

History at Land's End: Lemuria in Tamil Spatial Fables

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The Earth will belong to he who knows it best.

(Capel 1994, 72)

If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism,
it is the primacy of the geographical.

(Said 1994, 225)

Meditations on Loss at Cape Comorin

This paper seeks to address the theme of this volume by exploring the place of the fabulous in the imaginary geographies of a lost world in the Indian Ocean.

I begin with three enchanted flights of imagination that seek to convey a useful truth. All three are occasioned by travel to a real place—Kanyakumari, the “Cape Comorin” of colonial atlases, and the land’s end of the Indian peninsula and of its Tamil-speaking region (“Tamil Nadu”). The travel to land’s end, however, kindles memories of another time and place when neither “India” nor the world as we know them today existed, and when the Tamil realm, it is believed, extended far south of the Cape into the Indian Ocean in the guise of a vast continent variously referred to as Lemuria, Kumari Kandam, Kumari Nadu, or even Tamil Nadu:

The mind grieves when it thinks of Cape Kumari for it brings back memories of the seizure of southern Tamil Nadu by the ocean, and the consequent loss. . . . Both creation and destruction are part of God’s play. Even if we think in this manner of the loss of the southern land, the mind finds no solace even after thousands of years have passed.

So wrote C. Mutthuvirasami Naidu when he visited the Cape in 1955 (Mutthuvirasami Naidu 1954–1955, 453). As he looked out at the vast ocean that

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stretched before him, the antediluvian history of the Tamil people flashed through his mind as a Herculean struggle between ocean and land, between nature and culture:

I looked out at the boundless expanse of the ocean, ceaselessly and tirelessly turning and rolling, rising and falling, again and again. The thought sprang to my mind as I stood gazing at this sight that in this very manner, the ocean rose and destroyed Kumari Kandam several hundreds of years ago. When the southern ocean boiled over and seized the land, fine men, graceful women, and beautiful people, shapely colorful birds, animals and other living beings, all these suffered and perished. Temples, mansions, and palaces, renowned Tamil libraries and the rare arts, colleges and schools, assemblies and meeting houses, market places and port facilities, homes, gardens, and playing fields, all disappeared into the ocean. When I saw the distress all this caused, my heart trembled and drowned in an ocean of suffering.

(456)

So overwhelmed was Mutthuvirasami by such memories that even after he retired for the night, "the cries of distress of Tamil Nadu as it sank into the ocean" filled his thoughts. It was almost as if the ceaseless rolling waves continually stoked the embers of distress in his mind:

Alas! What can one say about the suffering heaped upon the ancient Tamil land which gave birth to the arts and to world civilization? What can one say about the cruelty of the ocean that caused all this? What can we say about the state of the Tamil-speaking land that today stands shrunken and emaciated. . . . How much distress and loss has all this caused? Can we even measure this?

(456)

Mutthuvirasami Naidu was not alone in expressing such distress over the loss of the Tamil land, language, literature, and people. Ten years earlier, in 1944, the well-known Tamil scholar A. M. Paramasivanandam had also cast similar aspersions on "the cruel sea" during his visit to the Cape with a friend (Paramasivanandam 1944). After taking in the sights, they bathed in the ocean and then sat on the shore. As they sat there, Paramasivanandam was overwhelmed with "memories of Kumari," and he demanded of the ocean, "Where is the Lemuria continent which extended in the east to Australia and in the west to Madagascar?" (22). In contrast to Mutthuvirasami, his memories took an explicitly geographical turn, and he names the various rivers, mountains, cities, and regions that are believed to have constituted the "forty-nine territories" of the antediluvian Tamil realm now lost to the ocean:

O Indian Ocean! Where did you conceal our Tamil Nadu, our ripe old land? Why did you plunder the forty-nine Tamil territories thousands of years ago? Where is that fine ancient river Pahruli . . . ? Where is that golden stream called Kumari? Where is the incomparable Mount Kumari filled with beauty? Where is [the city of] Then Madurai famed for the first Tamil academy over which presided the Lords Shiva and Murugan? Where is the lofty [city of] Kapatapuram, seat of the second [Tamil] academy graced by Tolkappiyar, Agastya, and many others? Where is Elutengu Nadu [Seven Coconut Territories]? Where is Elumunpalai [Seven Front Sandy Tracts]? Where is Elupinpalai [Seven Back Sandy Tracts]? And Elukunra Nadu [Seven Hilly Territories]? . . . Where did these go? Where did these go?

(21–22)

Like Mutthuvirasami, he, too, meditated on the contemporary consequences of the momentous loss of territory to the ocean:

If today our ancient Tamil land and ancient Tamil learning had survived, we would have ruled the world from Kumari to the Himalayas! We have instead become the laughing stock of others! Is this not your doing? . . . If it had not been for your actions, we would have ruled the world! Why were you angry with Tamil Nadu and the Tamil language and the Tamil people?

(23)

The last of our enchanted memory flights comes from the pen of R. P. Sethu Pillai, Professor of Tamil at the University of Madras (Sethu Pillai 1950). In Sethu Pillai's imagination, it was the venerable poet-sage Ilango Adigal, author of the famous early medieval Tamil epic poem, the *Cilapatikaram*, who interrogates "the cruel sea" on a visit to the Cape. As Ilango looks out at the sea, his face, which had been "aglow with the light of Tamil," clouds over with sorrow, and his eyes fill up with tears:

Oh! Kumari Sea! When I see you, my heart surges with distress. Your breeze fans the hot embers of my body! Alas! O wave-filled ocean! What did our dear precious land do to you?

(4)

Speaking through Ilango, Sethu Pillai charges "the mischievous ocean" with destroying not just the antediluvian cities and rivers of the Tamil realm, but also for bringing distress to the famed Pandyan kings who magnanimously ruled over that ancient continent, nurturing the Tamil language and literature:

O mischievous ocean! You consumed so many towns belonging to the Pandyan king! You drank up so many rivers! You swallowed so many mountains! Our Tamil poems recall that in ancient times the river Pahruli belonged to the Pandyan! The beauty of that river was praised by the poet Nettimaiyar. Where is that river? Where are its sprawling sands? Our Pandyan shed tears when he learnt that you had destroyed that river. Even today I can hear the sound of his crying in your breeze! Is this your only cruelty? You also swallowed the river Kumari which had gloriously served as the southern limit of our ancient Tamil land. . . . Where is that river Kumari? That river which served as the southern boundary of the fine land where Tamil is spoken, you destroyed it and destroyed our limit! You utterly destroyed with your cruelty all the towns and villages which had flourished in the land between the Pahruli and Kumari! The vast mountain range of Kumari that rose high and lofty on that land also became prey to your cruelty! Alas! You ate up our land! You drank up our rivers! You consumed our mountains! . . .

(6)

Like Mutthuvirasami and Paramasivanandam, Sethu Pillai, too, lamented that because of the ocean's cruelty, "the Tamil land had shrunk. My heart grieves . . ." (7).¹

I will return later to why travel to Cape Kumari produces such reveries of dispossession, displacement, and loss for these Tamil writers, "loosen[ing] strong emotions and kindl[ing] thoughts of a richly caring kind" (Basso 1996, 106). For

¹That such memory flights on visits to the Cape had become commonplace as a literary practice by the 1960s is also apparent from Sri 1963. Although I have seen no systematic study of attitudes towards the sea among Tamil speakers, I have found very insightful Marcia Yonemoto's recent discussion of ocean "fears" and "fantasies" in the "geo-cultural" imaginary of Tokugawa Japan (Yonemoto 1999).

now, I want to note that these flights of imagination are but telling moments I have extracted from a dense fertile imaginary about Lemuria that had consolidated itself by the middle decades of the twentieth century in Tamil-speaking India. Elsewhere, I follow the discursive adventures of this continent as a site of contending fantasies, from its moment of emergence in the European scientific imagination in the mid-1860s, through its transmission to colonial India by the 1870s, its transmutation at the hands of occult practitioners of Euro-America from the 1880s, to its eventual appropriation by Tamil-speaking intellectuals in the 1890s.² In the last hundred years or so in Tamil India, Lemuria is no longer confined to the occasional scientific footnote, hazy ethnological conjecture, or speculations on the occult fringe as in Euro-America. Instead, through numerous essays and monographs, textbooks, public speeches, even a government documentary, this Jurassic continent of the European scientific imagination has come to be tantalizingly installed in Tamil nationalist collective memory as the centerpiece of a catastrophic modern historical narrative about the loss of the antediluvian Tamil past. Indeed, I propose that there is such fascination with Lemuria in Tamil India because it provides the ground for fantasizing about loss—of language and literature; of purity, antiquity, authenticity, sovereignty, and unity; and, not least, of territory. Again and again, modern speakers of Tamil are reminded that today they may be confined to the relatively small region of southeastern India named “Tamil Nadu,” “land/nation of Tamil.” But once upon a time, long long ago, their ancestors had ranged over a vast continent, Kumari Kadam or Kumari Nadu.

