

**JAPANESE - TAMIL CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OHNO'S PROPOSITION**

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In recent times Susumu Ohno, Professor of Japanese Linguistics at Gakushuin University has, as a result of his intensive research, found similarities between Japanese language and Tamil language on the one hand, and on the other, between Japanese culture and Tamil culture. At the outset these similarities appear to be very fascinating to scholars, for this is indeed a novel attempt linking two languages and cultures hitherto considered distinct and unrelated.

A systematic and critical investigation of the similarities as put forth by Ohno will certainly help scholars all over the world to strengthen, modify, revise or abandon the position taken so far on the question of Japanese-Tamil relationship. With this view in mind an attempt is made in this paper to examine critically the cultural similarities between Japanese and Tamils presented by Ohno in two of his papers namely

- (i) "World View : The Three Level Universe in Japanese and Tamil Cultures", and
- (ii) "Japanese and Tamil New Year Celebrations", both appearing in a volume titled 'World View and Rituals Among Japanese and Tamils'.¹

II

As we read through these two papers we firstly get an impression that Ohno has not primarily had a clear grasp of Tamil culture. This is obviously because he has not had correct and full information on Tamil culture. Some of his statements appear to have been based on partial or misrepresented and in some contexts on misinterpreted information on Tamil culture. His "comparison of the funerary rituals of the Tamil speaking people in the Jaffna region of Sri Lanka with those which are described in Japanese myths and those used in the Nara and Heian periods (710-794 ; 794-1185)" seems to be based on highly imaginative accounts in some contexts and in others on far fetched or untenable accounts. Certain novel practices hitherto unseen and unheard by people coming from different parts of Jaffna have been introduced as part of Jaffna culture. Doubt arises if this endeavour was to make some practices tally with Japanese culture. Practices dead and gone have been presented as current practices in the modern society of Jaffna. Some possible universals in cultures are being directly or indirectly emphasised as correspondences in these two cultures. Some of the pan Indian features are being discussed as something unique to Tamil culture. Cultural traits and practices are not viewed and compared in their whole form. Thus details are overlooked and assumptions

have been made on surface similarity. In certain contexts Jaffna Tamil society and Sri Lankan Tamil society are being confused as identical.² Practices confined to restricted areas are presented as normal practices in the whole society. Possible cultural variations within the Jaffna society have been not taken into consideration³. For all these reasons we feel strongly tempted to question Ohno's attempt to find and establish similarities between these two cultures.

III

In his first paper as the title itself indicates Ohno is concerned with the concept of a three level universe. He mentions a number of peoples in the world including the Japanese who have or had belief in a three level universe. Among them he includes "the Tamil speaking people of Jaffna area in Sri Lanka as well". Japanese believed that deities lived in the upper world, the human beings in the middle world and the dead went to the netherworld.

According to Ohno "there are many who would maintain that perception of the universe as three leveled is unique to the Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic peoples of northern Asia and Siberia". He points out that Yoshida Atsubiko, a specialist in mythology and a professor at Gakushuin University does not think so. Ohno discusses the pros and cons of different views briefly and concludes that "this issue has not yet been resolved to the satisfaction of the academic world". Therefore he proposes to "leave off any direct discussion of this problem and instead approach it obliquely by a comparison of the funerary rituals of the Tamil speaking people in the Jaffna region of Sri Lanka with those which are described in Japanese myths and those used in the Nara and Heian periods".

Certain clarifications become necessary before discussing in detail the similarities between practices like the mogari in Japanese society and its correlates in the Tamil society.

It is not clear as to why Ohno has ignored or overlooked a vast majority of other people in this part of world who have belief in the concept of three level universe. No doubt Tamils or to say more precisely the Hindu Tamils both in Sri Lanka and India and perhaps in any other part of the world have belief in the concept of three world called *muuvulakam* in Tamil language. This is a broad division of the universe for there are several subdivisions and Hindu Tamils speak of *iireelulakam* "fourteen worlds". However at this juncture we would like to point out that his concept of three world is not something exclusive or peculiar to Jaffna Tamils or to Tamils in general. It is rather a pan Indian concept that prevails from very early times to this day irrespective of ethnic differences among Hindus. It has been attested in writings of the past all over India. So it is more appropriate to speak of it as part of Hindu culture rather than Tamil culture.

