamil used in Sri Lanka.

By definition, the Muslims of Sri Lanka are to be distinguished from their compatriots by their adherence to the faith of Islam. This single-minded commitment to one religion has led to the view that the Muslims are a homogeneous group sharing one religion and one language, bound together by common business interests. Such a view ignores the realities of the situation and obliterates the perceptions that the Muslims have of themselves. The Muslim, or Islamic community of Sri Lanka in fact constitutes three main groups, viz : the Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Moors and the Sri Lankan Malays. Of these the group that came earliest to the island were the Sri Lankan Moors who have been settled here since the eighth century. (Arasaratnam 1964). Although traditionally believed to be descendants of Arab traders who landed near Galle and fanned eastwards and westwards, it is more probable that the earliest wave of Arab traders was supplemented by Indian Muslims from the Malabar coast in or around the tenth century. Today these Muslims are to be found in towns and villages throughout the island, usually maintaining their traditional pastime of trading. The other two groups form a contrast to the ubiquitous Sri Lankan Moor, being confined mainly to the urban centres of Sri Lanka. The Indian Moors have settled in Colombo and Kandy for the most part, and are the descendants of Indian traders who came over during the British period. The Malays, descendants of Indonesian soldiers brought over by the Dutch, originally settled in Hambantota from where they moved to cities like Colombo. As linguistic communities too, these groups form contrasting entities. The mother tongue of the Malays is Malay, a language derived from Javanese, while Indian Moors use Tamil as their mother tongue. To the Sri Lankan Moor too, Tamil is, and has always been the mother tongue. In spite of age-long links with and settlement among the Sinhalese, the Sri Lankan Moors have never abandoned their preference for Tamil as the language of the home. This proclivity for Tamil has not been convincingly accounted for although the most plausible explanation is provided by Arasaratnam (1964). He ascribes the use of Tamil to the importance of the Tamil-speaking Malabar coast as a centre of trade, and to the use of Tamil as a language of commerce in South and South-East Asia. Thus the trading Moors retained Tamil as a mother tongue even in the Sinhala-dominated South and Central areas where

they settled. This has also probably helped the Moors to maintain themselves as a social group distinct from the Buddhist or Christian groups around them

The Tamil spoken by the Sri Lankan Moors referred to in this paper as Muslim (MT) Tamil has never been systematically investigated.¹ It forms a direct contrast to the dialect of Tamil used by the other, larger Tamil-speaking community, the Sri Lankan Tamils and which is referred to in this paper as Sri Lanka Colloquial Tamil (SLCT). This has long been recognised as a major dialect of Tamil and there is a considerable body of work on the grammar, phonology and vocabulary of this dialect. However although MT has not been subject to such linguistic scrutiny, it too has been recognised as a distinct dialect peculiar to the Sri Lankan Moor community, and social historians writing of the Moors refer to this dialect as 'Arabic Tamil'. According to Azeez (1965), this language was originally written in the Arabic script with a few letters improvised to denote Tamil sounds unknown in Arabic. Newspapers seem to have been published in this script, none of which are existent today. Arabic Tamil does not seem to have produced any literary works at all, though the comparable Muslim Tamil dialect of South India² has produced a number of works of literature including even an epic poem on the life of the Prophet Mohammed based on the 'Ramayanam', titled 'Sivapuramam' and written c. 1700. In spite of efforts by Muslim scholars to re-establish it as a literary language, the Tamil used by the Sri Lankan Moors exists essentially as a spoken dialect. Native speakers of this dialect refer to it as Muslim Tamil (or Conahe Tamil) the term Islamic Tamil usually being reserved for the formal written variety which is sometimes used. Although the use of Tamil as a mother tongue is prevalent throughout the Moor community, it would nevertheless be incorrect to regard the dialect as being wholly uniform. There are in fact noticeable intra-dialectal differences the most marked being between those who live in the South, ie Beruwala to Galle, and those who live in the North, ie Jaffna and the East ie. Batticaloa, Amparai. However in general, there is mutual intelligibility within the community, and the community as a whole is united in its use of dialect forms not known to or used by the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Any account of Muslim Tamil has also to take note of the place occupied by this dialect within the linguistic situation of Tamil in Sri Lanka. Tamil is a language that has exhibited diglossic variation even as early as pre-Christian times. Thus in common with other diglossic languages like Arabic, Greek and Swiss German, in Tamil too "two distinct varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the speech community...and each of the two varieties is assigned a definite social function" (Trudgill 1974). This compartmentalization of language function is overtly recognized by native speakers who assign different names to the two varieties, one being the 'higher' variety tending to have a 'prestige value', often learned at school and associated with a pan-national educated elite, the other being less formal, a 'lower' variety, learned and used at home and in informal situations. In Sri Lankan Tamil, the higher variety used