Spatial Fables, Imagined Elsewheres³

In this essay, I focus upon the geographical details and nuances of this Tamil imaginary in order to reveal how these produce a fantastic and fabulous spatial sensibility that is quite incommensurable with the rational, secular, disenchanting “planetary consciousness” (Pratt 1992) generated by disciplinary Geography. Tamil writings on Lemuria offer telling examples of what theorists of space have variously referred to as “geopiety,” “topophilia,” “worldmaking,” “place-making,” and so on (Basso 1996; Goodman 1978; Tuan 1976; Tuan 1990). The yearning for Lemuria may also be seen as a Tamil version of the quest for the “utopian” state of perfection and plenitude that has periodically asserted itself at different times in different places globally.⁴ Not discounting these possibilities—indeed drawing upon them in various ways—I consider the many writings on Lemuria in Tamil India as “spatial fables” that are products of a kind of imagination that may be characterized as “fabulation” (Scholes 1979).⁵ By spatial fabulation, I mean the *process* of thinking imaginatively—

²*The Lost Continent of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories, 1864–1981* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming). I borrow the phrase, “a site of contending fantasies,” from Peter Bishop’s fascinating study of Tibet as such a place in modern Western imaginations. See Bishop 1989, viii.

³I thank Chris Pinney for this felicitous phrase.

⁴There is a vast literature on this, but I have found particularly useful Bloch 1986; Kumar 1991; and Porter and Lukerman 1976. For a discussion of comparable utopian imaginations about lost homelands and lands of origin, see Smith 1986.

⁵Analogous to de Certeau’s “spatial stories” (1984), my notion of “spatial fables” builds upon the generic meaning of the fable as “a narration intended to enforce a useful truth,” in order to underscore the “fabulous” element in such narrations. Towards this end, I have found the following comment by Robert Scholes useful to think with: “Fables traditionally have lent

and enchantingly—about places not actually present or existing, about imagined elsewhere “beyond the known, beyond the accepted, beyond belief” (Armist 1996, 4). The products of “spatial fabulations,” as encoded in spatial fables, are “fabulous geographies” that are radically discontinuous from the material world that is empirically available for observation, survey, measurement, and mapping. And yet, Tamil spatial fabulists believe—or at least attempt to persuade their reader to believe—that their imagined elsewhere *really* exist, if only in some long lost, prelapsarian past. So, Tamil spatial fables about Lemuria transform spaces and places “contrary to fact into ‘fact’ itself” (Irwin 1976, 4). Rather than altogether ignoring or discarding “reality” as we know it, fabulation reorders it, in order to confront it, cognitively, emotionally, *politically*.⁶ As Michael Taussig notes in his discussion of “magical realism” in colonial Latin America, fabulation creates “an uncertain reality out of fiction, giving shape and voice to the formless form of ‘reality’ in which an unstable interplay of truth and illusion become a phantasmic social force” (Taussig 1987, 121). In the creation of “uncertain” realities, Tamil fabulism, as a spatial discourse, has to contend principally with Geography, the master science that emerged in later modernity in western Europe to describe the earth as it exists, as a disenchanted realm that is realistically knowable with certitude and precision, “the real world,” as it were.⁷

As scholars have observed in recent years, the science of Geography “constitutes the taking of possession of the earth, and the intellectual domination of space” (Smith and Godlewska 1994, 1). This possession and domination proceeded at several levels from the late-eighteenth century, but especially from the mid-nineteenth, with the institutionalization and professionalization of Geography (Capel 1981). In the first place, it involved knowing “the earth as designed for man, with a place for everything and everything in its place” (Stoddart 1986, 30). Through direct observation, classification, and comparison, the earth was tamed, and progressively rendered nonmysterious, unwondrous, disenchanted. It was measured, mapped, and described in intimate detail. No place was to be left unknown, no territory uncharted, ideally.

In the second place, Geography emerged as the master science for the management of discourse about the earth: its vocabulary and procedures came to legitimize talk about the earth and its spaces and resources. Since Geography is “overwhelmingly a European discipline” (Stoddart 1986, 37), this means of course that by the middle of the nineteenth century, Europe asserted its mastery over the earth, not only literally through the actual occupation and possession of large parts of its inhabited territories, but also epistemologically (and perhaps more enduringly) through its knowledge practices that provided the legitimate conceptual apparatus with which to talk and write about the physical world.

themselves to preaching, either as exempla in medieval sermons or directly through moral tags appended to the tales themselves—or both. This didactic quality is also characteristic of modern fabulation—but in ways which will need considerable qualification . . . modern fabulation . . . tends away from direct representation of the surface of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy” (Scholes 1979, 3).

⁶I have modeled my concept of “spatial fabulism” on cognate concepts such as “fantasy” and “magical realism” with which it shows some obvious similarities, and some crucial differences that I explore in my forthcoming book. For the complex role that “reality” and “realism” play in all such concepts, see especially Attebery 1992; Hume 1984; Jackson 1981; Plank 1985; Scholes 1979; Wolfe 1982; and Zamora and Faris 1995.

⁷There were undoubtedly many differences of opinion that prevailed in the metropole about the aims and parameters of Geography, but I am principally concerned here with the translation of these into an imperial discipline that underwrote European and especially British colonial projects across the globe.

Above all, taking possession of the earth and asserting mastery over it through Geography has meant the disavowal of discourses of space that do not conform to the protocols of the master science. In the colonial context, this generally meant the disavowal of precolonial or non-European “native” spatial visions that could (or should) not be accommodated within the emergent discipline of Geography. But it has also meant the deprivileging of those imaginations *even within* the metropole that did not conform to Geography’s dominant view of the earth as an empirically knowable, measurable, traversable, secular, and disenchanting place. In his ruminations on the place of the European voyages of “discovery” in the history of geographical thought, Joseph Conrad notes that “the dull imaginary wonders of the dark ages” that constituted what he characterizes as “Geography Fabulous” came to be replaced by the unquenchable search for “truth” and certitude in the age of “Geography Militant.” “Geography is a science of facts, and [it] devoted [itself] to the discovery of facts in the configuration and features of the main continents.” Yet geography’s prehistory was tainted, and it had to fight its way to “truth through a long series of errors. It has suffered from the love of the marvellous, from our credulity, from rash and unwarrantable assumptions, from the play of unbridled fancy” (Conrad 1926, 2–3, 14).

For Conrad, as indeed for most professional geographers of his generation, Geography eventually emerged as a triumphant science when it was able to transcend the stage where fanciful and fabulous speculations about the earth abounded, in order to attain the “truth” about the “real” world in which we live. Given this, how may we attend to those forms of spatial thought that offer a different reading of the history and configuration of the earth and that are not necessarily rooted in disciplinary Geography’s normative planetary consciousness, a consciousness I have suggested transformed the globe into a disenchanting place, that eliminated the work of imagination in favor of empirical reason, and that consolidated (the European) man as the all-knowing subject and master of all he surveyed? How do we handle those forms of modern spatial thinking that carry traces of the precolonial, the nonmodern, the un-European? I use the analytic of spatial fabulism to explore some “marvellous” and “fabulous” ruminations about space in Tamil India that have been rejected (and named as such) by metropolitan science. I do this in order to expose the potential that may exist in such fabulous geographies to destabilize Geography’s empire, and ask how we might evaluate such transgressions and disruptions. I suggest that such fabulous geographies, and the spatial fabrications that produce them, allow us to consider a range of sentiments about space that were banished to the margins with the rise of disciplinary Geography in the nineteenth century, with its preoccupation with empirical observation, scientific reasoning, and objectivist certitude. They compel us to rethink the politics of imagination and creativity in place-making, and to come to terms with the play of the marvellous, the miraculous, and the wondrous in attitudes towards space. Not least, they remind us that our earth can continue to be an enchanted realm even after being colonized by Geography.

In other words, I hope to resist any easy and quick translation of the Tamil spatial fables about the lost world of Lemuria, into the secular, rational, and universal language of Geography, in order that we may “enjoy” the “singularity” of Kumari Kandam, if only fleetingly, in all its radical incommensurability.⁸ And yet, as we will

⁸My argument here has been shaped by my reading of Chakrabarty 1997. See especially his discussion of Paul Veyne’s comment that history as a discipline does not encourage “the enjoyment of the singularity” of events, and his definition of the singular as “that which defies the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination” (42–43).

see, because this fabulation takes place in a colonial (and postcolonial) context, it cannot free itself of the hegemonic “realist” terms of Geography’s discourse to which it capitulates, again and again. And neither ironically can I when, in the interest of academic discourse, I ultimately “render this enchanted world into our disenchant[ed and realist] prose” (Chakrabarty 1997, 40).

The Geography of Loss

In his insightful ethnography of language and landscape among the Western Apache, Keith Basso observes that places are “social constructions par excellence,” and suggests that we can begin to gain access to “the conceptual frameworks and verbal practices” through which place-making is pursued by attending to “place-names and the full variety of communicative functions served by acts of naming in different social contexts” (Basso 1996, 74–76). Accordingly, my analysis of Tamil spatial fabulations about Lemuria begins with acts of “place-naming,” with the transformation of European terms into Tamil toponyms, for the latter are “used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations—associations of time and space, of history and events. . . .” (Basso 1996, 76).

