

Cattle Raiding at Night (Yaamam - Aanirai Kavarthal)

DR. C. Markandan

Associate Professor, Vels University

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ABSTRACT

The war tradition of the Tamils primarily revolved around the concept of Aram (righteousness). There is no evidence of wars taking place during the night. However, it can be inferred from Tamil traditions that the main reason for wars—namely, the capturing of cattle herds—occurred during the night-time hours (yaamam).

Keywords: Tamils – War – Aram – Yaamam (night-time) – Capturing cattle – Civilization – Megalithic age – Tribal traditions – Bards – Poets – Poverty – Hunger – Kings – Ownership – Land – Fame.

INTRODUCTION

In Tamil cultural tradition, love and heroism are inseparable. The war tradition of the Tamils has a long continuity. Tamils have followed codes of conduct (aram) in the battlefield. However, the war tradition that arose during the early tribal stages was not the same as the later war tradition. This is because we can observe a type of warfare that was neither regulated nor civilized. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore what kind of war traditions Tamil society practiced before the emergence of the war ethics (aram) followed by the Tamils.

Codes of War

Tamil traditions prescribe certain codes of war. Among them are:

Wars that begin with the beating of the murasu (war drum) in the morning must also be ended with the beating of the murasu in the evening.

Battles should take place only on the designated battlefield.

It is forbidden to attack enemies who are unarmed.

The Tamil society also laid down other codes of war, such as prohibiting attacks on temples, monasteries where ascetics live, and the homes of Brahmins.

However, a major question remains: Were these war codes always upheld under all circumstances?

Causes of War

Poverty and hunger were the fundamental reasons for war.

Desire arising from the divisions of gold, land, and women also served as causes for war.

War might have begun when a strong person sought to subdue and rule over someone weaker.

Likewise, when someone attempted to seize another's rightful possessions, it could have led to war.

Thus, war could have started for many such reasons. Regardless of how wars began, the central question of this research article is: Were the codes of war (por aram) of the Tamils upheld?

Tradition of War

It is appropriate to examine the war tradition of the Tamils by dividing it into three stages:

Firstly, studying the war tradition that emerged during the Megalithic tribal chieftain period, which was intertwined with the lifestyle of the bards (panar) and was characterized by cattle raids or territorial attacks.

Secondly, examining the wars of the Sangam age, which were conducted by kings and praised by poets, involving cattle raids, disputes over land ownership, and quests for fame.

Thirdly, analyzing the codes of conduct (aram) in wars that took place after the Sangam period.

In this manner, classifying the causes of war into three stages provides the best way to understand the Tamil war tradition.

Tamil traditions lay down many codes of war. Discussing all of these would make this article too lengthy. Therefore, this article focuses on just one specific code of war: that wars were to be conducted during the daytime.

Time of War

It was a code of war among the Tamils that battles were to be conducted during the daytime. By fighting only during the day and refraining from war at night, soldiers were able to rest in the encampments known as pāsaraṭi during the night hours. This is evidenced by classical works such as the Purananuru and Nedunālvadai. Accordingly,

“Even Chozha Nedunchezhiyan of fierce battles came and faced them, many were the valorous wrestlers who confronted him; Will there be any left, for the daytime is but brief.” (Olaivai S. Duraisamy Pillai; Purananuru; 2009; 302)

This verse by Idaikkunrur Kizhar refers to the battle waged during the daytime by Pandya Nedunchezhiyan who won the war at Thalaialanganam. Thus, we see from the 79th poem of Purananuru that wars were indeed conducted during the day.

“We can say that there are no references in the Tolkappiyam to battles being conducted during the daytime. However, it is noteworthy that the commentators who wrote explanatory notes on the verses of Tolkappiyam referring to vetci (the first stage of war) have explained that ānirai kavarthai (cattle raiding), which forms the initial stage of war, was carried out by carefully choosing the time—specifically at night.” (Dr. V. Annapakiyam, Marapporilum Aram; Vallamai Online Magazine; 2021)

This statement highlights two points worth investigating: that war also took place at night and that the Tolkappiyam does not explicitly address the conduct of war. We may examine evidence of wars that occurred at night.

“This act of ānirai koodal (driving away cattle), which characterizes the vetci thinai, was for the most part carried out at night. In Purapporul Venpamalai, when describing the viricci ketai, it is said: ‘Not spoken of by those of the evening time’ (eendirun maalai sollor thandru) and

‘In the evening courtyard of the adorned hall’ (ezhuvani sirur irun maalai munril).

These indicate that the appropriate time is generally the evening. Later, when describing how, upon reaching the enemy’s territory, the herdsmen guarding the cattle were overcome, it is suggested that:

‘These herdsmen, who would not have been defeated during the daytime, were indeed defeated at this night hour.’”

Thus, the idea that cattle raids—the opening act of war—were typically conducted at night, and that such practices are alluded to in classical commentaries, becomes a significant area of exploration.

“... even though the verse ‘... .. only in the day, as the distant ones fell, the anklets resounded, the merciless ones seized the spoil’

makes it evident that the time of seizure was indeed at night, this is still to be understood. Furthermore, in contrast to the viricci (listening for good omens) that was rejected, we can see in the Takadur Yaththirai song cited earlier that the time of cattle raiding is specifically marked as ‘yaamam’, meaning midnight.” (Ilavazhaganar; *The Economic Life of Ancient Tamils*; 1945; pp. 21-22) From this statement, we learn that since cattle raiding (ānirai kavarthai) took place at night (yaamam), this custom of conducting war at night must have belonged to the earlier war tradition of the Tamils—specifically during the Megalithic tribal period linked to the lifestyle of the panar (wandering bards), prior to the Sangam age. It is also clear that no code of ethics (aram) was observed in such cattle raids arising out of poverty.

