

## MALAYA: WHAT'S IN THE NAME ?

by

Joseph Minattur  
Nanyang University

*Malaya* is a Sanskrit word meaning a range of mountains. It is used to refer to the range of mountains in and adjacent to the Malayalam country (present-day Kerala) which was called Male by the later Greek and early Arabian geographers.<sup>1</sup> The word appears to have been derived from the Dravidian word *mala* (*mala* in Malayalam and *malei* in Tamil).<sup>2</sup> *Mala* means hill or mountain. The people inhabiting the region west of the mountains originally denoted by the Sanskrit word *Malaya* are called Malayalis and their language Malayalam. The country is sometimes referred to by the inhabitants as *malanādu* (hill country). Some of the Arab geographers called it *Malabar* (*mala* + *barr*, Arabic for continent, or *mala* + *bār*, Persian for coast and also for kingdom).<sup>3</sup> The Portuguese seem to have accepted this name and given it wide currency.

*Malaiyūr*,<sup>4</sup> the name mentioned in the Tanjore inscription of Rajendra Chola means a hill town, *mala*, hill and *yūr*, town (in Tamil).<sup>5</sup> In South India *yūr* is a common ending for place-names; for instance, names like Chittūr, Manalūr, Malayattūr, Chengannūr.

Most of the names mentioned in the inscription seem to be Tamil or Malayalam. When Sanskrit affixes appear, they are such as would usually be found in compound words in Malayalam.

It does not seem reasonable to assume that though they were indigenous names, they were given a Dravidian form in the inscription. The Dravidian form may have been due to their Dravidian origin, and one can account for this origin if one may reasonably assume that the

- 1) Caldwell, R., *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, 3rd ed., Madras, 1956, p. 575.
- 2) *Ibid.*
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 4) Could the *Maleoukolon* of *Geographike Huphegesis* be a corruption of *Malayūr-kōṭi*, *kōṭi* meaning a cape, as in *Dhanuṣkōṭi* in South India ?
- 5) In Malayalam it would mean a town or village or any locality.

dominant groups in the population of these countries were Dravidian or that their king was of Dravidian origin. If he were a Hinduized native ruler, inclined to Indianise his kingdom, one would expect to find Sanskrit place-names rather than Dravidian ones. Considering all the relevant circumstances, one may safely say that if the place-names indicate anything, they tend to support the assumption that Rajendra Chola led his victorious army against a Chera king and his people.

We may now consider in some detail a few of the place-names. *Palam* in *Māppāpalam* approximates to the ending in place-names like *Ottappālam* and *Mundupalam*, where *pālam* means a bridge. It could as well be a contraction of *pālayam*,<sup>6</sup> a camp. Anyway, there is an unmistakable Dravidian touch about the name. The same may be said of most of the other names also. In *Valaippandūru*,<sup>7</sup> *uru* is the same as *ūr* and connotes a locality (town or village). *Valai* may mean an enclosure. It could also be that *Valaippan* stands for the name of a person. If so, it would mean the town or village established and/or lived in by Valaippan. *Talaitakkōlam* has in it two, if not three, Dravidian words, *tala* (head) and *kolam* (pond).<sup>8</sup> *Itta* is the name of a genus of palms distinguished by their pinnate leaves. If the name is split into *talai* (Tamil, head) and *takkēlam*, the second word may stand for *illicium anisatum*. Probably the division of words given first is to be preferred, as many place names end in *kolam* (or *kulam*), for instance *Kāyamkulam* in Kerala and *Teppakulam* in Madras State. In *Ilāmuriḍēsam*, *ḍēsam* (Sanskrit, *dēsa*) is village and *muri*<sup>9</sup> is a Malayalam word meaning piece or division. *Ila* may stand for land or earth. The name may therefore suggest a village formed by a new division of land. *Ilamuri* with a short *a* will mean a tender piece; it may therefore be applied to a division that is newly effected. *Mānakkavāram*<sup>10</sup> may correspond to the Necuveren of Marco Polo

6) This would be more in accord with the penultimate consonantal sound in *Māppapālam*. Compare place names like *Metupalayam*.

7) *andu* (for *ante*) in *Valaippanduru* clearly suggests the sense of possession.

8) In Malay the word is spelt *kolam*.

9) *muri* by itself would indicate a division of a district.