An important difference in the details of this belief between the Japanese culture as described by Ohno and the Hindu culture as it prevails today has to be noted. According to the Japanese all the dead go to the netherworld whereas according to the Hindu concept all the dead do not go to the netherworld. First the soul of the dead is taken to the Kingdom of Yama called *Yamalookam* in the southern direction of the upper world. The deeds of the soul are analysed and it is sent to the netherworld only if it had done *tij vinai* "bad deeds". Had it done *nal'vinai* "good deeds" it would find a permanent place in heaven. According to Hindu culture netherworld is not a permanent abode of any soul. Herein we are reminded of the concept of re-birth and the Hindu Karmic theory. We would like to know the details in the Japanese culture.

Ohno gives the Tamil names of these worlds. All these names perhaps except one are from old Tamil literary works⁴. More common names for these worlds by which the ordinary man makes references to them are not given. They may be added herein: heaven is commonly known as *cuvarkkam*; "this world" is also known as *puulookam*; underworld is commonly referred to as *kiil ulakam* (in contrast with *meel ulakam* "upper world") and also as *paataala ulakam* and *narakam*⁵. These common names in day to day use indicate how deep rooted this concept is in the society.

Let us now elaborate our discussion on similarities in the funeral practices of the ancient Japanese and the Tamils of modern Jaffna in Sri Lanka. Ohno first speaks of and describes the practice of *mogari* in ancient Japanese society.

According to Ohno "*mogari* is a term which refers to the custom of setting the body of a dead person in one location and conducting rites over it for a certain length of time before burial. There a building was most often erected for the purpose of sheltering the body such a building was called a *moya*, literally, "a mourning house" The four walls were secured so that neither man nor beast could intrude unwarranted entrance into the *moya* confines was not permitted. Only a single person of the closest relationship to the deceased - a husband, a wife, a parent, a child - could approach the body of the dead person".

The parallel practice in the Jaffna culture is presented as follows: "In Tamil society when someone is approaching death, he or she is moved to a special room or building. Into that room or building, only one person, a close relation-husband, wife, parent, or child - of the dying person, may go".

Now the question is whether such a practice as described above prevails everywhere in Jaffna society. Most areas don't seem to follow this practice. People would generally allow the person to die in his usual place.

Later they may or may not move the body to a spacious room, say to the hall, when close relatives gather. Hence the practice of moving the person approaching death to a special room or building is not a normal practice but a variant practice confined to a few areas. Enquiries reveal that even in these areas no special building is erected. Moreover the practice of moving the person is not part of any regular cultural practice. This practice has no specific term of reference in the Tamil language as other regular practices have. Perhaps the person is moved into the main hall or room of the house only for the convenience of the people, mainly close relatives, who may gather on hearing the news that the person is about to die. Usually close relatives gather around a dying person or a dead person and nowhere in Jaffna as far as our knowledge could reach there is any restriction on the number of close relatives who could go near the dead. Ohno surprisingly restricts the number to merely one. This restriction of course tallies the number in the Japanese culture. Further it should be emphasised that *mogari* in Japanese culture takes place after one's death whereas in Jaffna culture the parallel practice as described by Ohno begins to operate "when someone is approaching death". Speaking in general, broad similarities do sometimes have minute but important differences (particularly when details are considered) that may play a significant role in final assessments.

However a fragment of similarity may be seen between the Japanese *moya* and the funeral *pandal* "a thatched shed" in Tamil culture⁶. The funeral *pandal* is specially erected for the purpose of conducting the funeral rites. This is done almost everywhere in Jaffna. The body of the dead person is bathed and brought to the *pandal* where the priest would have set a location for the ceremony. Funeral rites are conducted for an hour or so and the body is removed for cremation. It is very surprising that Ohno has not made any reference to this *pandal*.

Another custom related to the practice under discussion may be pointed out. In most areas in Jaffna when a person was about to die on a *pancam*-day⁷ people removed him out of the main house and had him in a specially erected temporary building. This temporary building was burnt as the body of the dead was taken to the crematorium. But when a person passed away suddenly on a *pancami* day people usually removed a few tiles in the roof of the house or made a temporary hole in the roof. These acts were due to a sort of fear that the spirit of the person who died on *pancami* would haunt the location where death took place and may do harm to others. In the past village people often spoke of *pancami peey* "ghost of *pancami*" in terror⁸.

