

## *Tamil Pongal Festival and Japanese New Year*

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Languages of the same linguistic origin will have a basic vocabulary that phonetically corresponds. This means that there is a shared basic structure of cultural patterns in the world. If the languages of the two societies are proven to be related in origin, then it may well follow that there are also similarities at the level of basic culture.

Culture, race and language are not always integrally connected. Yet, this is not to say that there may never be any connection between them. A shared basic vocabulary signifies a common means of apprehending the world.

When there is linguistic similarity, it is possible to discover in them not only the existence of correspondences in vocabulary, but also correspondences in culture. When such correspondences exist, apparent similarities in lifestyle may be confirmed by the discovery of correspondences in languages. (*Susumu Ohno, 1985:18*)

With this technique, a comparison of Tamil life and culture with that of the Japanese results in a list of extremely clear correspondences in certain cultural phenomena. One such correspondence is that which exists between the Tamil New year's festival of *Pongal* and the Japanese celebration of *koshōgatsu*, the celebration of "Little New Year".

*Pongal* is a festival held annually in Tamilnadu of India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore. 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. The *pongal* gruel is eaten with sugar or sugar cane.

Both *pongal* and *koshōgatsu* are celebrating on the same day; with the same red coloured gruel with sugar. How does one interpret the exact correspondence of these events? The correspondence of such peculiar factors could be dismissed as a mere coincidence. Both festivals are held during the 14th, 15th and 16th of January under the solar calendar. In essence, both *Pongal* and *Koshōgatsu* are New Year's supplications for bountiful harvests in the coming year. As to why this takes place on the fifteenth and not the first day of the new year, there are deciding circumstances in both cultures.

Before the solar calendar, a lunar calendar was used in Japan. Under the lunar calendar, the day of the new moon was counted as the first day of the month and the full moon fell on the fifteenth. The New Year festival takes place on the fifteenth because, as Japanese ethnologists have already suggested, in ancient times the day of the full moon was considered as the first day of the month but, after the calendar was changed to begin the month on the day of the new moon, what had been the first day became the fifteenth. In other words, the fifteenth day of the first month under the lunar calendar, that is, the day of the first full moon, was the first day of the year under the ancient calendar (*Susumu Ohno, 1985:20*). Ethnologists go no further than to state the probability of such an explanation, but an examination of the traditional Tamil calendar seems to confirm it.

In India especially in Tamilnadu, a Tamil calendar is in use to this day, under which the full moon is counted as the first day of the month. Therefore, the fifteenth day of the first lunar month is the first day of the Tamil first month, called *Tai*. This day is considered New Year's day so that on January first, the first day of the solar calendar, no celebrations are held in Tamil society; rather, everyone goes to work as usual. It is only on January 14th or 15th, the Tamil people celebrate the New Year. According to Susumu Ohno, in Japan, before the advent of the lunar calendar, the day of the full moon was counted as the first day of the month.

With the adoption of the lunar calendar in Japan, the ancient calendar, under which the month began on the day of the full moon, was abandoned and the official observance of New Year's Day was shifted. However, in agricultural society, the practice of celebrating on the day of the first full moon, the fifteenth day of the first month, was maintained. It may be assumed that this day was called *koshōgatsu* (*Little New Year's Celebration*) in order to distinguish it from the official one held on the first day of the first month.

Below is the list of the events that make up the January fifteenth New Year's agricultural

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festival as celebrated in Tamilnadu, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan. From this list, we can be able to see the corresponding events of *pongal* and *koshōgatsu*.

Tamilnadu, Sri Lanka, \*Malaysia and \*Singapore

### **Pongal**

#### January 14th

1. Firecrackers are exploded
2. Old possessions are burned
3. cowsheds are burned

#### January 15th

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. People circle their houses while shouting or calling "*Pongalo! Pongalo!*"
8. Offerings to crows.
9. Tree beating

#### January 16th

10. New sarees and other clothes given as gifts.
11. Holiday for servants
12. Offerings to cattles
13. Family gathers in parental home; offerings made to ancestors.
14. Visit by performers
15. Dancing and singing
16. Stick games played
17. Kite-flying

Japan

### **Koshōgatsu**

#### January 14th

1. Firecrackers are exploded
2. *tondoyaki* ritual burning of old things.
3. sheds are burned

#### January 15th

4. decorations are hung
5. Fresh water drawn for the first time in the year
6. Red gruel made with red bean is served
7. People circle their houses while shouting or calling "*Hongara! Hongara!*"
8. Offerings to crows
9. tree-beating.