In the late 1890s, when Tamil intellectuals⁹ first started to reconcile the antediluvian history of their language and literature (as they had learned it through recently recovered and published ancient Tamil literary works) with the story of the earth and the formation of its continents narrated by modern geology, they used phrases such as “the vast continent south of Cape Comorin,” or “the land that had extended further south” of Cape Kumari, to refer to the terrestrial entity in the Indian Ocean that European science had labelled as “Lemuria,” “the Indo-African continent,” even “Gondwanaland” (Kanakasabhai 1966; Nallaswami Pillai 1898).¹⁰ And indeed, through much of the twentieth century as well, this practice continued as Tamil fabulists largely left *unnamed* this entity that they claimed was the ancestral homeland of the Tamil people, the birthplace of their language, literature, and culture. Frequently, they resorted to formulaic epithets to invoke its presence, such as “the sprawling landmass,” “the vast territory in the southern sea,” “the land seized by the ocean,” and so on. Acts of *nonnaming*—which may well be read as a refusal to name rather than as a *failure* to do so—ought to be noted as well, for leaving something un-named suggests it cannot be captured through human utterance, pointing in turn to its wondrous, mysterious, even awe-inspiring, nature. Given Geography’s penchant

⁹In my forthcoming book, I discuss the lives and sociopolitical imperatives of those who wrote about Lemuria in Tamil India from the 1890s. For now, I would locate their varied speculations on the lost continent within a complex network of praise, passion, and practice centered on the Tamil language that I characterize as “Tamil devotion” (Ramaswamy 1997). Interest in Lemuria first surfaced within what I have identified as the “classicist” imaginary of Tamil devotion, concerned as it was with establishing the timeless antiquity of Tamil and the primordality of Tamil “civilization,” but soon spread to the religious, the Indianist, and Dravidianist discourses on the language as well.

¹⁰The term “Lemuria” was first coined by the British zoologist Philip Lutley Sclater in 1864 (Sclater 1864). The terms “Indo-African continent” and “Gondwanaland” are generally associated with the writings of A. H. Keane (1896) and Edward Suess (1904), respectively. In European geological and ethnological writings of the late nineteenth century, there was no consensus on the territorial status of “Lemuria.” Some referred to it as a “land-bridge,” others as a “land connection,” and still others as a “continent.”

for naming and claiming, the refusal to name may be also read as an anti-Geographical gesture undertaken by Tamil spatial fables, and in this respect is akin to fuzzy chronological phrases such as “once upon a time,” or “long, long ago,” that marks fantasy’s resistance to a time-conscious disciplinary History.

All the same, it is a measure of the conflicted intimacy between Tamil spatial fabulism and European science that the name “Lemuria” becomes popular from at least 1903 in Tamil India, and is widely used until today.¹¹ But from the start, “local” names were also sought, the most common of which, from 1903, was Kumari Nadu, the “territory of Kumari,” or “virgin territory” (Suryanarayana Sastri 1903, 8).¹² From the mid-1930s, another term comes progressively into vogue as Lemuria also comes to be referred to as Kumari Kandam, the “virgin continent” (Kandiah Pillai 1934, 4).¹³ While the name “Lemuria” lent the authority of European science to this paleo land, it had picked up some embarrassing associations as well. For instance, it was named as such by the English zoologist Philip Sclater in 1864 after the monkey like lemurs which supposedly inhabited it in some distant paleotime (Sclater 1864). Similarly, through Euro-American occult speculations with which many Tamil fabulists were familiar, the name Lemuria had come to be associated with a continent inhabited by bestial beings of doubtful sexual orientation (de Camp 1970, 54–70). Neither of these characterizations was helpful to a project that sought to transform “Lemuria” into an ancestral “Tamil” homeland. In contrast, Kumari Kandam and Kumari Nadu had the virtue—apocryphal though this turns out to be—of being ancient Tamil names that linked the paleospace of the European scientific imagination to the hallowed knowledges of old Tamil poetry.¹⁴

¹¹I borrow the term “conflicted intimacy” from Terdiman 1985.

¹²A year earlier, in 1902, the Jaffna-based Tamil scholar, Mutthuthambi Pillai, used the term “Kumari Nadu” to refer to the postdiluvian territory that remained *after* the loss of land to the ocean (Mutthuthambipillai 1902, 90). Although Tamil fabulists insist that the antediluvian territory was referred to as “Kumari Nadu” in its own time, I have found no reference to the term prior to the early years of the twentieth century.

¹³While the term “kandam” literally means “piece” or “section,” it was used as the Tamil term for “continent” in a text that is generally considered to be the first Tamil geography textbook by the missionary-scholar Rhenius (1832). For a nuanced discussion of the historicity of the term “continent,” and the nonstandardized ways in which it was used prior to the late nineteenth century, see Lewis and Wigen 1997, especially 28–33. Although Tamil fabulists insist that “Kumari Kandam” is an ancient “Tamil” name, it is a derivative of the Sanskrit spatial term “Kumarika Khanda” (and its variant, “Kumari Dvipa”). According to some Sanskrit *Puranas*, the latter was one of the nine divisions of “Bharatavarsha,” which, according to some modern interpreters, was the ancient term used to signify the Indian subcontinent; occasionally, they note, “Kumarika Khanda” itself appears to have referred to the subcontinent (Sircar, 1967, 54–55; Mukherjee 1989, 9–12). Leaving aside for now modern attempts to find “real” geopolitical references for such “fabulous” spatial entities, a fascinating subject in itself, I want to note that the earliest Tamil text to contain an explicit reference to Kumari Kandam is the circa fifteenth-century *Kantapuranam* (itself derived from the Sanskrit *Skanda Purana*) where it is presented as the only one among the nine divisions of Bharatavarsha to be *not* inhabited by “barbarians.” The southern-most division of Bharatavarsha, it was a hallowed land with numerous Shaiva shrines and Brahman settlements (Arumukhanavalar 1981, 130). It is certainly not presented as an ancestral Tamil homeland. The earliest documented evidence I have found for the use of the name “Kumari Kandam” for the antediluvian Tamil homeland is in a series of public lectures given at the University of Madras in 1926 (Purnalingam Pillai 1985, xi).

¹⁴It also has to be noted that from the 1930s, when all three terms, “Lemuria,” “Kumari Nadu,” and “Kumari Kandam” became part of the vocabulary of Tamil fabulism, some differences appear in their usage. For some, Kumari Nadu was that part of Lemuria or Kumari

In addition to intimating that this paleocontinent was well within the horizon of awareness of ancient Tamil literature, the names themselves in their very semiosis are suggestive, for I would argue that “Kumari Kandam” and “Kumari Nadu” are the spatial counterparts to the linguistic notion of Tamil as *kanni-tamil*, “virgin Tamil.” As I have discussed elsewhere, this is one of the most popular ways in which the language was characterized since at least the later decades of the nineteenth century, suggesting that Tamil had been pure, untouched, inviolable, and self-sufficient before the arrival of the Aryan hordes from the North (Ramaswamy 1997, 114–21). Similarly, the naming of Lemuria as a “virginal” continent or “virgin” territory suggested that it, too, had been a pure, untouched, inviolable, and unpenetrated Tamil place, particularly useful for a project concerned with creating an authentic, originary, and sovereign homeland.

For much of the twentieth century, between these two names, Kumari Nadu and Kumari Kandam, it is the former that has been more consistently used to designate the lost Tamil homeland. It is not accidental that the term “nadu” is drawn upon to describe this antediluvian land, for it is the most popular Tamil spatial term (with a long history that can be traced back to the early centuries of the Christian era) for cultivated territory, characterized by settled populations, government, and sovereignty (Devaneyan 1952, 1; see also Krishnan 1984).¹⁵ In using the term “nadu” in conjunction with “Kumari,” Tamil fabulists shifted the very meaning of Lemuria away from its dominant Euro-American designation for a remote *uninhabited* paleocontinent to a familiar and “real” Tamil place inhabited by Tamil speakers governed by Tamil kings and living in a Tamil state. The use of the suffix “nadu” also opens up the possibility for designating this antediluvian land as “Tamil Nadu,” “land/nation of Tamil,” from as early as 1903 (Suryanarayana Sastri 1903, 8). This latter term has been used extensively in the twentieth century to refer to the Tamil-speaking region (even “nation”) of modern India, and became the official name of the state of Madras—after much debate and contestation—in 1968 (Nagarajan 1987; Ramaswamy 1997, 154–61). The renaming of Lemuria as “our Tamil Nadu” or “ancient Tamil Nadu” meant that this paleocontinent had always already been a “Tamil” place, besides establishing a proprietary claim on it in the name of modern Tamil speakers. It also suggests that the “geo-body” of the (modern) “Tamil land/nation” had existed for hundreds and thousands of years, a point of great significance for Tamil discourses of loss that I will consider a little later (Thongchai 1994). Through such variegated acts of naming, Tamil fabulists have of course verbally transformed a *terra incognita* into a familiar “Tamil” place. In addition, they have also endowed Lemuria with a “density of meaning” it does not have elsewhere in the world where it has also been the subject of fantasizing since the 1860s (Basso 1996, 28).

