



The Role of Humour in Sangam Society: An Analysis of 'Nakai Meippadu'

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Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted role of humor, specifically "Nakai Meippadu" as defined in the Tolkāppiyam, within Sangam society (300 BCE - 300 CE). Utilizing a close reading of Ettuthokai and Pattuppattu poems, the study analyzes the four categories of "Nakai" – "Eļļal," "Iļamai," "Pētamai," and "Maṭan" – demonstrating their function as instruments for social commentary, emotional release, and the negotiation of interpersonal relationships. By examining specific examples of these humorous expressions within their

literary and socio-historical contexts, this research reveals how "Nakai" served to reinforce social hierarchies, express intimacy, correct deviations from societal norms, and reflect cultural understandings of the world. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex emotional and social dynamics of the Sangam era, highlighting the integral role of humour in ancient Tamil civilization.

keywords: Sangam era, Tamil civilization, Nakai Meippadu, societal norms, cultural

Introduction

The **Sangam era**, a period extending approximately from 300 BCE to 300 CE, marks a watershed moment in the cultural and literary history of **Ancient Tamilakam**. This era witnessed the genesis of a vibrant and sophisticated poetic tradition, preserved primarily within the anthologies of "**Ettuthokai**" (Eight Anthologies) and "**Pattuppattu**" (Ten Idylls). These collections, far from being mere aesthetic artifacts, serve as invaluable repositories of information, offering crucial insights into the intricate social, cultural, and emotional fabric of the Sangam people.

A cornerstone of understanding the emotional expressions prevalent in Sangam society lies in the concept of "**Meippadu**," a term meticulously codified within the *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest surviving Tamil grammatical treatise. "**Meippadu**," essentially, refers to the outward manifestation of inner emotional states, a system that underscores the performative nature of emotions in ancient Tamil culture. Among the eight primary emotional categories delineated in *Tolkāppiyam*, "**Nakai**" (humour/laughter) assumes a prominent role, offering a window into the subtle dynamics of social interactions and the underlying cultural values that shaped them.

This paper posits that "**Nakai Meippadu**," as evidenced in Sangam literature, functioned as a multifaceted social instrument. It served not only as a vehicle for social commentary, allowing for the subtle articulation of societal critiques, but also as a vital mechanism for emotional release, providing a means to navigate the stresses and complexities of daily life. Furthermore, "**Nakai**" played a crucial role in the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, shaping the contours of social interactions across various strata of Sangam society.

To substantiate this argument, this study will undertake a focused analysis of selected poems drawn from the **Ettuthokai and Pattuppattu** anthologies. By examining specific

instances of **"Nakai"** within their respective social and literary contexts, this research aims to illuminate the diverse functions of humour in Sangam society. Employing a methodological approach that integrates literary analysis with socio-historical interpretation, this paper will strive to unravel the complexities of **"Nakai Meippadu,"** thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics and cultural ethos of the Sangam era.

Understanding 'Nakai Meippadu' in Tolkāppiyam

Tolkāppiyam categorizes **"Nakai"** into four distinct forms: **"Eḷḷal"** (எள்ளல்), **"Iḷamai"** (இளமை), **"Pētamai"** (பேதமை), and **"Maṭan"** (மடன்).

- **"Eḷḷal"** refers to mockery or ridicule, often used to assert social superiority or highlight perceived flaws.
- **"Iḷamai"** denotes laughter arising from youthful innocence or naivety, frequently associated with love and playfulness.
- **"Pētamai"** stems from foolishness or lack of understanding, used to criticize or satirize.
- **"Maṭan"** is caused by ignorance or misinterpretation, reflecting a gap in knowledge or perception. It is important to emphasize that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

They can overlap within a single poem, demonstrating the complexity of human emotions and the nuanced ways in which they are expressed. The interpretation of **"Nakai"** is also heavily dependent on the **"thinai"** (landscape) and the social context of the poem. The **"thinai,"** which encompasses both the physical landscape and the emotional context, significantly influences the emotional tenor of the poem and the intended effect of the humour. Furthermore, the social context, including the social roles and relationships of the characters involved, plays a crucial role in shaping the meaning and function of **"Nakai."** The interplay of these categories with other emotions, such as anger, love, and sorrow, underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of human experience in the Sangam era. This complexity reveals that the emotional landscape of the Sangam society was rich and layered, and **"Nakai"** was an integral part of expressing and navigating that landscape. The interplay of these categories with other emotions, such as anger, love, and sorrow, underscores the dynamic nature of human experience in the Sangam era.