#### January 16th

10. New clothes given to employees
11. Holiday for servants
12. Offerings to horses and cows.
13. Family gathers in parental home; visits to family graves.
14. Visit by performers
15. Dancing and singing
16. Shooting arrows
17. Kite-flying.

\* *Not all the events are observed.*



The observance of both *pongal* and *koshōgatsu* is spread out over the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth days of the first lunar month (i.e. January).

In Tamilnadu, on the evening of the fourteenth day of January, old objects such as worn-out sarees, shoes and even tyres are piled up and burned in great bonfires. People also beat the little drums and explode firecrackers. This practice originates in the ritual incineration of old, used objects as a rite of purification for the New Year on the fifteenth of January.

According to Susumo Ohno, fire festivals are also held in Japan on January fourteenth. These are variously called *tandoyaki* or *dondoyaki*. The practice is called *tandoyaki* in the Tōhoku, Kantō and Kinki districts and in Yamanashi Prefecture; in the Chūbu district (Nagano and Shizuoka Prefecture) and in Mie and Kumamoto Prefectures it is called *dondoyaki* or *dondoya*.

The event usually involves hanging from a post acorns and chestnuts that have been gathered in the mountains, then burning them along with the sacred straw ornaments that have been hung for New Year. Or as is done in Akita Prefecture, the event entails erecting a bamboo pole and hanging ears of rice from it, after which it is entirely set afire. Old ornaments that have been used on the household altar, the first calligraphy of the New Year and other such items are also burned with them. In some parts of the country, the vessels used to present offerings to the roadside deities are burned together; in other regions, firecrackers are exploded at the same time (*Susumu Ohno, 1985:23*)

In Tamilnadu, January fifteenth is considered the first day of the month *Tai*. The same goes to Japan where the January fifteenth is New Year's Day. In Tamilnadu, the character of the fire festival has changed. It is now called *bogi* and considered an occasion for the ritual plea for rain. In Japan too, the character of the celebration has changed since the Nara period and in many places it has become an occasion for eating toasted rice cakes in the superstitious belief that doing so will keep one in good health.

In some places of Jaffna (Sri Lanka), on the day of *Pongal* festival, cowsheds together with fencing are burned and new ones are built. Whereas in Japan as one event of the observance of *koshōgatsu*, a shed is built for children in which they eat and sleep for a few days. Then, on January 14th or 15th, the shed is burned. This shed is called variously *shōgatsugoya* (*New Year's shed*), *yukigoya* (*snow shed*) or *torigoya* (*bird shed*). The custom is found in Akita Prefecture and Yamanashi Prefecture (where the shed is called *gokoya* (*honourable*

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*shed*) as well as in Hyōgo Prefecture, where it is called *hochoji* (meaning unknown) (*Susumu Ohno, 1985:25*).

For the decoration purpose on *Pongal* festival, in Tamilnadu, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore, mango leaves are hung from a rope which is then used to cordon off a sacred area in which the *Pongal* gruel is prepared. Also, a straw rope hung with mango leaves is strung across the doors of houses. In Japan, as part of the New Year's celebration *shimekazari*, ropes of straw used to demarcate sacred space, are hung. Rings of holly leaves are hung from the straw ropes. This use of *shimekazari*, to mark off a special, often sacred are common to Tamilnadu, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan.

The custom of eating red rice of *Pongal* gruel is widely observed as part of the observance of *Pongal* in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. Normally, in front of an altar filled with offerings of bananas and coconuts, the village herdsman's wife will pour cow's milk into an earthen vessel and make a fire with banana leaves underneath it. The milk soon comes to a boil and overflows the pot. When this happens, the villagers, who have to this point been watching in silence, begin shouting over and over, "*Pongalō! Pongal! Pongalō! Pongal!*". This is a great exclamation of joy over a bountiful harvest. The literal meaning of the word is, "It has boiled! Grow fruitful!" The explosive shouts of the villagers echo throughout the village. In Japan too, the custom of eating *azuki-gayu* (gruel with red beans) on January fifteenth, is a central part of the present-day celebration of *koshōgatsu*. And the Japanese use the words "*Hongara! hongara!*".