While further describing the Japanese practice Ohno says: "In addition to a single close relative, two members of the *asobibe*, the funerary guild were also admitted (into the special room or building)..... On someone's

death, two members of the asobibe were chosen to play a most important role in the funeral rites, that of attending the dead during the period of mogari”

“Members of the asobibe will go to the place of mogari and serve in attendance. In doing so, one of the two will be called negi, the other, yogi. The negi, will put on a sword and carry a halberd; the yogi will put on a sword and bear food and drink”.

“The word negi has the same root as the verb negirau, meaning “to calm another with words; to soften another’s heart”. Thus the role of the negi is to speak to the dead. The role of the yogi, on the other hand is to offer food and drink”.

Now let us see the parallel practice in Tamil society as described by Ohno:

“In addition to the single relative, two others may enter to attend to the dead. These two both carry long knives of steel in order to protect themselves. One has the task of closing the eyes of the person who has died, then singing to him or her to give comfort. This person also speaks to the dead, telling the person that he or she need not worry, that he or she will go to heaven, thus setting the dead person’s spirit at peace. The role of the second attendant (who is a woman from a caste called Kōviyar, close attendants to the people of the high caste in Jaffna) is to prepare food. She is in charge of preparing food for other mourners”.

As in earlier instances we would like to check if the practice described above is dominant everywhere in the Jaffna society. A cross checking of this description with elderly and well informed persons coming from different parts of Jaffna revealed that they had neither witnessed nor heard of such practices. Many raised their eye brows on hearing the restriction placed on the number of persons attending on the dead as two. Some said that in the past people carried a knife or a piece of iron to the crematorium when the body was taken. No one sings to give comfort. All agreed that women lament aloud out of sorrow. We are not sure if Ohno refers to this lamenting as singing. In Jaffna society no one speaks to the dead in order to console him or her as in Japanese culture. There is no need because Hindu Tamils in Jaffna believe in good faith that the soul attains peace. It may be a wishful thinking but yet it is a strong belief. That is why in announcing someone’s death people usually verbalise it as *iraivan ati ceerntaar* or *civapatam ataintaar* “so and so has attained the Feet of Lord Siva”⁹.

The motive of Ohno in introducing the woman from the Kōviyar caste is obviously to draw a parallel with the members of the asobibe in ancient Japanese culture. This is rather strange because this caste emerged

only at a point of time not very early in the history of Tamils. This caste is something peculiar and exclusive to Jaffna society. It is not found in Indian Tamil society. Even in Jaffna only some groups of families in the high caste had the services of this caste. One is tempted to ask if Tamil culture was confined only to these small groups in Jaffna. Hence this aspect cannot be taken as representative of Jaffna Tamil culture. Moreover if we were to take this parallel (asobibe-Kōviyar) seriously, it may amount to saying that Japan is more close to Jaffna than to Tamilnadu in India.¹⁰

Ohno draws particular attention to the length of time set apart for mourning - eight days and eight nights - in ancient Japan. Professional mourners were used. Further "for seven days and seven nights no offerings of food were made. Due to this, evil and dangerous spirits were aroused. Members of the asobibe were sought throughout the land. They then pacified the spirits on the eighth day".

The practice in Jaffna is given as follows: "On the eighth day a banquet is laid out. On eight plates, eight different types of food are put, and both meat and liquor are served. Also the roots of a palmyra tree are dug up and made into a powder that is heaped into a cone. Over this water is then sprinkled. This is an offering for the eight demon hags who it is believed, come into the world of humans late at night to eat people and drink their blood. If though, they find this offering, they are satisfied and leave humans unharmed". Ohno has in fact said that "this is a normal custom in Sri Lankan Tamil society".¹¹