1. cf. Rāheem (1975); Suseendirarajah (1980) also investigates this dialect.

2. The language of the majority of Muslims in India is Urdu, Tamil being used only in the South.

in formal speech and writing, referred to as Centamil is an idealized form of the Tamil spoken in Jaffna (Kandiah 1967), all other colloquial varieties, e.g. Batticaloa Tamil etc. being considered 'lower' varieties.

Examples of the distinction between the 'high' and 'low' varieties are to be readily found in the verb forms used on formal and informal occasions. Given below are some examples of these variations which occur in Muslim Tamil, Sri Lanka Colloquial Tamil and Sri Lanka Literary Tamil, ie Centamil, respectively :

MT	SLCT	SLLT	Meaning
celliyē	conneen	conneen	I said.
celliyē	conniiNke	conniirkel	You said (Honorific/Plural)
celliyē	conniir	conniirkel	You said. (Singular)
iikkiyē	irukutu	irukkinretu	There is
poone	poonen	pooneen	I went.
poone	poonaaNke	poonaarkel	They went
poone	pooniiNkelaa	pooniirkelaa	Did you go ? (Honorific/Plural)
wanta	wantaa	wantaal	She came.
wanta	wantaan	wantaan	He came.

As can be seen from the above, Tamil is a language in which grammatical categories such as number, tense, person etc. are indicated by morphological increment, and variations can be seen in the case of all three varieties set out above. One can also note here that the forms of SLCT bear a fair resemblance to SLLT ; the MT forms however are simplified. There is for instance no distinction between Singular and Plural forms, used also as honorific forms indicating respect as in the other varieties of Tamil. Interrogative forms in MT also tend to be reduced, interrogation being marked by intonation rather than by morphological particle. The table given above also illustrates another aspect of the linguistic situation, viz : the availability of not two but three varieties to the MT speaker. This has tended to make the two-way diglossic situation of Tamil even 'more complex, and there prevails what Mkilifi (1972) describes as a 'triglossic' situation, encompassing the literary 'high' variety, the informal 'low' variety of the Sri Lankan Tamil and the Moors own variety, Muslim Tamil. Thus the linguistic world of the Moor consists of two parallel diglossic situations. In the formal situation where he is called upon to exhibit learning or education, situations which include public meetings of any kind,

interviews for jobs, radio broadcasts and religious services, the Moor like all other Tamil speaking communities would codeswitch to Centamil. One of the factors governing the phenomenon of code-switching is perception of the identity of one's audience, but in the case of the Moor's switch to Centamil, consideration of audience identity is immaterial for even if the speaker is addressing an audience composed of fellow Moors, as at a mosque service for instance, he would suppress his use of the colloquial Muslim Tamil and use instead the 'higher' variety.

In the other type of situation, ie the informal social situation, which includes interaction with one's friends, relations, servants etc. the Moor could and would interact not only with members of his own community but with members of the Sri Lanka Tamil community as well. Here identity of audience is a salient factor determining the choice of variety to be used. If the interlocutor is a Sri Lankan Tamil, the Moor who has a knowledge of SLCT would switch to this variety, but if the interlocutor is a fellow Muslim, then the variety used would of course be Muslim Tamil.