As Basso has noted, place-making is also a way of “constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here’” (Basso 1996, 6). The principal (hi)story that Tamil spatial fables about Kumari Nadu tell is one of loss of place—of not just any place, but of the ancestral Tamil homeland, the birthplace of Tamil language and literature, the nursery of foundational Tamil values.

Kandam that survived the first deluge and became the homeland of Tamils. Others distinguished between Kumari Kandam and Lemuria. In a majority of instances, though, the three terms are used synonymously.

¹⁵As Burton Stein notes, “[e]tymologically, nadu refers to agricultural land in contrast to kadu, a Dravidian word for forest or other land not suited for cultivation” (Stein 1980, 90–91). The Tamil nationalist C. N. Annadurai once defined “nadu” as that which is filled with people (Annadurai 1947, 5).

In narrating this loss spatially, this fabulous imagination fills up Kumari Nadu with named locations—regions, rivers, mountains, cities—that are derived from innovative and imaginative readings of ancient and medieval allusions to loss of land and of dispossession, which are selectively recuperated from the precolonial literatures of the Tamil life-world.¹⁶ So, “long, long ago,” or “in ancient times,” before it was seized by the ocean, Kumari Nadu had been divided into “forty-nine Tamil territories” named “Elutengu Nadu” (“Seven coconut territories”), “Elu Maturai Nadu,” (“Seven Madurai Nadu”), “Elumunpalai Nadu” (“Seven front sandy tracts”), “Elupinpalai nadu,” (“Seven back sandy tracts”), “Elukunra Nadu” “Seven hilly territories;” “Elukunakarai Nadu” (“Seven eastern littoral lands”), and “Elu kurumpanai nadu” (“Seven dwarf-palm tracts”). These “fertile,” “temperate,” and “prosperous” regions formed the heartland of the antediluvian Pandyan kingdom. They were flanked by “mountainous regions” called “Kumari” and “Kollam.” To the south lay the “southern province” of the Pandyas, Tenpalimukam. Two large rivers, the Pahruli and the Kumari, flowed through Kumari Nadu and contributed to its fertility. These in turn emerged from vast mountain ranges—sometimes compared to the Himalayas in their grandeur and height—variously named Kumari Malai, Kumari Kotu, or Meru. The two major cities of Kumari Kandam—which served as the antediluvian Pandyan capitals, as well as sites for ancient Tamil academies of letters called *sangam*—were Then-Madurai and Kapatapuram. This entire territory was bounded by seas (variously referred to as Tonru Mutir Katal, Ten Katal, Totu Katal) to the west, the south, and the east. It is a measure of the fabulous nature of this place-world that through the course of the last century, new regions, rivers, mountains, and cities have continued to be added to this evolving geography of fantasy. The result is a landscape that is not vacant, topographically or symbolically, as each of these locations is named, given a story, and accommodated into the larger narrative of loss.

Fantastic though it may all seem, the geography of Lemuria comes to be written in realist terms, as we see from the attempts to bestow and name regions, rivers, mountains, and other topographic features such as we expect to encounter in the “real” world. As I note later, Tamil fabulists are also preoccupied with the question of the

¹⁶There are a limited number of ancient literary works that Tamil fabulists invoke, again and again, in their discussions of the geography of Kumari Kandam. Foremost among these are: the circa twelfth-century C.E. commentary by Adiyarkunallar on the early medieval epic poem, the *Cilapatikaram*, a text that was “discovered” and published for the first time in 1892 (Swaminatha Aiyar 1950 [1892]); a circa tenth-century C.E. commentary attributed to Nak-kirar on a treatise called *Iraiyana Akapporul*, published for the first time in 1883 (Anon. 1969); and verses from the anthologies *Kalittokai* and *Purananuru* from the early centuries of the first millennium C.E., also “discovered” and published for the first time in 1887 and 1894 (Kasiviswantham Chettiayar 1943; Swaminatha Aiyar 1985 [1892]). It is important to note that it is soon after the publication of these works for the first time in the closing decades of the nineteenth century that the discourse of loss discussed in these pages takes off in Tamil India. In interpreting the “work” that has been done on these ancient allusions in modern times, I have found particularly illuminating Keith Basso’s comment that “[b]uilding and sharing place-worlds . . . is not only a means of reviving former times but also of *revising* them, a means of exploring not merely how things might have been but also how, just possibly, they might have been different from what others have supposed. Augmenting and enhancing conceptions of the past, innovative place-worlds change these conceptions as well” (Basso 1996, 6). See also Robert Scholes’s comment, “[F]abulative histories . . . mix fact with fantasy . . . the fabulative impulse has achieved its most impressive results when it has worked most closely with the raw materials of history. . . . [It] . . . outrageously invent[s] totally implausible “documents” to fill the lacuane in the historical record. Plugging the gaps in the record in this way amounts to a rape of history by imagination” (Scholes 1979, 206).

limits of this antediluvian territory, much in the same way that disciplinary Geography as taught and practiced in colonial India was so boundary-conscious. There is also considerable discussion over the location of Kumari Nadu in terms of the terrestrial formations of the earth as we know it today. An early text noted in 1903 that it “extended in length from today’s Cape Comorin to the island of Kerguelen [in the Indian Ocean], and from the island of Madagascar to the Sunda Islands which include Sumatra, Java and other islands” (Suryanarayana Sastri 1903, 62). Another text suggested in 1912 that the continent “touched China, Africa, Australia, and Comorin on its four sides” (Somasundara Bharati 1912, 5). In 1948, it was observed that “the vast southern continent . . . lay on the two sides of the equator, the greater portion of it stretching southwards as far as the South Pole and towards east and west as far as Australia and even farther as far as South Africa . . .” (Maraimalai Adigal 1948, xl). This suggestion has been reiterated recently in a 1991 pronouncement that “before the deluges, Lemuria extended from the South Pole regions to the foot hills of the Himalayas, including Afghanistan . . .” (Ramachandran and Madhivanan 1991, 95). So, for these Tamil spatial fables, Kumari Nadu had “really” existed, once upon a time, long, long ago, and one of the ways this reality is constituted is by reckoning the size and extent of the continent in terms of known places that exist today.

Given that Geography, the “science of earth measurement” (Bayly 1996, 304), is preoccupied with scale and numbers, it is not perhaps surprising that Tamil fabulists also confirm the reality of their antediluvian homeland by enumerating the area of the “Tamil” territory lost to the ocean. Here, they turn to the figure of “700 kavatham” provided by a medieval Tamil commentator, Adiyarkunallar, as the dimensions of the region—the “forty-nine territories”—that extended between the rivers Pahruli and Kumari in the antediluvian Pandyan country that was ultimately seized by the ocean. While it is recognized that the modern equivalent of the “kavatham” is not known, this has not stopped many from computing the area lost to the ocean using this figure. The earliest—and most popular—estimate conjures up 7000 miles of lost “Tamil” land (Purnalingam Pillai 1904, 4–5; Suryanarayana Sastri 1903, 62). Others concede that this might be too extravagant—for this would mean that Kumari Nadu extended all the way to the South Pole—and instead offer more modest figures ranging from 1,400 to 2,100 to 3,000 miles (Abraham Pandither 1984 [1917], 55; Aiyan Arichan 1904–1905, 274; Devaneyan 1940, 50). Still others nuance such figures by suggesting that perhaps an area of 6,000–7,000 *square* miles was lost (Somasundara Bharati 1967, 122–23).¹⁷ Regardless of such differences of opinion, it is important to note the imperative to quantify the extent of the land lost, which once again betrays the conflicted intimacy between such spatial fabulation and realist Geography, a point to which I will return at the end of my essay.

For now, I want to note the multiple referents for the place-name “Kumari” in these fabulous geographies—a telling reminder of the “large tasks that small words can be made to perform” (Basso 1996, 44). In these Tamil spatial fables, “Kumari” serves as the name of the entire lost continent, the name of one of its regions *and* one of its mountains (and of its peak), as well as the name of a major river that ran through it. Today, of course, it is the name borne by India’s land’s end, a hallowed Hindu pilgrimage site for at least two millennia and a popular tourist spot in recent times. At least since the early centuries of the Christian era, it has also been the name bestowed upon the traditional southern boundary of Tamilakam, “the Tamil realm,” which extended, as poem after poem reiterates, from “the northern Venkatam

¹⁷For early critiques of such “fabulous” computations, see Monahan 1903–1904 and Subramania Sastri 1915–1916.