In ancient Tamil culture a type of bean was used, not for colouring but as main ingredient for red rice. In a *Caṅkam* literary text *Perumpāṇārrupatai* which belongs to the second century A.D., there is a passage about gruel made with beans.

*neṭuṅkurar puḷaip pūvi nanna*  
*kuruntāl, varakin kuraḷavilc conrip*  
*pukariṅar vēṅkai vikaṅ ṭanna*  
*vavarai vāṅpuluk kaṭṭip payilvur*  
*incuvai mūrar perukuvir*

(*Perum. : 192-196*)

With rice of grains  
short as the flowers of the long-eared spindle tree,  
I cooked a good rice dish, containing beans

like a bunch of colored *vēṅkai* flowers,  
and mixed it well  
You too, will have  
this delicious cooked rice with beans.

On January fifteenth, during the *pongal* festival, offerings are made to crows. Such offerings are made not only at *Pongal* festival but are normally a part of every Tamil religious event. However, in some parts of Japan, there is the custom of throwing food, in particular, throwing *mochi* (pounded rice cakes) to crows during the celebration of *koshōgatsu* on or about January fifteenth. In Japan, the custom of giving *mochi* to crows is most often observed on January eleventh, except for the places in Tōhoku district where it takes place on January fifteenth or sixteenth (Susumu Ohno, 1985:32). The Tamil custom corresponds to the practice of making offerings to crows on January fifteenth, which is found in Japan.

In both Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka, there are customary practices held on January sixteenth which correspond to the Japanese custom of taking a holiday from work, giving new clothes to employees and memorializing one's ancestors.

The custom of giving clothes to employees on January fifteenth or sixteenth during *Pongal* festival is found in Tamilnadu as well as in Japan. According to Shanmugasadas, in Sri Lanka gifts of money and clothes are given out on this day.

In Tamilnadu, *Pongal* ceremony for cows is held on January sixteenth. Since the cow is a sacred animal in India, an entire day is given over to celebrating *Pongal* for cows. The family cow is presented with a new collar and lead rope in a complex ritual. Susumu Ohno pointed that in Joōji village in Iwate Prefecture, people offer the husks of rice and beans to horses and cows on the sixteenth day of January. Whereas in Higashidōri village on the Shimokita Peninsula of Aomori Prefecture, on the twentieth of January a ritual is held for horses and cows. People offer *mochi* and change bridles and ropes for new ones.

On January fifteenth in the Tamil-speaking area of Sri Lanka, the *Pongal* gruel is prepared and offered to cows in the morning but in the evening specially prepared food (including dried fish, prawns, lobster etc.) is presented as an offering to the ancestors. In order to maintain this custom, everyone, even those people who have moved away from the area returns to his or her place of birth by the day before *Pongal*, that is, by January fourteenth. When one considers that the day of *Pongal* is in fact New Year's Day, it seems entirely

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natural to offer prayers for one's ancestors on this occasion.

On Tokunoshima, one of the Amami Islands, the sixteenth of January was a day on which people held memorial services for their ancestors and was called *senzoshōgatsu* (ancestors New Year). On this day people would gather at family gravesites and toast their ancestors with toddy. The terms *oyagenzo* and *senzoshōgatsu* both indicate clearly the purpose of returning to one's native place on the sixteenth day of the New Year (*Susumu Ohno 1985:41*).

The correspondence is proven by the similarities in many aspects such as ritual burning of old things, decorations, rice gruel made with red beans, offerings to cows and cattles, the cry "*Pongalō! pongal!*" and "*Hongara! hongara!*", providing employees with new clothes, visits to parental homes and family graves and so on.

There are near-exact correspondences between almost every event associated with the Tamil New Year's festival of *Pongal* and the Japanese celebration of *koshōgatsu*. It is hard to believe that such similarities could come about through mere coincidences especially such linguistic correspondence as that between the words *Pongal* and *Hongara*. This reflects a close relationship between Tamil and Japanese culture.

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