The "eighth day" is acceptable to all sections of people in Jaffna. People call it in Tamil *ettu-c-celavu* or briefly *ettu* "the expenditure on the eighth day". Nowadays this is being done on a day earlier than the eighth day. Number of plates (banana leaves) laid out varies from place to place. Most places have the number as three. Three plates (banana leaves) are placed in different winnowing pans and food is served in them. In most areas there is no restriction on the number of food-types served. The only restriction is that the number should be odd and not even. Usually all the types of food favoured by the dead are prepared and served. Serving of meat and liquor is not a normal practice in every house-hold in Jaffna. They are served only if the dead was in the habit of taking them. There isn't any difference of opinion in this practice. This offering is primarily meant for the departed soul. Upto the thirty first day water is kept in a vessel during night times for the departed soul. A chopped coconut is also placed. An oil-lamp burns. Thus unlike in Japanese culture attendance on the dead is prolonged in Jaffna culture till the thirty first day of one's death. Important and significant ceremonies are done for the departed soul on the thirty first day. According to Ohno the attendance on the dead in Japanese culture was only for eight days.

Ohno makes reference to the practice of dropping a stone into the water in Jaffna culture. According to his interpretation "the purpose and meaning of this ceremony is to ensure that the dead person goes to heaven: the stone serves to block the entrance to the under-world thus breaking any link between the dead and the netherworld". He cites Tirukkural (38) as endorsing his interpretation. Further he makes reference to the custom of setting a stone on someone's grave during *Cankam* period. For him "this suggests a conscious need to block the way to the land of the dead". He concludes that "this act is basically the same as the practice, still found in Sri Lanka today, of dropping a stone into the water".

We are here concerned only with Ohno's interpretations of the purpose and meaning of dropping the stone into the water. They appear to be far fetched. He takes the literal meaning of the phrase "*vaalnaal vali atakkum kal*" in Thirukkural (38) in support of his interpretation. But the whole phrase has a rather metaphorical sense. On the other hand the stone in the grave referred to by him has other meanings too. Here we are reminded of the stones erected in battle fields during ancient times. Scholars' attempt to explain the beginning of hero worship with reference to such stones should not be forgotten.

Also we wish to emphasise that the stone referred to by Ohno is a symbolic representation of the departed soul. It is considered sacred. Certain ceremonies including *pujah* are done piously for this symbolic stone. Hence our contention is that the stone put into the water cannot be considered as one that "blocks the path between this world and the underworld".

In concluding his first paper Ohno gives 12 corresponding events in both cultures. Similarity in them seems to be very meagre except in the use of professional mourners. Ohno may be pleased to learn that the idiom *kuulikkum maaratittai* "mourning for wage" in Tamil emerged out of a true practice that existed in the past¹². Finally we would like to point out that the total number of events that take place during a funeral ceremony in Jaffna are very many and that Ohno has attempted to set up similarities only in 12 events.

IV

In his second paper Ohno claims that Japanese and Tamils have several shared features culturally as well as linguistically¹³. He speaks at length about the cultural correspondences between "the Tamil New Year's festival of Pongal and the Japanese celebration of Koshōgatsu, the celebration of Little New Year".

According to Ohno's description "Pongal is a festival held annually in the Tamil region of India and Sri Lanka. It is an ancient festival, dating from before the incursion of Aryan culture. On the fifteenth of January

Tamil people make a gruel from a reddish variety of rice..... Both Pongal and koshōgatsu are held during the 14th, 15th and 16th of January under the solar calendar. In essence, both are New Year's supplications for bountiful harvests in the coming year.....It is only on January 14th or 15th that people celebrate the New Year". In another context he refers to this festival as "the January fifteenth New Year's agricultural festival".

It is not clear why Ohno considers Pongal as New Year celebrations. From the point of Tamils Pongal celebrations are not the New Year celebrations. For the Tamils the dawn of New Year is not in January. New Year celebrations take place in the month of April. Pongal celebrations and New Year celebrations are markedly different in significance and practices. Most of the events that take place during New Year celebrations do not take place during Pongal celebrations.

Pongal takes place mostly on January 14th and it is commonly known as Cuuriya Pongal. This celebration signifies a kind of thanks giving to nature for the (bountiful) harvest that farmers would just then have. The time of Pongal won't be appropriate for making any supplications for bountiful harvests in the coming year. It will be too early to make such supplications because harvests in the coming year will occur only after several months.