[Tirupati] mountain” to “the southern Kumari.” For Tamil fabulists, the very ambiguity of this latter phrase has offered a strategic opportunity to insist that “Kumari” here refers not to the Cape—the land’s end of today—but to the antediluvian river that ran through Kumari Nadu and that served as *its* southern boundary. It is with the loss of this river—and the territory through which it ran—and with the consequent shrinkage of “Tamil Nadu” to its postdiluvial extent that the Cape came to serve as the southern limit, it is argued. For all who participate in this discourse, the Cape is the only surviving topographic entity that still carries the name of this lost world. As such, it acts as a critical *lieu de memoire*, in Pierre Nora’s terms, standing on the threshold, as it were, between two places, that which is imagined to have been lost and that which is thought to have survived (Nora 1989).¹⁸ Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that the travellers to land’s end with whose flights of imagination I opened this paper should have launched into such reveries on reaching the Cape, for at least since the end of the nineteenth century—from the very first Tamil writings on Lemuria—it has come to serve as the reckoning spot for Tamil spatial fables about a lost homeland in the Indian Ocean. It has become, in Bakhtinian terms, a chronotope, a point “in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse” and “where through the agency of historical tales, their intersection is made visible for human contemplation.” Through such tales, it has been transformed into a paradigmatic site of nostalgic place-making, a “mnemonic peg” on which to hang fantasies of dispossession and geographies of loss (Basso 1996, 62).

Mapping Loss

Much akin to literary fantasy in Europe, which developed through a dialectical relationship with realistic fiction (Mathews 1997, 2), Tamil spatial fables about Lemuria have taken shape through a dialectic with disciplinary Geography. Not surprisingly, Tamil fabulists appropriate the modern map, Geography’s paradigmatic technology for representing space and describing the earth accurately, scientifically, realistically. And they appropriate it to represent Lemuria spatially, to convey information about where it was located vis-à-vis other landmasses on the earth’s surface, as well as to represent the geography of loss of Tamil territories that had once existed but no more. As such, maps of Kumari Nadu become one of the key means through which the “reality effect” of this fantasy is produced and circulated in Tamil India.

Consider the following excerpt from a 1945 book entitled “Our Nation,” intended primarily for young children:

Look at India on the map. At its southern end is the cape called Kanyakumari, south of which is a vast sea. Today this is called the Indian Ocean. Our earth appeared countless years ago. Over these countless years, it has changed many times. Where the Indian Ocean exists today, once there was a vast land expanse. This was called

¹⁸Translating *lieux de memoire* as “sites of memory,” Nora defines these as places where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself . . . where a sense of historical continuity persists” (Nora 1989, 7). Particularly appropriate in this context is Nora’s understanding of memory as “life, borne by living societies. . . . It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation Memory . . . is affective and magical Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (8–9).

Navalan Teevu. Europeans called it Lemuria. Gondwana was another name they gave it. At its center stood Mount Meru. One of its peaks was (Sri) Lanka. Just as the continent of Asia lies in the north today, Navalan Teevu or Lemuria lay in the south. . . . There was intense volcanic activity on Navalan Teevu. Several of its regions disappeared into the ocean. At that time, there was a vast land adjacent to Kanyakumari. The people there were worshippers of the mother goddess. The mother goddess is referred to as *kanni* or *kumari* [virgin]. Hence the land came to be called Kumari Nadu. In the next chapter, we will read that Navalan Teevu and its Kumari Nadu was the motherland of the Tamilians.

(Kandiah Pillai 1945, 2–3)

To illustrate this statement, its author, Kandiah Pillai, included a map in Tamil entitled “Ancient Navalan Teevu or Lemuria.”¹⁹ It shows the outlines of the geographically established continents of Eurasia, Africa, and Australia (all of which are named), superimposed over which is a shadowy area that represents Lemuria. From its location on the map, the reader could conclude that it extended over a territory that included most of what we know of today as southern Africa, peninsular India, southern China, the islands of Southeast Asia, and Australia. Just south of the modern territory of India is Kumari Nadu, which, in the author’s contention, was the northern part of Lemuria that survived the volcanic eruptions that destroyed that continent. The entire area north of Lemuria was supposed to be covered with water in its time, although the map itself depicts land forms as they appear today.²⁰

Maps of Lemuria or Kumari Nadu similar to Kandiah Pillai’s begin to make an appearance in Tamil publications from 1916 and continue to be published till this day—including on the World Wide Web! Indeed, even when maps are not directly included in their publications, many Tamil fabulists appear to have used modern maps to generate their geographies of loss. To this extent as well, Tamil spatial fabulations are in conflicted intimacy with Geography whose knowledge-forms they both borrow and contest. A majority of the fabulous Tamil maps are in Tamil, although a few are in English as well.²¹ Some even appear as jacket-cover illustrations for books on Lemuria.²² They are rarely drawn to scale, although as we have seen, many Tamil fabulists went to great lengths to argue the specific dimensions of the lost Tamil homeland. Some maps contain a wealth of geographical information (figs. 1–2), others are merely roughly sketched outlines of continents and islands (fig. 3). I have argued elsewhere that many of these are “mimic maps,” imitating in their formal appearance, their north orientation, the shapes of various land masses, the conventions of naming, and the like, maps of Lemuria produced in Euro-America from at least 1870 (Ramaswamy 1999). At the same time, the two principal goals of these maps produced in Tamil India appear to be to demonstrate the vastness of Kumari Nadu, and to represent the loss of the originary Tamil homeland.

¹⁹“Navalan Teevu” is the Tamil calque of the Sanskrit term, Jambudvīpa, “Rose Apple Island.” This is the annular continent (one of either four or seven) that is inhabited by human beings according to the Sanskrit *Puranas*. The use of this Puranic concept here, as indeed in other Tamil spatial fables about Lemuria, is yet another example of the indebtedness of this “Tamil” imagination to a Sanskritic world view.

²⁰The same map also appears on the jacket cover of Kandiah Pillai’s book, as well as in Kandiah Pillai 1949 [1945].

²¹English maps may be found in Chandrababu 1996; Mahalingam 1981; Manuel Raj 1993; Purnalingam Pillai 1945.

²²For example, Appadurai 1941; Chidambaranar 1948; Kandiah Pillai 1945; Kandiah Pillai 1947; Kandiah Pillai 1984; Puratcidasan 1995.

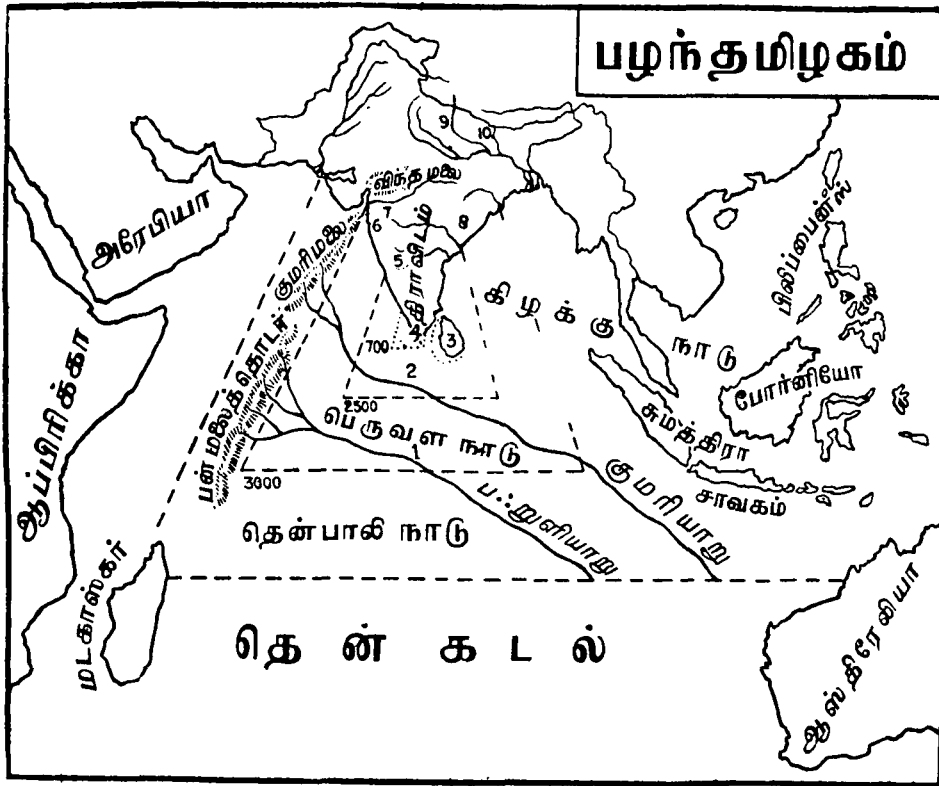


Figure 1. Pulavar Kulanthai, “Ancient Tamil realm.” This map in Tamil shows the modern Indian coastline superimposed on the ancient submerged land mass of Lemuria (designated here by the outer-most dotted lines) reaching at its greatest extent to Madagascar in the west and Australia in the east. The dotted lines marked 3000, 2500, and 700 represent the progressive loss of land to the ocean over time. Numbers 1 and 2 represent the lost cities of Old Madurai and South Madurai on the banks of the rivers Pahruli and Kumari whose sources lay in the mountain ranges along the western edge of Lemuria. From Pulavar Kulanthai (1971).