Social scientists who have investigated instances of such code-switching usually view this phenomenon as indicating a community's perception of one language or one language variety as being more dominant than the others used by that community. Thus in Rubins' (1962) study of Paraguay, Spanish is seen as the more dominant language in preference to the native Guarani, and in Norway, Gumperz and Blom (1972) point out how one variety of Norwegian, Bokmal, is associated with education and power and therefore tends to be more dominant than the others. However though the Moor does switch to Centamil in certain formal situations, this does not mean that he automatically assigns dominance position to this variety of Tamil. For in the complex linguistic system of the Moor, the language that has a prestige value far above that of Tamil or any other indigenous language, is Arabic. In common with Muslims all over the world, to the Sri Lankan Moor, Arabic, the language of the Koran, is the language of God, And so though it is a language far removed from the everyday realities of life in Sri Lanka, it is invested with a moral sanction not shared by any other linguistic code, and in the Muslim community, any person even if he is a child, is accorded great respect, if he or she can read the Koran well. It is also significant to note that Arabic like Centamil is a superposed language, but where Centamil is learnt within the confines of a school, Arabic though used as a formal language for very specific purposes, is learnt within the home, and practised and reinforced within the intimate confines of one's family and friends of the same community. Thus though it is possible to find Moors not literate in Tamil though they may use and speak Muslim Tamil, it is rare to find a Muslim who does not know at least the rudiments of classical literary Arabic. Tamil though it may be important to the Moor is thus not accorded the respect given to or have the same socio-psychological influence accorded to Arabic.

The linguistic world of the Moor then is an interesting mosaic of various codes, the use of these codes being governed by socio-cultural considerations. It reflects the impinging of an Islamic tradition placing high value on Arabic on

the diglossic structure of Tamil. What has been described so far however are extra-linguistic features, factors which though they determine choice of code to be used are not intrinsic features of the language. But if one looks closer at the linguistic features proper of Muslim Tamil, one can see mirrored internally the same intermingling of Dravidian and Arabic traditions, elements of an Islamic culture overlaying and interweaving with the basic structures of Tamil.

As is to be expected, the area in which this complexity is most easily observable is the field of lexis. Lexical variations between Muslim Tamil and Sri Lanka Colloquial Tamil are diverse, and it is this which contributes largely to Muslim Tamil being incomprehensible to a SLCT speaker. Some examples of these variations are given below and as the list illustrates, they range from different words for simple household items to variations in verb-forms and prepositions.

MT	SLCT	Meaning
sansaappe	karenti	spoon.
puttuwem	katirei	chair
gaareppu	mullu	fork
andi	pinneerem	evening
kiismiis	No word	raisins
noombu	wiretem	fast
lebbe	caami	priest
maruwa	pireku	afterwards
cutti	eennentaal	because
mawuttu	cettu	die
yaadu	nineywu	memory/remembrance

The list given above illustrates the case of dialectal variations for the same concept, but Muslim Tamil also embodies concepts which are unknown to the other communities on the island because they are uniquely Islamic. Consequently there are no corresponding equivalents for these concepts in Sri Lanka Colloquial Tamil. Thus *sahaan*—the practice of 6 adults sitting around and eating from a communal plate of food, obligatory on all religious occasions as a reminder of the brotherhood of Islam. The word is also used to indicate 'a group of 6 for a meal' and when catering, a gathering of 50 people for instance would be referred to as *etfu sahaan*, ie 8 *sahaan* ; *maher*—bride price, paid by the groom and obligatory on all males. SLCT speakers provide only *ceethanam*, dowry for the daughter, ; *musella*—a prayer mat, small rug or carpet imprinted with a scene of Mecca ; *niiyet*—intention, a vow that remains to be fulfilled being

referred to as *niiyetu katen*—a debt of intention ; *kaber*—grave or pit for burial ; *santekku*—a wicker basket—like structure used to carry corpses, used for all Muslims instead of a wooden coffin ; *maxeruuf*—forbidden, as for instance certain foods like pork : *ʔaʔak*—divorce, the word signifying not divorce by mutual consent but the unilateral declaration of divorce by a Muslim male *jumma*—the Friday prayer at noon ; In Muslim Tamil, time is in fact marked by reference to times of prayer, e.g. *saher* the pre-dawn prayer, *aser*—prayer at twilight etc. Thus *saherukku elumbuneen*—I woke up at about 4.30 a.m. for *saher* ; *kitaab* the book ie the Koran ; *sunnettu*—circumcision *tabliik*—orthodox ; *zaxaat*—the obligatory rite of giving alms, one of the five precepts of Islam, etc.¹

The words given above are a random list of words used by Muslim Tamil speakers and are mainly of Arabic origin. However these words are not considered loanwords for they are well and truly assimilated into Moor culture, and are subject to the same linguistic rules as the other Tamil words used. However they are relevant only to the Moors as they signify specific Islamic concepts.