Usually people make use of the rice obtained from the recent harvest for Pongal, a kind of rice preparation with milk and other ingredients optionally used. This Pongal is usually cooked in the front courtyard of the house early in the morning as the sun rises¹⁴. Tamil poetry speaks of *cennel arici* "rice obtained from a reddish variety of paddy" as the best kind and most suitable for Pongal. But this is seldom available anywhere in Jaffna¹⁵.

The celebration on January 15th is known as patti Pongal. This is done in the evening near the cattle shed. The importance of cattle in an agricultural land needs no emphasis. Jaffna Tamils generally don't have any celebrations on January 16th connected with the two previous celebrations.

For Ohno there are 17 corresponding events of Koshōgatsu and Pongal. They are as follows :

Japan	Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka
<p>January 14th</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. tondoyaki (ritual burning of old things) 2. sheds are burned 3. fire crackers are exploded 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. old possessions are burned 2. cowsheds are burned 3. fire crackers are exploded

Japan

Tamilnadu

January 15th

4. decorations are hung
5. fresh water drawn for the first time in the year
6. rice gruel made with red beans is served
7. offerings to crows
8. people circle their houses while calling "Hongara hongara"
9. tree-beating

4. decorations are hung
5. fresh water drawn for the first time in the year
6. red rice gruel or bean gruel is served
7. offerings to crows
8. people circle their houses while calling "Pongalō pongal"
9. tree-beating

January 16th

10. apprentices' and/ or servants' holiday (a day for amusement)
11. new clothes given to employees
12. family gathers in parental home; visits to family graves
13. visit by performers
14. dancing and singing
15. shooting arrows
16. offering to horses and cows
17. kite-flying

10. a day for amusement
11. new sarees and other clothes given as gifts
12. family gathers in parental home; offerings made to ancestors
13. visit by performers
14. group dancing
15. stick games played
16. offering to cattle
17. kite-flying

Before discussing the details of these correspondences let us point out that the events do not strictly occur as scheduled above. According to the listed correspondences, serving of red rice gruel or bean gruel takes place on January 15th. Does it mean that such an event does not take place on January 14th? We have already indicated that in Jaffna society Pongal takes place mostly on January 14th. People would not like to burn their old possessions and cowsheds on that auspicious day. Such an act is considered inauspicious. Further certain events like the exploding of fire crackers, making decorations, gathering of family members in parental home, dancing, singing etc. are part of universals that occur during festive occasions in other cultures too. Most of these events take place in the Tamil society on other occasions too. For instance old possessions are burned on the eve of the New Year in April. Decorations are hung for any celebration-even for a funeral. Rice gruel is made on New Year day too. Offerings to crows are made on particular days of fast too.

The details of the correspondences as given by Ohno have to be compared and analysed for a clear understanding of the extent to which similarities exist. Burning of old possessions and cowsheds is not part of any ritual or regular practice during Pongal celebrations in Jaffna society. This may or may not take place in a household in Jaffna whereas it is done as a ritual in Japan.

Ohno says that "fire festivals are also held in Japan on January fourteenth." We have to seriously think whether we can equate the fire festivals that take place in Japan on January fourteenth and the burning of old possessions in Jaffna. Hindus have some kind of fire festivals during other months or occasions in the second half of the year. We wish to point out categorically that to our knowledge Ohno's information that "at Jaffna, people burn old objects on the evening of January fourteenth" and that "near the city of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, on the day of the Pongal festival, cowsheds together with fencing, are burned, and new ones are built" is rather inaccurate.

With regard to decorations Ohno says "on the day of Pongal in Sri Lanka, it is customary to cut banana plants and set them up at the door of one's home. He claims that this custom corresponds to the Japanese practice of setting up kadomatsu (pine trees put up at one's gate for New Year's)". Truly speaking Jaffna Tamils have this kind of decorations for a wedding or a funeral but seldom for Pongal. Rarely someone may set up banana trees in the location where Pongal is cooked but again not at the door of his home.

It is very interesting to read what Ohno says about the ritual of tree beating and wife-spanking in Japanese culture. According to Ohno "on January fifteenth in the village of the Shizuoka area, it was once the custom among farm families for children to stir rice gruel made of red beans, and then strike fruit trees with the wet stick. As they did this one of them would chant, "Big fruit, little fruit. Did you bear? Will your bear? Bear big fruit or I'll beat your branches". More amusing is the description of the practice of wife-spanking¹⁶.