Analysis of 'Nakai' in Sangam Literature with Examples

"Eḷḷal" (எள்ளல்), the expression of mockery or ridicule, holds a significant place

within the “**Puranaanuru**” poems, a collection that predominantly addresses heroic themes, warfare, and the complex dynamics of social interactions within the Sangam era. These poems frequently feature instances of “**Ellal**,” particularly directed towards defeated kings and their failed military campaigns. This form of humour is not merely a spontaneous expression of amusement; it is a strategically employed tool, serving to reinforce the established social hierarchy and underscore the paramount importance of martial valour.

For instance, a poet, acting as a courtier or a wandering bard, might vividly depict the return of a defeated king from battle. This depiction would not be a sympathetic portrayal but a scathing critique, highlighting the king's weaknesses and strategic failures. The poet might focus on the tangible signs of defeat, such as the king's broken chariots, the disarray of his remaining army, and the visible signs of their exhaustion and demoralization. The poet could employ vivid imagery to emphasize the contrast between the king's former glory and his current state of humiliation.

Example

Imagine a poem where the defeated king is described as returning with “**chariot wheels splintered, like the bones of a fallen elephant**,” and his army is likened to “**a flock of crows scattered by a storm**.” The poet might further emphasize the king's diminished status by describing his once-proud banner as “**torn and tattered, like the remnants of a beggar's cloak**.” Such imagery serves to visually represent the king's loss of power and prestige.

Analysis

“**Ellal**” in these contexts served to reinforce the prevailing social hierarchies and power dynamics. By publicly ridiculing the defeated king, the poet not only celebrated the victor's triumph but also reaffirmed the societal values that prioritized martial prowess and strategic acumen. This act of ridicule functioned as a form of social control, discouraging future challenges to the established order and reinforcing the importance of adhering to the warrior ethos. Moreover, the poets' use of “**Ellal**” highlights their role as both entertainers and social commentators. They were not merely passive observers of events; they actively shaped public opinion and contributed to the construction of social memory. By immortalizing the victories and defeats of kings in their poems, they ensured that these events would be remembered and interpreted in a manner that reinforced the dominant ideology.

Scholars have noted that the use of "**Eḷḷal**" in **Puranaanuru** poems also reflects the

competitive nature of Sangam society. The frequent wars and rivalries between kings created a context in which public humiliation and ridicule were powerful tools for asserting dominance and maintaining social order. The poets, through their skilful use of language and imagery, played a crucial role in this process. Furthermore, the concept of "**porul**" (meaning) within Sangam poetry is important. The poets use "**Eḷḷal**" to convey a deeper meaning beyond the surface level of ridicule. They are often reinforcing the "**aram**" (righteousness) of the victorious king, and the lack of "**aram**" of the defeated king. This adds a moral dimension to the use of "**Eḷḷal**".

"**Iḷamai**" (இளமை), the expression of youthful laughter, finds its most vibrant manifestation within Akam poetry, a genre that delves into the intricate themes of love and intimacy. This form of humour is not characterized by harsh ridicule or biting satire, but rather by gentle playfulness and light-hearted banter, reflecting the innocence and spontaneity of youth. Lovers within Akam poems frequently engage in such playful interactions, teasing each other about their romantic anxieties, perceived flaws, or clumsy attempts at courtship.

The use of "**Iḷamai**" in Akam poetry serves to create a sense of intimacy and connection between the lovers. It allows them to express their affection in a way that is both playful and affectionate, fostering a sense of emotional closeness. This type of humour is often used to alleviate the anxieties and uncertainties that accompany romantic love, creating a space for light-heartedness and joy.