The first of these goals is achieved by invariably showing Kumari Nadu as a large land mass that extends south of, and sometimes includes all or most of (British) “India.” In fact, most Tamil maps are centered on the subcontinent, and it is quite clear that one of their aims is to persuade the reader to compare the relatively small size of “India” as it exists in the world today, with the vastness of Kumari Kadam which stretched all the way, once upon a time, to Africa, Australia, and in one instance, to Antarctica (e.g., Mahalingam 1981; Ramachandran and Madhivanan 1991). Both because it is a fantasy land and a paleocontinent whose mapping is not constrained by the modern cartographic demand for systematic survey, measurement, and location on a specific grid, Kumari Nadu, in contrast to India, can assume any shape and size—and it does. At the same time, these maps also undo the borders—especially the southern boundary—of modern India so carefully reinforced by colonial (and postcolonial) geography and state cartography. To this extent as well, these fabulous

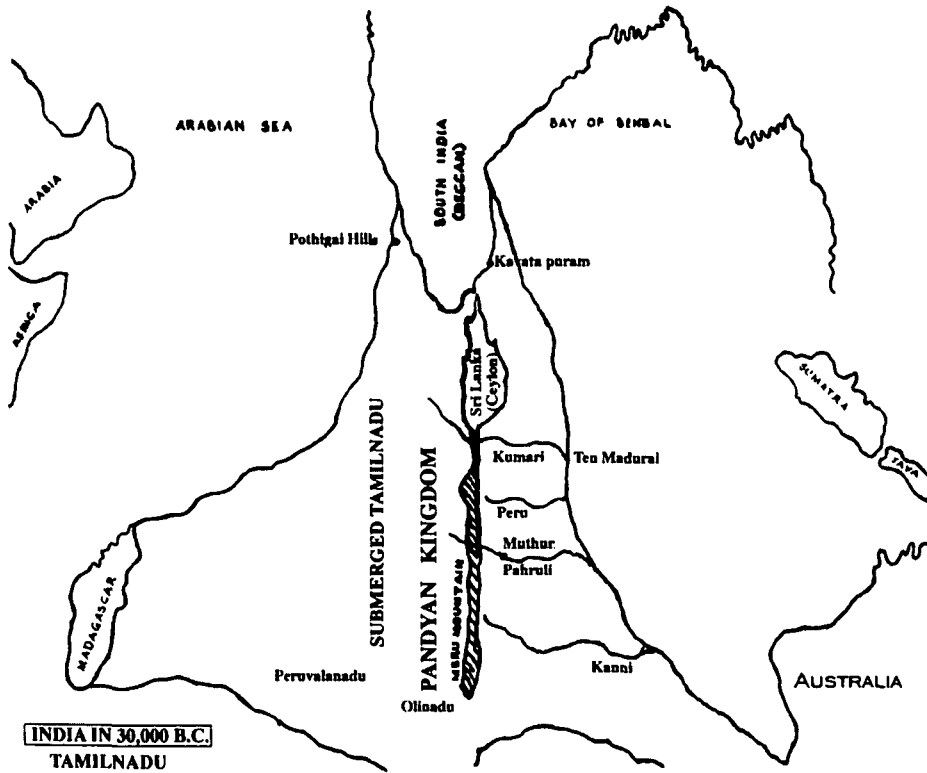


Figure 2. N. Mahalingam, "India in 30,000 B.C." From N. Mahalingam (1981)

Tamil maps are clearly subversive, even as they borrow and use the modern map-form of empire and nation. Although in their publications, Tamil fabulists are quite concerned with delineating the borders of Kumari Kandam, when it comes to cartographic representations of the lost territory, its limits are frequently left fuzzy, and sometimes are not even shown, thus visually reiterating the vastness of its extent.

I have suggested elsewhere that maps of Lemuria, both in Euro-America and in India, adopt three cartographic strategies to represent dramatic reconfigurations of the earth's territorial entities or catastrophic loss of land: the "before and after," the "synoptic," and the "sequential" (Ramaswamy 1999).²³ In the maps published in Tamil India, it is not any land that is lost, as in Euro-America, but Tamil land inhabited by ancestral Tamil speakers. The Tamil-ness of the lost territory is produced through various strategies, the most apparent of which is the very title that these maps often bear, such as "ancient Tamil realm" (Pulavar Kulanthai 1971; see fig. 1), "India in 30,000 B.C.E.: Tamil Nadu" (Mahalingam 1981; see fig. 2), or "Lemuria or the lost Kumari Continent" (Manuel Raj 1993; see fig. 3). The continent itself is often labelled with the Tamil names, Kumari Nadu, Kumari Kandam, and quite

²³A good example of the "before and after" strategy may be found in Rajasimman 1944. Maps that use the "synoptic" strategy are the most frequent (e.g., Chidambaranar 1948; Mahalingam 1981; Manuel Raj 1993; Pulavar Kulanthai 1971; Sivasailam Pillai 1951; Subramania Sastri 1915–1916). The sequential strategy is best shown by maps in Purnalingam Pillai 1945 and Chidambaranar 1948.

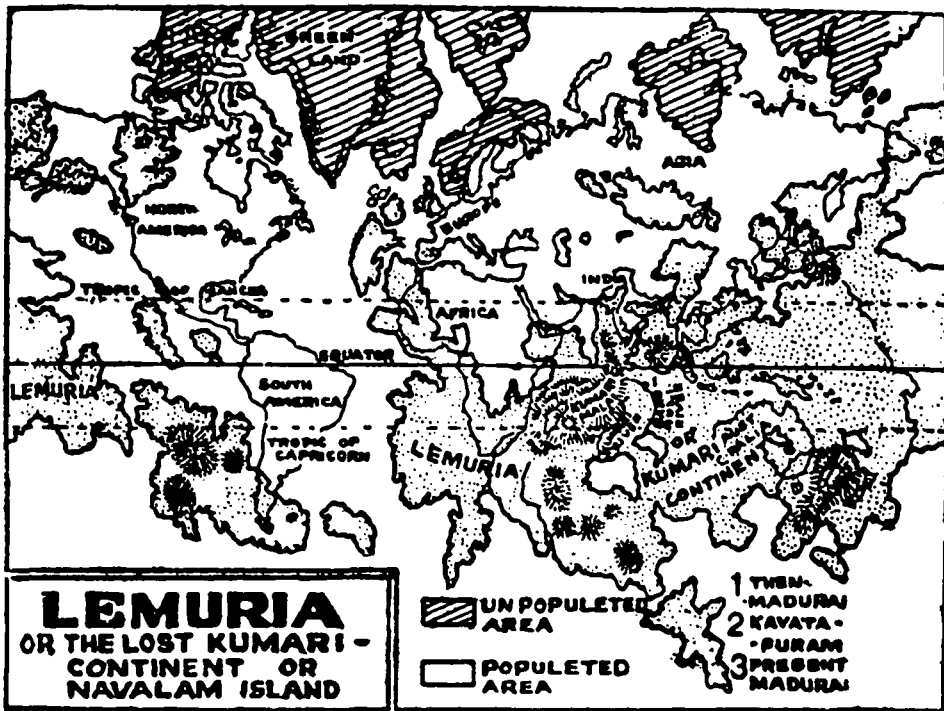


Figure 3. J. David Manuel Raj, "Lemuria, 'the Lost Continent', wherein the ancient Tamil Kings swayed their Sceptres and their Poets preserved Tamil Literature on palm leaves." From Manuel Raj (1993).

revealing, "submerged Tamil Nadu," "Land of Tamilians," or the "Pandyan kingdom" (Chidambaranar 1948; Mahalingam 1981; see fig. 2). Cartographic symbols are used to suggest that Kumari Nadu was inhabited by people (Appadurai 1941). And not least, the cartographic space of Kumari Nadu is filled in with the names of the rivers, mountains, regions, and cities of the lost homeland. Indeed, the fabulous geographies of Kumari Nadu that I discussed earlier come to be mapped beginning with the earliest Tamil cartographic representation of the antediluvian continent published in 1916, which schematically showed the rivers Kumari and Pahruli, the mountain range Kumari Kotu, and the regions of Tenpalimukam as well as the "forty-nine Tamil territories" (Subramania Sastri 1915–1916). A map of 1946 shows two mountain ranges (Kumari Malai and Panmalaitodar) running down the western edge of the "ancient Tamil realm," as well as the rivers Pahruli and Kumari which runs along the borders of the region of Peruvala Nadu, south of which extends Tenpali Nadu. The antediluvian cities of Thon-Madurai and Then-Madurai also dot the Lemurian landscape (Pulavar Kulanthai 1971; see fig. 1). A map that was published in 1948 on the cover of a book on the antediluvian Tamil academies of letters showed the cartographic outline of British India, south of which stretches a vast territory (bounded on the west by Madagascar and on the east by Australia) that is clearly named "The Land of the Tamils." The Meru mountain range runs through the center of this territory, which is dotted with the rivers Kanni, Pahruli, Peraru, and Kumari; the cities Muthoor, Then-Madurai, and Kapatapuram; and regions such as Oli Nadu and Peruvala Nadu (Chidambaranar 1948). In 1977, R. Madhivanan published a map

entitled "The ocean-seized Kumari Nadu (Lemuria)." The map shows the cartographic outline of India, south of which extends Kumari Nadu. It is segmented into nine different regions, which include the various "nadu" that constitute the "forty-nine Tamil territories," Kollam, and Tenpali (Madhivanan 1977). This map was used as the model for the maps that were included in a state-produced documentary on Kumari Kandam in 1981. The camera passes over a map of these various regions that made up the "forty-nine territories" before dramatically zooming in on the antediluvian city of Then-Madurai thronging with people and resounding with the song of Tamil.