Kinship terms on the other hand embody concepts which are more universal and fundamental, and thus are less susceptible to change or innovation. However in the field of kinship terminology too, Muslim Tamil exhibits the example Dravidian system being influenced by a totally different system. The kin of a terms used in Muslim Tamil co-incide in certain cases with those used by the other Tamil speaking community. For example, *maken*—son, parallel nephew ; *makel*—daughter, parallel niece ; *marumaken*,—*el*—cross nephew,—niece, son-in-law, daughter-in-law ; *maama*—father-in-law, mother's brother, husband of father's sister ; *maami*—mother-in-law, father's sister, wife of mother's brother ; *peeren*—grandson ; *peetti*—grandaughter. etc.

There are also certain kin terms used in this community which refer to categories of nuclear kin and used only in MT. Thus, *umma*—mother, *waappa*—father, *naana/kaakka*—elder brother ; *daatta/raatta*—elder sister ; *saacca*—father's younger brother, husband of mother's younger sister ; *saacci*—mother's younger sister, wife of father's younger brother etc.

The linguistic origins of some of these words are obscure, e.g. *naana*, *daatta*—*umma* however bears an obvious resemblance to Arabic *um*—mother ; the use of *saacci* for kin-type MoYo Si is found in the Malayalam-speaking Mapilla community, an Indian Muslim community of the Malabar coast. What is more important is the fact that the existence of these non-Tamil kinship terms reflects the complexities of the kinship system of the Sri Lankan Moors who although followers of Islam do not subscribe to the patriarchal patrilineal kinship structure of the Arab world, but have adopted some facets of the Dravidian kinship system of India. Hence the prominence given to the mother's brother in the kin structure, the preference for cross-cousin marriage and the forbidding of marriage between parallel cousins etc. All these are reflected in the list of Tamil terms given above, e.g. the term *marumaken* being used for

1. More examples of 'pure' MT vocabulary can be seen in the section on MT phonology

cross-nephew as well as son-in-law. At the same time the Moor system also contains features peculiarly its own, i.e. matrilocality and a matriarchal system, and these find expression in a linguistically different set of terms. It should also be remembered that the Moors are governed by Muslim Law which makes allowance for instance for polygamy, and thus there are kinship terms in MT which subsume the relationships this kind of marriage creates. The kin terms are therefore overt signals by which the Moor is able to mark the differences between his own community and the other non-Islamic community with whom he co-exists.

The presence of words of Arabic origin have had another important effect on the language, viz. the creation of a set of consonantal phonemes unique to Muslim Tamil. The importation of Middle-Eastern words brought with it the use of phonemes such as /f/ and /z/ which are foreign to Tamil, and the assimilation of the vocabulary went hand in hand with the assimilation of these phonetic elements. Vowel phonemes were not affected as the range of Tamil vowels incorporated those found in Arabic. Given below is the inventory of MT consonants; the specifically MT consonants are then discussed in greater detail.

Inventory of MT consonants

Plosives	p	t	ʈ	k
	b	d	ɟ	g
Nasals	m	n	ɳ	ŋ
Laterals	l	ɭ	ʎ	
Trills	r			
Fricatives	f	s	ʃ	h
	z			
Affricates				
Frictionless Continuants and Semi-Vowels	w	y		

Of the consonants given above, the consonants unique to MT are :

- (i) /b/ — a voiced bilabial plosive which occurs in all positions.

baangu — call to prayer.

kaabiri — infidel

noombu — fast

janaab — mister.

This also occurs as a gemminated consonant as in *lebbe*—priest. In SLCT, this is an allophone of /p/ occurring only in intervocalic and certain medial positions.