We have not even heard about the tree-beating or the wife-spanking practice in modern Jaffna. Of course tree-beating prevailed in some parts of Jaffna in the past. But surprisingly Ohno says that "the tree-beating ritual takes place even today in the rural areas around the city of Jaffna, Sri Lanka". The questions we would like to raise here are: Is this really a current practice? Specifically where is it done in Jaffna? Is it done as a ritual on the fifteenth of January? Who does it, the young or the old? A few other points too deserve similar questions in his paper.

Ohno cites "providing employees with new clothes, visits to parental home, singing and dancing" as common practices in both cultures during Koshogatsu and Pongal celebrations. But broadly speaking such practices take

place commonly in several other cultures too during festive occasions. His statements like "on Pongal, in the vicinity of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, too, a man goes from door to door, playing a drum and singing songs, after which he offers celebratory words and receives a small reward", "in the Tamil speaking area of Sri Lanka, the day for amusement is the same as in Japan, the sixteenth", "on Pongal day in the Jaffna area of Sri Lanka..... a type of bullfighting takes place" need further investigation for these are not customary practices in most parts of Jaffna. The usual occasion during which new clothes are distributed as gifts is Deepavali. During other occasions such as the Pongal and the New-year new clothes may or may not be distributed as gifts. Visits to parents, relatives and friends are done more enthusiastically and also as part of regular cultural practice during the New Year celebrations. Japanese may have all these during Koshōgatsu celebrations in January but with regard to Jaffna society any such undue emphasis on these practices during Pongal celebrations will be considered artificial, far fetched and even motivated.

V

In the light of what we have pointed out and discussed, we feel that some kind of re-thinking becomes essential on the authenticity of the materials gathered for investigation, the interpretation of the materials, the correspondences set up, and the methodology and the scientific approach adopted in the study. We would like to emphasise the need to draw a line between past practices and current practices, widespread practices and practices restricted to a few areas, and between common practices and uncommon practices and also to have precise statements about these practices.

NOTES

1. Susumu Ohno, Arunasalam Sanmugadas, and Manonmani Sanmugadas. 1985. World View and Rituals Among Japanese and Tamils, Gakushuin University Series 13, pp 226, Japan.
2. For instance in some contexts the author refers to the Jaffna Tamil society and in others he speaks of Sri Lankan Tamil society. See p.9. Tamil language and culture differ even within the Sri Lankan Tamil society. Among others, the Jaffna Tamil society and the Batticaloa Tamil society differ markedly in linguistic aspects and cultural practices.
3. One could see a lot of variations in funeral practices from region to region and caste to caste in Jaffna. But this does not mean that Jaffna people don't agree on any practice. It is possible to find certain practices as common-core and project some of the variant practices as very old on time scale.

4. The name *kiil nilam* probably does not occur in old Tamil literary works.
5. The word *ulaḱam* may freely vary with the word *lookam* in these phrases.
6. *Pandal* "shed" is a Tamil word. It has been borrowed into English too. Funeral *pandal* differs from wedding *pandal* in structure. Both types of *pandal* are referred to by different names.
7. *Pancami* is the last five of the lunar days.
8. Nowadays people seldom have such beliefs. During the past five decades a lot of changes have taken place in the customs, manners and beliefs of the society.
9. Nowadays people especially the younger generation have a tendency to discard this traditional way of announcing one's death and to resort to new ways of it expressing it especially with regard to deaths caused by the armed forces of the government in the Tamils' struggle for more rights.
10. As this point was discussed in an informal gathering a school child asserted that Jaffna and Japan are similar. Asked how, she said with all seriousness: change ff to pp and interchange the final letters na in Jaffna, you will have Japan. This explanation was according to her Tamil pronunciation of the word Japan.
11. Recollect note 2 in this context too.
12. There are several other Tamil idioms whose literal sense portray early cultural practices in Jaffna society.
13. The linguistic correspondences between Japan - Tamil will have to be reviewed in a separate paper.
14. Only the relevant details are given here from the point of our analysis.
15. The author of this paper did not have a chance to see it or taste it during the past fifty years.
16. For details of wife-spanking see pp 36 - 37 in Ohno's volume.