Example

Consider a poem where a young woman playfully chides her lover for his impatience, comparing his anxiousness to that of a child eagerly awaiting a toy. She might say, "**Your heart beats like a drum when I am delayed, just like a child who cries for a new plaything.**" This comparison not only highlights the lover's impatience but also adds a touch of endearing humour to the situation. The woman is not criticizing her lover harshly; rather, she is playfully teasing him, expressing her affection through gentle humour.

Analysis

This type of "**Nakai**" expresses the intimacy and joy of youthful love, emphasizing the importance of playfulness in interpersonal relationships. It highlights the carefree spirit

associated with youth and romantic love, reflecting the uninhibited nature of their affections. **"Iḷamai"** in Akam poetry is not merely a source of amusement; it is a vital tool for

expressing emotional connection and navigating the complexities of romantic relationships. Furthermore, the use of **"Iḷamai"** in Akam poetry often reflects the specific **"thinai"** or landscape in which the poem is set. The **"thinai"** influences the imagery and metaphors used in the poem, as well as the overall emotional tone. For example, a poem set in a mountainous landscape might feature metaphors drawn from nature, such as comparing the lover's impatience to the rushing of a waterfall.

The use of **"Iḷamai"** also underscores the importance of **"akam"** (interior) in Sangam poetry. It is a way to look at the inner feelings of the characters. The playful banter and teasing between lovers provide insight into their emotional states, revealing their affection, anxieties, and desires. The use of **"Iḷamai"** allows the poets to portray the emotional landscape of love in a way that is both subtle and evocative. Scholars have also noted that **"Iḷamai"** in Akam poetry often serves to create a sense of balance and harmony within the relationship. The playful interactions between lovers help to alleviate tension and create a sense of emotional equilibrium. This is particularly important in the context of Akam poetry, which often explores the complexities and challenges of romantic love.

"Pētamai" (பேதமை), the expression of foolish laughter, manifests in Sangam poems through the depiction of characters who make imprudent decisions or misinterpret established social customs, thereby creating humorous situations. This form of **"Nakai"** is not merely a source of amusement; it serves as a subtle yet effective mechanism for social correction, allowing poets to address deviations from societal norms without resorting to direct condemnation.

The poems often portray individuals who, through their lack of understanding or judgment, engage in behaviours that are deemed foolish or inappropriate. These characters might attempt to emulate the conduct of a higher social class, adopt customs that are foreign to them, or make decisions that are clearly detrimental to their well-being. The resulting humorous situations serve to highlight the characters' shortcomings and reinforce the importance of adhering to societal expectations.

Example

Consider a poem that satirizes an individual who, aspiring to the refined manners of a higher social class, attempts to replicate their behaviour but fails miserably. This individual might misuse honorifics, wear inappropriate attire, or engage in social interactions that are considered unbecoming of their status. For example, they might use overly formal language in an informal setting, or attempt to participate in rituals or ceremonies that are reserved for a specific social group. The poem would then highlight the absurdity of their actions, using vivid descriptions and humorous comparisons to emphasize their lack of understanding.

Analysis

"Pētamai" serves as a form of social correction by exposing and ridiculing behaviours that deviate from accepted norms. By highlighting the foolishness of these actions, the poets implicitly reinforce the importance of adhering to societal expectations and customs. The humour serves to underscore the characters' lack of understanding, while simultaneously reminding the audience of the proper conduct.

This form of **"Nakai"** allows poets to address social issues in a subtle and indirect manner. Instead of directly criticizing individuals or groups, they use humour to highlight their shortcomings, making the criticism more palatable and less confrontational. This approach allows for the expression of social commentary without causing undue offense or provoking direct conflict.

The use of **"Pētamai"** also reflects the importance of social harmony within Sangam society. By ridiculing behaviours that disrupt the established order, the poets contribute to the maintenance of social stability and cohesion. This is particularly relevant in a society where social roles and hierarchies were clearly defined.

Moreover, the **"thinai"** of the poem also influences the type of **"Pētamai"** being shown. The setting, and the nature of the people within the poem, will change the way that foolishness is presented. For example, a poem about people in a pastoral setting will show different foolish behaviours than a poem about those in a coastal setting. Scholars have noted that **"Pētamai"** also reflects the importance of **"porul"** (meaning) in Sangam poetry. The humour is used to convey a deeper meaning about the importance of social norms and the consequences of deviating from them. It is not simply about making people laugh; it is about using humour to teach and reinforce societal values.