10) K.A. Nilakanta Sastri translated it as "the great Nakkavaram" in his article 'Sri Vijaya', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient*, vol. 40, 1940, p. 286.

and may be the Nicobar Islands. It is of interest to note that the ending *vāram* may be from the Malayalam suffix *vāram* seen in words like *adivāram* and *malavāram* (foothills) or it may be from Sanskrit *vāra* (region) with the addition of the Dravidian ending *am*. *Ilangāsōkam* may be Langasuka. *Ilanga*, however, was the name of the author of the famous Dravidian epic *Śilappadikāram*. He was the brother of a Chera king. In spite of its obvious suggestion of Lanka (Īlam, Ceylon) and its people (Īlavan?) it is not improbable that *Ilangāsōkam* had some association with the name of the great poet.

*Paṇṇai* in Tamil means 'cultivated land.' But the name *Paṇṇai* may be a corruption of *paṇṇya*, that is, salable (goods) and may, therefore, stand for a warehouse. As a place name it may denote a place where there was a warehouse.

A discussion of the name *Kadāram* bristles with difficulties mainly because of all that has been written about it. It would appear that *Kaḍāram* and *Kiḍāram* could be equated with *Kaṭāhanagara*.<sup>11</sup> *Kadāram* and *Kāḷagam* may also stand for the same place, in spite of Coedès's clear misgivings about it. Coedès points out that it is probably because *Kaḍāram* means 'a dark brown colour' and *Kāḷagam* 'black', that the author of *Divākaran* was induced to identify the two; and Nilakanta Sastri remarks that the employment of synonyms from one and the same or different languages even in referring to proper names is a well-established practice in India.<sup>12</sup> Wheatley's suspicion that there is some substance in Coedès's objection because in a gloss on the *Śilappadikāram* we find mentioned both *Kiḍāraṅgan* aloeswood and silk from *Kāḷagam*,<sup>13</sup> may be removed when it is realised that it is not unusual for Indian poets to refer to one and the same thing by different synonymous names in the same poem and sometimes in the same stanza.<sup>14</sup>

11) See Wheatley, P., *The Golden Chersonese*, Kuala Lumpur, 1961, p. 279.

12) Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., 'Kataha'. *Journal of the Greater India Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1938, p. 128.

13) Wheatley, *op. cit.* p. 279.

14) This may sometimes be because of the requirements of metre; but sometimes it seems to be merely for variety.

*Kāḷagam* and *Kaḍāram*, according to Caldwell, are "poetical equivalents" of *Karur*,<sup>15</sup> which, as Tamil tradition has it, was the ancient capital of the Chera kings.<sup>16</sup> *Karūr* in Tamil means black town. Seeing that Arabian travellers have used both the names *Kalāh* and *Kalābār*, it is not improbable that in *Kāḷagam*, the literary or poetic form of *Karur*, Sanskrit *kala* (black) was adopted and Tamil *akam*<sup>17</sup> (interior) indicating a region was added to it. The resulting compound 'Kalakam' appeared to approximate to *kaḷagam* and the ingenuity of the poets may have gone further and applied to the place concerned synonyms of the word. The Arabian traveller<sup>18</sup> who referred to the place as *Kalābār* was probably translating into Arabic or Persian the Tamil-Malayalam *akam* as *barr* or *bār* and affixing it to *kāla*.

The abundance of Dravidian words in the names of these places would indicate the predominant position the Dravidians had in the new settlements to which they seem to have given names of their own making. If *Kāḷagam* is admittedly a poetic equivalent of *Karur*, it is probable that the people who gave their new capital that name were Cheras. It is unlikely that the English would call a place in the New World by the name of a Dutch town; in fact, New Amsterdam was re-named New York by the English when they took over from the Dutch. Similarly, *Kāḷagam* would be an appropriate and new-fangled name for a capital of the Chera settlers, as, while maintaining separate identity, it would remind them of their far-away homes.