Simon Ryan has noted that world maps with vast blank spaces, which were typically produced during the so-called European "age of exploration," acted as "incitement to the alteration of ownership." Blank spaces intimate that "there has been no previous history, but also teleologically construct the future as a place/time for writing," (Ryan 1994, 126–27). Following Ryan, I suggest that the blank maps of paleocontinents produced in the West "incite" and give license to Tamil fabulists to fill up their empty spaces with Tamil locations. If Euro-American maps of Lemuria with their blank spaces suggest that the continent was uninhabited by humans and without any lived history, the Tamil maps intimate the opposite through the well-established cartographic practice of naming and claiming. In these maps, the "geo-body" of the modern Tamil nation not only extends far out into the Indian ocean, but also way back into deep time. To paraphrase Thongchai, "a geo-body which had never existed in the past was realized by historical projection; . . . the agony [of loss of territories] is visually codified by a map. Now the anguish is concrete, measurable, and easily transmittable" (Thongchai 1994, 152).

Teaching Loss

Nowhere is Thongchai's point better illustrated in Tamil spatial fables than in a 1951 map of Kumari Kandam included in a Tamil school textbook meant for sixth-grade students in Madras state studying the language (Sivasailam Pillai 1951). This is the only map of the lost continent I have so far found in a Tamil school textbook, and it shows peninsular India, south of which stretches the shadowy outline of a territory labelled "ocean-seized Kumari Kandam." Along the western edge of Kumari Kandam runs the mountain range called Kumari, and the rivers Pahruli and Kumari are shown flowing from it and disappearing into the right-hand border of the map. North of the territory "seized by the ocean" is the postdiluvial Tamil realm extending from the Tirupati mountain to the Cape, the traditional "Tamilakam," "abode of Tamil," of Tamil literature. The text accompanying this map, written by one Sivasailam Pillai, tells the student, its intended reader:

Tamil Nadu is a very ancient land. In ancient times this was a vast sprawling land. Formerly, the ocean that is to the south of today's Cape Kumari was a vast land mass that was attached to Tamil Nadu. The Western Ghats extended into the ancient portion of land. That section of the mountains was called Kumari. Moreover, two rivers called Kumari and Pahruli flowed there. Because of these, this territory was very fertile. Several thousand years ago, this prosperous landmass disappeared into the ocean. It is after this that Tamil Nadu has shrunk to its present boundaries. Today Tamil Nadu extends from Tirupati mountain in the north to Cape Kumari in the south.

(Sivasailam Pillai 1951, 15)

Looking at the map in conjunction with this statement, it is fair to say that the young Tamil student would have been left with little doubt about the loss of territory that “our Tamil Nadu,” “our land/nation,” had suffered over time.

Although the map of Kumari Kandam included in this textbook is unusual, the message accompanying it was not, and indeed had become commonplace by the 1950s in school books meant for Tamil instruction. I document elsewhere the role that school and college textbooks have played in India in mainstreaming Tamil fables about the lost Tamil homeland from the early years of the twentieth century. While mention of a paleocontinent in the Indian Ocean appears as early as 1873 in a colonial physical geography textbook (Blanford 1873), and history textbooks begin to speculate about Lemuria as a possible “Dravidian”/Tamil homeland from 1909 (Marsden 1909), the most frequent—and detailed—discussions of the lost homeland occur in Tamil readers meant for Tamil-language instruction in schools from the 1930s.²⁴ Both in schools and colleges, Tamil pedagogy has been the paradigmatic site for the circulation of spatial fables about Lemuria.

In Tamil language readers from the 1930s, and especially during the 1940s and 1950s, discussion of Kumari Kandam is almost always in terms of territorial loss—and the resulting loss of valuable Tamil works. After this catastrophic tragedy, Tamil kings had established their rule over Tamil akam, “Tamil realm,” which extended from the Tirupati Hill in the north to land’s end, and from coast to coast. Frequently, maps of the historic Tamilakam, often labelled “Tamil Nadu,” accompany these discussions (e.g., Nannan and Chandrasekharan 1958; Rajamanikkam 1954; Srinivasan 1956). Almost invariably, the student is brought down to the present (of the 1940s and 1950s) when “Tamil Nadu” had become even more emaciated, with the loss of its western and northern areas, and especially with the loss of the historic Cape Kumari, to neighboring dominions. The loss of territory over time—from antediluvian “Kumari Nadu” (or ancient Tamil Nadu) to the postdiluvian “Tamil akam” to the present “Tamil Nadu”—is thus presented for the student’s contemplation in linear, catastrophic time. From the 1940s, young students were also expected to learn and memorize answers to questions such as “What did “Kumari” refer to in former times? What does it refer to today?” “What are the reasons for the shrinking of the boundaries of Tamil Nadu?” “What rivers flowed in the antediluvian Tamil Nadu?” “What do you know of Kumari Kandam? What are the boundaries of Tamilakam?” (Sivasailam Pillai 1951, 19; Srinivasan 1956, 25; Srinivasan and Krishnaswami Mudaliar 1947, 4).

It is perhaps not surprising that the most extensive schoolbook discussion of the lost Tamil land—and of the shifts in its boundaries—occurred during the 1940s and 1950s, the very decades that saw not just the birth of independent India but also the reconfiguration of its internal political geography. From the late 1940s through 1956, Tamil nationalists conducted a series of powerful agitations to make the newly formed state of Madras conform to the historic borders of Tamilakam that had extended, as it was repeatedly claimed, from “the northern Venkatam [Tirupati] mountain” to the “southern Kumari.” Particularly satisfying to all concerned was the final incorporation—not without sacrifice of lives and the loss of other territory—of

²⁴In terms of college curriculum, the 1903 history of the Tamil language by V. G. Surayanarayana Sastri (1903), which first identified Lemuria as “Kumari Nadu” and discussed it in some detail, was used as a textbook at the University of Madras for Tamil courses as early as 1908. Other works that mentioned Lemuria soon began to be used in college-level Tamil literature and language courses.

Kanyakumari (which for the past few centuries had been part of neighboring Travancore kingdom) into Madras state in December 1956 (Nagarajan 1987; Sivagnanam 1974, 717–74). The one serious irredentist consequence of Tamil fantasies about lost territories, the redeeming of Kumari was politically important because it had served as the historic southern border of the Tamil realm, as it was claimed again and again by Tamil nationalists. Symbolically, of course, its significance was no less because as I noted earlier, the Cape had been transformed into a nostalgic *lieu de memoire* for spatial fables about the lost Tamil homeland, as the reveries at land's end during the 1940s and 1950s with which I opened this paper remind us.²⁵

Spatial Fables in the Shadow of Geography

I have suggested that spatial fables of Kumari Nadu as the lost Tamil homeland had become part of the collective memory of Tamil nationalism by midcentury. These produced a fabulous spatial sensibility in which, instead of being confined to the small and circumscribed territory of Tamil Nadu as they are today, Tamil speakers were asked to imagine that their antediluvian ancestors had lived on a vast continent called Lemuria that had been their homeland, the “birthplace of humanity,” and the “cradle of civilization.” In spite of securing the blessings of the state from the late 1960s (when Tamil nationalist political parties came to power in the region), this spatial sensibility exists largely, however, in the interstices of a normative planetary consciousness in which Tamil and its speakers are but one small (and often ignored) part of a world dominated by Others. Discussions of Kumari Nadu typically appear in books meant for Tamil-language instruction, and Tamil scholarly publications and periodicals (although it is not entirely absent in English-language writings). Even when it appears in Tamil-language *history* textbooks, Lemuria generally only merits a brief mention in a discussion on “the Dravidians,” but *never* disrupts the normative linear flow of Indian history beginning first in the Indus valley, followed by the arrival of “the Aryans” in the subcontinent in the second millennium B.C.E. And, it is ignored in school textbooks on geography, in English *and* Tamil.²⁶ Since Geography is the paradigmatic modern science of space and the site for the production of a normative planetary consciousness about our earth, I close this essay by considering the relationship of Tamil spatial fables of Lemuria to this master discipline, a relationship that I have previously characterized as “conflicted intimacy.”