"Maṭaṇ" (மடறண்), the expression of ignorant laughter, manifests in Sangam poems through the depiction of characters who misinterpret natural phenomena or social customs, resulting in humorous situations. This form of **"Nakai"** is particularly revealing of the Sangam people's understanding of the world, highlighting the delicate balance between knowledge and ignorance. It provides a unique window into the cultural beliefs and perceptions of the time.

The poems often portray characters who, due to their limited understanding of the natural world or their unfamiliarity with certain social customs, arrive at erroneous conclusions. These misinterpretations lead to humorous situations, which serve to underscore the characters' lack of knowledge and the broader societal understanding of the world.

Example

Consider a poem where a character, unfamiliar with the nocturnal sounds of wild animals, mistakes them for the presence of supernatural beings. This character might describe the sounds as eerie whispers or otherworldly groans, attributing them to spirits or demons. They might then engage in superstitious rituals or take elaborate precautions to protect themselves from the perceived threat. The poem would then highlight the absurdity of their actions, using vivid descriptions and humorous comparisons to emphasize their misinterpretation of the natural world.

Analysis

"Maṭaṇ" reflects the Sangam people's understanding of the world by revealing the boundaries between what was known and what remained unknown. It highlights the areas where scientific understanding was limited, and where cultural beliefs and superstitions filled the gaps. This form of **"Nakai"** allows us to glimpse the Sangam people's worldview, their perceptions of nature, and their interactions with the unknown.

The use of **"Maṭaṇ"** also provides insights into the cultural beliefs of the time. The characters' misinterpretations often reflect prevailing superstitions and folklore, revealing the influence of these beliefs on their perceptions of the world. By portraying these misinterpretations, the poets implicitly acknowledge the existence of these beliefs and their impact on people's lives. Furthermore, **"Maṭaṇ"** can also be used to show the differences between social groups. Those who are more isolated, or live in areas with less social interaction, might be shown to have a larger amount of misunderstanding of the world around

them.

The "**thinai**" of the poem also plays a significant role in the expression of "**Maṭan**." The specific landscape and the associated lifestyle of the characters influence the types of

natural phenomena or social customs that are misinterpreted. For example, a poem set in a forest region might feature misinterpretations of animal sounds, while a poem set in a coastal region might feature misinterpretations of maritime phenomena. Scholars have noted that "**Maṭan**" also highlights the importance of observation and experience in Sangam society. By portraying characters who lack these qualities, the poets implicitly emphasize the value of empirical knowledge and the dangers of relying solely on hearsay or superstition. "**Maṭan**"

is a way to look at the cultural knowledge of the time, and to understand the limitations of that knowledge.

The Social Functions of Humour

- "**Nakai**" provided a subtle yet effective means of social commentary, allowing poets to critique social issues without direct confrontation. Satire and irony were used to address sensitive topics, providing a safe outlet for dissent.
- Sangam festivals and gatherings likely featured humorous performances and rituals. These events provided an outlet for emotional release, helping individuals and communities to cope with stress, conflict, and hardship. They fostered a sense of community and shared experience.
- "**Nakai**" played a crucial role in shaping and maintaining interpersonal relationships, from romantic partnerships to social hierarchies. Playful banter and teasing were used to build intimacy and strengthen bonds, while ridicule and mockery were used to assert dominance or express disapproval.

Conclusion

"**Nakai Meippadu**" in Sangam literature reveals the multifaceted role of humour in ancient Tamil society, serving as a tool for social commentary, emotional release, and the negotiation of interpersonal relationships. Understanding "**Nakai**" provides valuable insights into the cultural values, social dynamics, and emotional landscape of the Sangam era, enriching our understanding of ancient Tamil civilization. Future studies could explore the

evolution of humorous traditions in later Tamil literature, investigate the role of gender in "Nakai" expression, or analyze the relationship between "Nakai" and other forms of cultural expression, such as dance and music. The intricacies of "Nakai" further illustrate the depth and complexity of Sangam literature, a testament to the rich cultural heritage of Tamilakam.

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