“When the belly is tormented by severe hunger, only one thought prevails—that it must somehow be appeased. In such a state, there is no scope to consider: ‘Will the people of the village agree? Is there a good omen?’ Therefore, in that earliest period of vetci, when the hungry simply seized the property of those nearby and ate, there was neither room for viricci (ascertaining the minds of the people) nor for narchol kettal (listening for auspicious words). Only later, when vetci lost its original character and became the opening act of war by a king initiating conflict with a rival, did these aspects come to have a place.” (K. Govindan; *The War Code of the Ancient Tamils*; 2017; pp. 33-34)

This statement makes it clear that the practices of seeking village approval, observing omens, and the viricci ritual definitions emerged only under the king-poet tradition. However, espionage or reconnaissance (otru parthai) must have been present even in the tribal-era cattle raids. For it was essential to find out the size of the cattle herd, the strength of the warrior guarding it, and how many men would be needed to drive the herd away. Thus, reconnaissance was likely a necessary part of cattle raiding.

“When we look at cattle raiding (ānirai kavarthai), guarding, ambushes, and the planting of memorial stones (nadukal) together, the inter-tribal conflict and wars arising from cattle raids (inter-tribal war – cattle raiding) appear to be a later feature of the Megalithic civilization. This could be one of the core themes or motifs practiced within the tradition of the panar (wandering bards).” (Raj Gowthaman; “Raids and Conflicts and the Megalithic Civilization”; 2009; p.13)

This statement reveals that cattle raiding was foundational to tribal life. It also makes clear that such cattle raids did not follow any formal codes or rules. The war tradition of the tribal-era panar demonstrates that only hunger, poverty, and individual need were at the center of such actions. With this understanding, it becomes necessary to distinguish between cattle raiding in the tribal period and cattle raiding during the times of kings. Equipped with this perspective, recognizing the contexts in which wars were conducted either at night or during the day leads to a sharper, historically grounded clarity.

“During the Sangam period, when clans settled and lived permanently in different places, each clan built its economy around the particular tract of land it occupied. Among these four types of ecological landscapes (thinai), whichever was the most resource-rich became a cause for war. Each clan waged war not only among themselves but also against other clans.”(P. Mathaiyan; “The Agrarian Society in Sangam Literature”; 2010; p.86)

This statement confirms that the categorization of land-based landscapes was also a fundamental cause for wars. Furthermore, the view of Olavai S. Duraisamy Pillai that even the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas originated from tribal life further underscores the reality of Megalithic tribal existence.

“When the hungry warriors (maravar) of the paalai (desert) region raided and drove away the cattle (ānirai), the cowherds (āyar) of the mullai (pastoral) land, who had carefully reared them, retrieved them. As time passed, this cattle-centered conflict evolved into something different. Noticing the repeated threats to their wealth of cattle, the cowherds of the mullai land chose a leader solely to protect their herds; in this way, kingship took shape.

The king thus chosen by the āyar made the protection of their cattle his foremost duty. Observing this new arrangement in the mullai land, the warriors of the paalai land also selected a leader—making him their king—so that he might secure for them the cattle they desired. Thus, the conflict that initially arose between the paalai warriors and the mullai cowherds gradually transformed into a war between their respective kings. Over time, this evolved further into successive wars between the kings of two distinct nations.” (K. Govindan; The War Code of the Ancient Tamils; 2017; pp. 6-7)

From this statement, we understand that the vetci (cattle raid), though commonly associated with the kurinji or mullai landscapes, is in fact proper only to the paalai.

The paalai cannot be rigidly separated as entirely kurinji or entirely mullai; rather, it is truly an intermingling of both.

Therefore, the cattle raiding wars (ānirai kavarthai) that took place at night between the tribal communities of the paalai (vetci) land and the mullai (karandhai) land belong to the Megalithic age and are not from the Sangam age. Moreover, not all Sangam poetry exclusively reflects the royal (king-poet) tradition. It also includes songs from the tribal panar tradition. It is because we have interpreted these together, without distinguishing them, that such confusions have arisen.

Hence, it becomes necessary to separate and study Sangam poems as either tribal poems or royal poems. Doing so will allow us to reconstruct Tamil history more accurately. Thus, it is our responsibility to re-examine the Sangam literature and rebuild the history of the Tamils. The wars of cattle raiding described later in Purapporul Venpamalai are merely a continuation of the royal king-poet tradition.

CONCLUSION

Although it is true that conducting war at night was not a Tamil tradition, it is evident that ānirai kavarthai—the act of cattle raiding, which was the primary cause for war—took place during yaamam, that is, at night. Therefore, while wars themselves did not occur at night, the key trigger for war—cattle raiding—did indeed happen during the night hours. It cannot be denied that even if battles were not fought at night, these nighttime cattle raids stood as the principal reason wars began. Taking what rightfully belonged to others is generally called theft. It seems that, mindful of their cultural sensibilities, the Tamils chose not to use the word "theft" (thiruttu) for such acts, but instead employed the term ānirai kavarthai (cattle raiding).

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