

Translating Esotericism: Tamil

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As will be well known to readers of this journal and special issue, the term “esotericism” in English has a wide variety of meanings that depend on the historical context and time period, and the term has also come to encompass an entire academic field of study. At its root, the word comes from Greek *esōterikós*, from *esōtērō*, “inner.”¹ Taking this etymology rather than later academic developments as a starting point, in this brief article I connect the idea of esotericism and its semantic range with equivalents in Tamil, a Dravidian language prevalent in south India that has a history spanning over two millennia.² There is no translation for “esotericism” in Tamil that captures the fullness of the contemporary academic field and its range. At the same time, there is a root word and its accompanying semantic cloud, as well as a few other words that have similar meanings and as such in my view are well-equipped to translate a concept like esotericism more generally.

The most obvious word to consider is the Dravidian root word **உள்** *ul*, “inside,” the definition of which harmonizes etymologically with the adjective esoteric as derived from Greek. The word (and its variations) has had a rich history not only in Tamil but also Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, and tribal languages like Toda, to name but a few, and was also often linked to the idea of “mind” or “heart” as the interior of a person or being.³ The word is not limited

1. Hoad, *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 155.

2. For a detailed yet accessible history of this language see Shulman, *Tamil*.

3. “*ul*,” in Burrow & Emeneau, *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*.

to any single religion, either, whether Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava (Hindu), Buddhist, or Jain. In modern Tamil one regularly encounters this word in the form of the postposition உள்ளே *ullē*, the most common word for “inside” (e.g., வீட்டுக்குள்ளே *vīṭṭukkullē*, “inside the house”).

Like “esoteric,” the word *uḷ* also has an abstract sense that connects its literal meaning to the wider semantic range that includes esoteric knowledge. This sense is rather common, and some of the most prominent dictionaries even include the adjective “esoteric” as a direct definition of *uḷ*. For example, the University of Madras Lexicon gives the first definition of *uḷ* as “that which is private, secret, esoteric,”⁴ and Winslow’s *A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary* similarly defines it as “the inside, the interior, that which is intrinsic, private, secret, esoteric.”⁵ This sense becomes especially important in Tamil compound words. For example, the term உட்பொருள் *uṭporuḷ* (*uḷ* + *poruḷ*, with *ḷ* changing to *ṭ* according to consonant assimilation) is defined as “meaning” or “signification,” and literally refers to a kind of “inner meaning,” which the Madras Lexicon also extends in its secondary definition to a “secret or esoteric meaning.”⁶ This secondary definition of *uṭporuḷ* is an extension from its primary definition as the “real purport or signification,” that is, an inner essence of a given word or idea.

In addition to the etymology of *uḷ* and its derivatives, there is also its contextual presence over the course of Tamil’s long literary history. There are innumerable religious texts that use this word and its compounds in various ways, and trying to determine which contextual uses are closer to the meaning of “esoteric” and which have the more literal meaning of “inside” would extend this short article to at least the length of an entire book. Nevertheless, some contexts are more clearly “esoteric” than others, and could be seen as a source for the understanding of *uḷ* as “esoteric.” One such context is an intersecting body of Śaiva literature

4. “*uḷ*,” in University of Madras, *Tamil Lexicon*.

5. “*uḷ*,” in Winslow, *Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary*.

6. “*uṭporuḷ*,” in University of Madras, *Tamil Lexicon*.

that includes sources as varied as the ca. twelfth-century *Tirumantiram* attributed to Tirumūlar,⁷ the songs of the Tamil Siddhas,⁸ as well as Tamil Vīraśaiva texts that treat on topics related to yoga and ritual.⁹ Numerous examples of the use of *uḷ* or its derivative *uḷḷē* abound in this literature in contexts that refer to esoteric interpretations of rituals and of the human body and its functions.

In the *Tirumantiram* there is also evidence that a particular development in esoteric hermeneutics was intertwined with theories on the revelation of the Vedas, the Sanskrit ritual source texts and hymns upon which much of Hinduism is based, and which in this context are said to have both an exoteric and esoteric form. For example consider the following verse (53), translated by Maithili Thayanithy:

irukkuru vāyēḷil vētatti nullē
urukkunar vāyunar vētattuḷl ōṅki
verukkuru vākija vētiyar collum
karukkuru vāyinra kaṅṅaṅumāmē.

In the beautiful Vedas of metrical form
The three-eyed god rises
As melting Consciousness.
He is the essence embodied
In the mantras chanted by the Brahmins,
His form instills awe.¹⁰

Maithili interprets this verse by citing the *Paripāṭal*, a Tamil work from the Sangam period, noting that the “inner or esoteric meaning of the Vedas is denoted by the term *marai* (the hidden) in the poem addressed to Tirumāl:

7. While the text has never been critically edited, most scholars utilize the English translation: Tirumūlar, *The Tirumandiram*. A prominent Tamil edition with commentary circulating in south India is Tirumūlar, *Tirumūlar Tirumantiram*.