- (ii) /d/ — a voiced dental plosive, occurs in initial, intervocalic and final positions.
- duwaa* — an appeal
maderesaa — mosque school
kandiri — feast
istaad — bridal throne

In SLCT this occurs as an allophone of /t/ in intervocalic and medial positions.

- (iii) /j/ — a voiced palatal plosive, occurring in initial, intervocalic and final positions.
- joos* — a division of the Koran
najiis — filth
haj — obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca.

This also occurs as a geminated consonant as in *hajjiani*—title of respect for a female pilgrim to Mecca.

In SLCT, this occurs as an allophonic variation of /c/ only in cluster with a preceding homorganic nasal consonant.

- (iv) /g/ — a voiced velar plosive occurring in initial and intervocalic positions.
- gaareppu* — fork
naaguur — place name.

In SLCT this is an allophone of /k/ which occurs only in cluster with a preceding homorganic velar nasal.

- (v) /f/ — a voiceless labiodental fricative which occurs in all positions.
- faatiha* — a prayer
suufi — a mystic
irfaan — personal name
wakf — mosque trustee

This consonant is not found in Tamil.

- (vi) /s/ — a voiceless alveolar fricative which occurs in all positions.
- salaam* — a greeting
nasel — illness
kiismiis — raisins.

In SLCT this occurs as an allophonic variation of /c/ in initial and intervocalic positions; also in loan-words such as *pas*—bus.

(vii) /z/ — a voiced alveolar fricative which occurs initially, in intervocalic position and finally.

zamzam tanni — water from the Well of Zamzam in Mecca—holy water.

janaaza — funeral procession

hadiiz — code of law ie Koranic regulation.

This consonant is not found in Tamil.

(viii) /s/ — a voiceless palato — alveolar fricative occurring in initial and medial positions.

seittaan — devil

insaa alla — God willing

In SLCT, this occurs only in words of Sanskrit origin..

(ix) /x/ — a voiceless velar fricative which occurs only in intervocalic position.

zaxaat — charity

This Arabic phoneme is evident only in careful speech. In conversation, /x/ is often replaced by /k/ — thus *makeruuf* — forbidden, *zakaat* etc. MT however makes a distinction between /x/ /k/ and /h/ e.g. *maharuuf* is a personal name. In SLCT, /k/ in intervocalic position is replaced by /h/, and /x/ does not exist.

(x) /h/ — a voiceless glottal fricative which occurs in all positions except final.

haraam — sinful

maher — bride price

ilhaam — personal name.

In SLCT, this occurs as an allophone of /k/ in intervocalic position.

What seems to have happened then in MT is that a secondary phonological system has been imposed upon the primary system of Tamil, which allows for the existence of certain voiced plosives in initial position, a phonetic feature not existent in Tamil and for certain fricatives and plosives to assume phonemic status though in SLCT they exist as allophones. This phonological system serves to re-emphasise the intricacies of the language of the Moor, which derives from both Tamil and Arabic sources and yet is distinct from both. The dual loyalties imposed by this are interesting—the adoption of Tamil as a mother tongue leading to identification with a larger Tamil-speaking group while affiliation to Islam lends a sense of social distance. At the same time the adoption of Tamil has also led to socio-cultural patterns which though based on Islam are uniquely Sri Lankan and not Arab or Middle-Eastern. It is therefore an interesting example of how, through linguistic and cultural diffusion

and integration, a small band of people could maintain themselves as a distinct social community differing from the diverse cultures around them. And in recent years there have been yet other forces influencing the community. In the 50's and 60's for instance, Moors in urban centres tended to adopt English as the language of education in preference to Tamil or Sinhala and this encouraged identification with another small community, the Sri Lankan Burghers. As Sinhala gained importance as a national language, large numbers of Moors found it more advantageous to switch their linguistic loyalties, especially in the field of education, to Sinhala. This has created a new class of Moors, literate in Sinhala but not in Tamil the language they claim as their mother tongue. Thus as this traditionally conservative community comes more and more into contact with the other social groups on the island, the complexities forged by the intermingling of Tamil and Arabic threaten only to become even more complex.

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