We have already referred to *Malaiyūr* where the settlers were content with using a Dravidian compound. But some of the kings

- 
- 15) Generally identified with the town of that name in the Coimbatore district which formed part of the Chera kingdom. See Caldwell, *op. cit.*, p. 94. One may also note that the Tamil dialect spoken in Malabar used to be called *Karintamil* (black Tamil).
- 16) Caldwell, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- 17) Compare *Tamilakam* (the Tamil country).
- 18) In the *Journey of the Arab merchant Sulayman in India and in China*, written in 851, we read that from Langabalus ships sailed to a place called Kalāh-bār and that the same name *bār* was given to both a kingdom and a sea coast. Cited in Przulski, J., 'Indian colonisation in Sumatra,' *Journal of the Greater India Society*, vol. 1, p. 95.

who held sway over Malaiyur seemed to have preferred, according to the age-old Indian practice, to call their royal dynasty by a Sanskrit name. The Sailendras, in all probability, adopted for their dynastic name a translation of Malayalam *mala-arayar* (Tamil, *māla-arasar*), the kings of the mountain. The Mala-arayar are at present a hill-tribe inhabiting the Southern Ghats. They

speak corrupt Malayalam in the northern part of the range where Malayalam is the prevailing language, and corrupt Tamil, with a tinge of Malayalam, in the southern, in the vicinity of Tamil-speaking districts.<sup>19</sup>

The *Mala-arayar* in the higher ranges of southern Kerala keep lamps burning in cairns attributed to Paraśurāma who, according to legends, reclaimed the land of Kerala from the sea. This, according to V.R.R. Dikshitar, indicates that they are

directly or indirectly connected with the Parasurama cult from ancient times . . . From their association with the Parasurama cult and from the name Mala Arayans we have to conclude that they are part of the so-called Arayan community who perhaps came in the wake of Parasurama's conquest of Malabar. That this is not impossible is seen from the fact that both in appearance and in standard of living they are distinctly apart from the other hill-tribes who are seen scattered in the different parts of Malabar.<sup>20</sup>

One may or may not agree with Dr. Dikshitar's conclusion; but there can be no doubt about the fact that the name *Sailendra*, unwittingly or otherwise, is an exact translation of *mala-arayan*.<sup>21</sup> Considering the widespread use of Dravidian names for places and for proper names in South-East Asia during the period, and considering also the fact that royalty invariably assumed Sanskrit titles, it is difficult to conclude that the assumption of this title by the Sailendras had nothing

19) Caldwell, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

20) Dikshitar, V.R.R., 'Some Hill Tribes of Malabar' in *Kerala Studies*, edited by P.K.N. Pillai, Trivandrum, 1955, p. 139.

21) One may also note that in Tamil *Porayan* (from *pora* mountain; *porrai* in modern Tamil) was the title of Chera kings. See Gundert, H., *A Malayalam-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Kottayam, 1962, p. 661.

to do with their origin, especially when the title referred to the dynasty and not to an individual king.

Even if the Sailēndra kings had no connexion whatever with the *mala-arayar*, it is evident that one of the regions over which these kings ruled was called by a name similar to that of the country where the *mala-arayar* lived. As we have seen, this name, like names of the common folk, retained its Dravidian character. While *Malaiyūr* remained purely Dravidian, names like Palembang and Minangkabau<sup>22</sup> seem to have been formed by a combination of Sanskrit and Dravidian words. It may also be noted that Malabar is the name of a mountain in Java.<sup>23</sup> From these it may reasonably be assumed that the first part of the name is from the Dravidian word *mala*.

We find in the name *Funan* the same image of mountain. *Funan* is the modern pronunciation of two Chinese characters which were pronounced *biu-nam* in the old days. They are considered to be the Chinese transliteration of the old Khmer word *bnam* which meant mountain.<sup>24</sup> According to the inscriptions found in Han Chei Temple and at Kuk Pra Kot, the rulers of Funan called themselves by the Sanskrit titles, *parvatabhupala* and *sailaraja*, both meaning king of the mountain.

The name Kundunga of the East Borneo inscriptions probably meant chief of the mountain or hill.<sup>25</sup>

It may also be mentioned that the "name Malaya is very com-

22) See Minattur, J., 'The Nature of Malay Customary Law', *Malaya Law Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1964, p. 100.

23) See Stutterheim, W.F., 'Note on Cultural Relations between South India and Java', *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-Landen Volkenkunde*, 1939, p. 83. From this mountain springs a river called Tarum. Dr. Stutterheim calls attention to the fact that in the Javanese inscriptions of the 4th and 5th centuries a kingdom known as Taruma is mentioned, while a charter of Kulottunga Chola in 1070 mentions a *Tarumapura* which is said to be situated ten miles north of Cape Comorin.

24) See Majundar, R.C., *Ancient Indian Colonisation in South-East Asia*, Baroda, 1955, p. 21.