8. See for example Venkatraman, *History of the Tamil Siddha Cult*; Ezhilraman, “Siddha Cult in Tamilnādu”; and Zvelebil, *Poets of the Powers*.

9. For more on the Vīraśaiva movement see Fisher, “Tangled Roots of Vīraśaivism”; and Steinschneider, “Beyond the Warring Sects.” For examples and citations of such yogic texts see Steinschneider, “Subversion, Authenticity.”

10. Thayanithy, “Concept of Living Liberation,” 122.

vētattu marai nī – You are the essence or the hidden meaning of the Vedas (Pari. 3:66).”¹¹ The idea seems to be that while high-caste Brahmans who revere the Vedas may not often perceive the presence of Śiva in their mantras, there is a deeper meaning embedded in the Vedic revelation if one cares to look.

While such esoteric hermeneutics may have been directly linked to a particular Śaiva view of Vedic revelation, the Tamil Lexicon notes that *மறை* *marai* is used more broadly to denote an “esoteric teaching” based on a revealed scripture.¹² In other words, in Tamil it is not just a teaching or an abstract concept that can be esoteric, but also a literal text, mantra, or body of ritual, whether written or believed to have been aurally cognized or revealed. This allows for the claim that there is indeed a precedent for esoteric exegesis of revealed language in Tamil, and that such an idea was not simply introduced to the language through encounters with Jews, Christians, or Muslims, all of whom have had communities in southern India.¹³ If this article were to be expanded it would be fruitful to consider such encounters and how they deepened the semantic range of *marai* or other terms that refer to esoteric hermeneutics.

In addition to *uḷ* and *marai*, a reverse dictionary search will lead to a few other Tamil words that relate to the semantic range of esotericism. These terms have entered Tamil via Sanskrit, and as a result are also used across South Asia and not just in Tamil Nadu or Sri Lanka. Examples include *சுவாபதேசம்* *svāpatēcam* (< Skt. *sva* + *apadeśa* = *svāpadeśa*, “inherent indication”), defined as “esoteric sense, inner meaning”;¹⁴ *உபநிடதம்* *upanīṭatam* (related to Skt. *upanīṣad*), literally “sitting by the side” but referring to the “esoteric teachings of the Vedas”;¹⁵ and *ஆசாரியன்* *ācāriyaṅ* (< Skt. *ācārya*), one definition of which is a “spiritual teacher duly anointed

11. Ibid., 122n220.

12. “*marai*,” in University of Madras, *Tamil Lexicon*.

13. For the notion of Vedic revelation and its comparison with the revelation of the Hebrew Torah, see Holdrege, *Veda and Torah*.

14. “*svāpatēcam*,” in University of Madras, *Tamil Lexicon*.

15. “*upanīṭatam*,” in Fabricius, *J. P. Fabricius’s Tamil and English Dictionary*. For the Upanīṣads as interpretations of the Vedas, see Olivelle, *Early Upanīṣads*.

and authorized to initiate others into the esoteric doctrines of religion.”¹⁶ While undoubtedly of Sanskrit origin, loan-words like these also formed part of a medieval hybrid language, usually called Maṇipiravāḷam (< Skt. *maṇipravāḷa*, “gems and coral”), which combines elements of both Tamil and Sanskrit. As a result, their meanings are neither exclusively Sanskritic nor exclusively Tamil, and as such are worth considering alongside the “pure” Dravidian words like *uḷ* and *marai*. A similar Sanskrit and Tamil synthesis also becomes important in later Tamil literature of relevance to esotericism, such as the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works of Sri Sabhapati Swami (ca. 1828–1923/4).¹⁷

While there is no suitable translation in Tamil that captures the full range of contemporary meanings of “esotericism,” this article has shown that there is nevertheless a parallel discourse around terms like *uḷ* (and *uḷḷē*), *marai*, and loan-words from Sanskrit that have helped create and continue to form a discourse on what constitutes “inner” or esoteric meaning. These words, their semantic fields, and their discursive histories are important to consider when engaging questions on how to translate complex cultural concepts like esotericism, and such engagement also has the potential to reveal many more details about the rich linguistic and cultural history of Tamil more broadly.

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16. “*ācāriyan*,” in University of Madras, *Tamil Lexicon*.

17. For more on this figure and his ties to modern esoteric movements see Cantú, *Like a Tree Universally Spread*; and Cantú, “Sri Sabhapati Swami,” 347–73.

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