25) See Minattur, J., 'King Kundunga of the East Borneo Inscriptions', *Journal of South-East Asian History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1964, p. 181.

mon in Sumatra. There are a mountain and a river of that name; there are four villages called Malaya and a tribe of that name."<sup>26</sup>

The recurrent image of the mountain in the names of dynasties, kings, countries, towns and villages, cannot be ignored as being due to mere chance coincidence. Nor can it be attributed to a prevailing Saiva cult in all these instances. From the inscriptions found in Kutei it is not possible to identify with certainty the religious cult practised by Kundunga and his descendants.<sup>27</sup> We are again not sure whether the kings of Funan were Vaiṣṇavite or Śaivite.<sup>28</sup> The Śailendras are known to have been Buddhists,<sup>29</sup> and were therefore unlikely to have assumed a dynastic name which was designed to honour Lord Śiva. We have therefore to look for mundane grounds for the adoption of the name.

According to Vlekke,<sup>30</sup> it was Vishnu's son who assumed the title "*Sri Mahārāja Śailēndravansa . . .*" and Vishnu had married the daughter of a ruler of Funan who was, of course, "king of the mountain" (*śailarāja*). Could it be that Vishnu's son claimed the dynastic name through his mother?

Apart from these references to hill countries and kings of the mountain, there is at least one reference to a South Indian tribe in the ancient inscriptions discovered in South-East Asia. An inscription found in Cambodia<sup>31</sup> refers to an abode of Brahmins in *Kurumbanagara*. The Kurumbar, after whom the town appears to have been named, are a tribe of nomadic shepherds inhabiting the hilly regions of the present day States of Kerala and Mysore. According to Sir Walter Elliott, "[t]hey are stated to have been engaged in trade and to have owned ships and carried on a considerable commerce by sea".<sup>32</sup> Kurumbar is the Tamil-Malayalam form of the name which

26) *T'oung Pao*, series 2, vol. 2, p. 115, quoted in Majumdar, R.C., 'The Malay', *Journal of the Greater India Society*, vol. 3, 1936, p. 93.

27) Hall, D.G.E., *A History of South-East Asia*, 2nd ed., London, 1964, p. 37.

28) Vlekke, B.H.M., *Nusantara* 2nd ed., 1959, p. 33.

29) Hall, *op. cit.* p. 49.

30) Vlekke, *op. cit.* p. 33.

31) Discovered by R. Dalet at Neak Ta Dambang Dek; see note 33 below.

32) Elliott, W., *Numismata Orientalia*, vol. 3, pt. 2, pp. 36-7, quoted by Mookerji, R.K., *Indian Shipping*, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1957, p. 36.

in Canarese is *Kurubaru*. It is the Tamil-Malayalam form that appears in the inscription. At the date of the inscription<sup>33</sup> Malayalam may not have developed into a distinct language. All over the Chera country it was Tamil that was spoken. The ancient Tamil work, *Śilappadikāram*, for instance, was written in Cranganore (Muchiri) by a brother of the Chera king. There are references in *Keraṭōtpatti* to the Rajas of *Kurumbarnād* who were powerful in medieval Kerala.<sup>34</sup>

A bronze statuette discovered by Dr. Bosch in Sumatra may also indicate the influence of Malabar in South-East Asia. Commenting on this find from Padang Lawas, Tapanuli, Longhurst wrote: "I should imagine the female figure represents a portrait statuette of a lady who made a gift to the *vihāra*. The style of the image suggests the 15th century as its probable age. In pose and dress, the figure is not unlike the *Satī* images of the 16th century and earlier, so common in this presidency, but of course, the style of dress and coiffure were common long before that period, and both may still be seen in Malabar at the present day."<sup>35</sup> Dr. Bosch thinks that the image has to be assigned to an earlier period, with the tenth century as the highest limit.<sup>36</sup>

O.C. Gongoly referring to the *meru* style of temple architecture found in Bali has written: "Somewhat similar slope-roofed temples have survived in Kerala, in the sanctuaries of Cochin and Travancore which, by the way, preserve many early relics of ancient Indian culture which have disappeared from other parts of India".<sup>37</sup>

The significant mention of Paraśurāma in a lawbook regarded as of the highest authority in Java during the Majapahit period may

33) Coedès thinks that the inscription dates from the reign of Jayavarman of Funan who died in 514 A.D. See Coedès, 'A New Inscription from Funan', *Journal of the Greater India Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1937, p. 117.

34) See Raja, P.K.S., *Medieval Kerala*, Chidambaram, 1953, p. 69.

35) Quoted by Sastri, N., 'A South Indian Portrait Bronze from Sumatra,' *Journal of the Greater India Society*, vol. 3, 1936, p. 105.

36) *Ibid.*

37) Gongoly O.C., in his review of W.F. Stutterheim's *Indian Influences in Old-Balinese Art*, *Journal of the Greater India Society*, vol. 3, 1936, p. 123.

point to the impact of Kerala on the people of Java. In this lawbook, *Kuṭāra-mānava-sāstra* by name, one finds the following passage :

The Manāva-sāstra was communicated by Mahārāja Manu who was like god Viṣṇu. The Kuṭāra-sastra was communicated by Bhṛgu in the tretāyuga; he was (also) like god Viṣṇu; the Kuṭāra-sāstra is followed by Parasurāma and by the whole world, it is not a product of the present time . . . 38

In an inscription of 1358 A.D. seven judges are described as being *Kuṭāra-mānavādisāstra-vivecana-tatpara*, that is, persons versed in the understanding of *Kuṭāramānava* and other lawbooks.<sup>39</sup> In the Bendasari inscription of the middle of the fourteenth century six judges are said to have decided a civil suit in accordance with the principles laid down in *Kuṭāra-mānava*.<sup>40</sup>

Brandes thinks<sup>41</sup> that the lawbook consists of two parts, one the *Kuṭāra-sastra* inspired by Bhṛgu<sup>42</sup> and the other, the *Mānava-sastra* inspired by Manu.<sup>43</sup> He also refers to a Malay Chronicle which states that the lawbook was compiled under the direction of Surya Alam, king of Demak.<sup>44</sup> *Surya*, in the king's name, may be a Malay version of Chera.<sup>45</sup>

The main reason given for the authority attributed to the lawbook, the very name of the book,<sup>46</sup> the mention of Paraśurāma in it, the authorship ascribed to it—all these would tend to indicate its Kerala connection.

38) Section 121, quoted in Majumdar, R.C., *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, vol. 2, pt. 2, Calcutta, 1938, p. 5. See Jonker, J.C.C., *Ond-Javaansch Wetboek*, Leyden, 1885.

39) Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

40) *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

41) Cited in *ibid.*, p. 5.

42) Bhṛgu was the name of an ancestor of Parasurama.

43) Cited in Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

44) *Ibid.*

45) Compare : Raja Suran.

46) *Kuṭāra* is in all probability from Sanskrit *kuthāra*, an axe. *Kuthāra* was Parasurama's favourite weapon, one which he successfully wielded in his encounters with Kshatriya princes.

One may also note, for what it is worth, the reference in *Sejarah Melayu* to Sang Sapurba's travelling to Java, Borneo and Bentan before he became ruler of Minangkabau.<sup>47</sup> This account may be purely legendary, but it is significant that at least two of the countries he is said to have visited are those where one comes across references to the kings of the mountain. And Minangkabau happens to be the place where the impact of Kerala can be traced in social institutions.<sup>48</sup>

When works of art as well as many other things point to Kerala influences in South-East Asia, can we choose to ignore the eloquent evidence of language found in the place names mentioned in ancient inscriptions? And the most prominent among these names is *Malaiyūr*.

In meaning *Malaiyūr* is almost identical with *Malabar*. There is no doubt that *Melayu* in the Malay language has been derived from *Malaiyūr* and that *Malaya*<sup>49</sup> is the English equivalent for the Malay *Melayu*. This equivalent happens to be exactly the same as Sanskrit *malaya*, the word used to connote the mountain range near the boundaries of Kerala.

47) See Winstedt, R., 'The Founder of Malay Royalty and his Conquest of Saktimuna, the Serpent', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 4, 1926, p. 414.

48) See Minattur, J., 'Indian Influence on Malay Customary Law', *The Modern Review* (Calcutta), vol. 115, no. 5, p. 330.

49) Malakka, the Dutch name for Malaya, is obviously from the name of the town Malacca which, in turn, appears to be from the name of a tree (Malayalam, *Malūkkappēra*, *psidium pyriferrum*). Malayalam, *malekka*, as a verb, would mean to grow thick, swell, "perhaps also to lie in heaps, form hills" (Gundert, *op. cit.*, p. 730). Wilkinson, however, traces the name to Arabic *malakat* (possession) which in Malay means a mart. (Wilkinson, *A Malay-English Dictionary*, London, 1955, p. 729).