For the colonial state in India, “to know the country” at the least meant to know it geographically (Bayly 1993; see also Thongchai 1994, 121). Colonial texts claimed to write the “true” geography of India, rescuing it from the fabulous spatial conceptions embedded in “Hindoo” texts, especially the Sanskrit *Puranas*. The “India” of colonial geography was an abstract, rational, disenchanting place, a clearly bounded entity extending from north to south, peninsular in shape, and confined to a fixed graticular grid on the earth's surface (Edney 1997). It is in this form that “India” was

²⁵These essays also make favorable allusions, in the course of their reveries on loss of land, to the ongoing agitation for including Kanyakumari in Madras state. See also Arunachalam 1944.

²⁶References to a paleocontinent or land-bridge in the Indian Ocean may be found in Blanford 1873 and Fox 1938, but neither use the term “Lemuria.” Two Tamil geography textbooks refer to the lost Pandyan capitals and their submergence, but do not link these with Kumari Nadu (Ashirvatham 1931; Chithambera Sastriar 1883).

progressively disseminated to its colonial inhabitants through the medium of geography textbooks (Bayly 1996, 307–10; Goswami 1998). In the Tamil-speaking parts of the Madras Presidency, geography was an essential part of the postelementary school curriculum, and its “peculiar importance” as the subject “most likely to open the mind of a native of India” was stressed from at least the 1830s (quoted in Murdoch 1885, 151).²⁷ And the state sought to “open” the native’s mind by presenting the earth as a secular entity, knowable systematically and completely through the language of (European) science. As Thongchai (1994) has noted for nineteenth-century Siam, the geography textbooks which circulated in the Presidency from the 1830s, whether written by colonials or Tamils, nurtured disciplinary geography’s conception of the earth as an a-historical, spherical entity made up of four or five continental land masses, stable and enduring. In turn, these continents are presented as made up of clearly bounded territories that are variously named nations (and their attached colonies), and each territory is characterized by the “race” of its inhabitants. Indeed, well into the twentieth century, geography textbooks were a primary vehicle through which racial consciousness about the peoples of the world was disseminated in colonial India, so that a specific sense of being-in-the-world spatially was promoted, “each person, each race, in their own place” (Driver 1992, 32). Being largely colonial texts, these geography school-books not surprisingly underwrote a Europe-centered planetary consciousness, as for example, illustrated by this 1895 statement: “Europe, although the smallest continent, except Australia, is the most important. It lies in the centre of all the land of the world; it is the home of the most civilised, the most powerful and the wealthiest nations. . . . Africa is the least known and the least civilised of the continents. . . . It is intensely hot” (Marsden 1895, 13).²⁸ If Europe was centered thus, “India,” not to mention the Tamil country, was of course radically de-centered. So, Rhenius, the missionary author of the very first geography textbook in Tamil published in 1832, informed his readers that he felt compelled to write it because “there are those in this country who do not realize that their land is part of a large earth, and assume [instead] that their country is the world. . . .” Among the tasks of his “science of the earth,” was to demonstrate that “your country is only a small one among many others” (Rhenius 1832, preface).

As Bayly notes, Indian geography textbooks, modeled as they were on eighteenth-century British geographical traditions influenced by Locke and Hume, were “relentlessly matter-of-fact and empirical. Geography was a science of measurement and description,” interrupted every now and then with “unsystematic racialist assertion” (Bayly 1996, 311–12). In particular, the method of the British geographical tradition was “deliberately dry and untheoretical, an antidote to romance and imagination” (Bayly 1996, 309).²⁹ Not surprisingly, there was considerable scorn cast on the “fabulous” Hindu spatial vision of the world, as is clear from this long statement by Montstuart Elphinstone, author of an early prominent history of India in 1841, in a language that clearly anticipates Conrad’s ruminations of the 1920s:

The Hindus have made less progress in [geography] than in any other science. According to their system, Mount Meru occupies the center of the world. It is a lofty

²⁷Another text noted that because Hindus were ignorant of the “science of geography,” they became prey to all kinds of misconceptions, which had led to their downfall (Anon. 1864, preface).

²⁸For other similar statements, see also Anon. 1895, 39–40; Murdoch 1901; Rhenius 1832.

²⁹In this regard, see Clift 1869, 6–8; and Murdoch 1885, 155.

mountain of a conical shape, the sides composed of precious stones, and the top forming a sort of terrestrial paradise. It may have been suggested by the lofty mountains to the north of India, but seems no part of that chain, or of any other that exists *out of the fancy of the mythologists*. It is surrounded by seven concentric belts or circles of land, divided by seven seas. The innermost of those circles is called Jambudwip, which includes India, and is surrounded by a sea of salt water. The other six belts are separated from each other by seas of milk, wine, sugar-cane juice, etc, *and appear to be entirely fabulous*. The name of Jambudwip is sometimes confined to India, which at other times is called Bharata. That country, and some of those nearest to it, appear to be the only part of the earth at all known to the Hindus. Within India, their ancient books furnish geographical divisions, with lists of the towns, mountains and rivers in each, so that, although indistinct [*sic*] and destitute of arrangement, many modern divisions, cities, and natural features can be recognized. But all beyond India is plunged in a darkness from which the boldest speculations of modern geographers have failed to rescue it. It is remarkable that scarcely one Sanscrit name of a place beyond the Indus coincides with those of Alexander's historians, though many on the Indian side do. It would seem, therefore, as if the Hindus had, in early times, been as averse to travelling as most of them are still, and that they would have remained for ever unconnected with the rest of the world if all mankind had been as exempt from restlessness and curiosity as themselves.

(Elphinstone 1841, 252–53, emphasis mine)

Another telling comparison between the “new” geography and the fabulous imagination of the Hindus was offered a few decades later in 1885:

The different modes adopted by Hindus and Europeans in framing systems of geography are well worthy of notice. A Hindu, without any investigation, sat down and wrote that the centre of our universe consisted of an immense rock, surrounded by concentric oceans of ghee, milk, and other fluids. To induce men to believe his account, he then pretended that it was inspired. Europeans, on the other hand, visited countries, measured distances, and after very careful investigation, wrote descriptions of the earth. Which is the more worthy of credit?

(Murdoch 1885, 153)³⁰

Convinced as they were that “Hindus as a rule are deficient in observation,” and that they lack scientific “curiosity” (Murdoch 1885, 178),³¹ colonial geographies rarely, if ever, admitted “native” spatial conceptions into their domain. Occasionally, Sanskrit designations for “India” (or its regions) were conceded, but, in general, little of the fabulous conceptions of space from the world of Sanskrit or Tamil literature found its way into colonial (or postcolonial) geography textbooks whose principal mission was to “describe the earth” as it was, visible to the eye, measurable by instruments, and chartable on a map.

Bayly has noted that while the fabulous conceptions of the Hindu world “did not sit well with the scientific and mensurational ideas which the British brought to the

³⁰See also Anon. 1863, 3; Anon. 1895, 29; Rhenius 1832, 4; Sargeant 1848, 27.

³¹For other such comments on the absence of geoknowledge among Indians, see Murdoch 1865, 230, 567; Rennell 1783, iv. There are some exceptions though (Government of India 1878, 34–35; Havell 1924, 14–18). Such statements, occasional though they might be, do support Bayly's recent contention that “crude disparagement was [not] the dominant mode of British engagement with Indian knowledge” (Bayly 1996, 260). “Disavowal,” rather than “crude disparagement,” is the rhetorical strategy that is adopted in most colonial textbooks that I have seen.

closely defined subject of geography, . . . [i]n practice, though, there was much room for overlap." Even though geography textbooks in north India written by Indians were, like their colonial counterparts, "heavily empirical," the "older" components of geography and topography did not "simply die out" (Bayly 1996, 310–11). My analysis of Madras Presidency geography textbooks suggests otherwise.³² Although as the twentieth century advanced, their overt Eurocentrism gave way to more nationalistic portrayals of India and the Tamil region, nonetheless the view of the earth and its constituents that geography textbooks in both English and Tamil offered, even in the postcolonial period, is highly normative, conformist, and in the best tradition of British geography, "heavily empirical," devoid of "romance and imagination," and radically disenchanting.

It is to such a view of the world that most educated Tamil fabulists, schooled in colonial Geography, were exposed. This Geography told them about the relatively insignificant place occupied by India and by the Tamil region in the larger (colonial) order of things. Such a geographic image, based though it might be on scientific surveys, starkly contrasted with the truths of ancient Tamil literature (that modernity had helped salvage and popularize), which intimated that in the distant past, things had been otherwise. So, the normative geographic image of India, scientific though it may be, had to be contested, if the wisdom of ancient Tamil literature—so necessary for both Tamil nationalism and Tamil modernity—had to survive and not be shown up as naive and false. Tamil spatial fables are thus marked by what Foucault (1980, 81–82) would have called an insurrection of subjugated knowledges. Precolonial spatial conceptions disavowed by colonial Geography—such as "Jambudvipa" (or Navalán Teevu), "Kumarika Khanda," and "Mount Meru"—are salvaged, transformed, and redeployed in the fabulous realm of Lemuria, the paleocontinent that European science had itself imagined into existence. The neatly drawn borders of (British) "India" are undermined by the alternate geographies of loss of Kumari Nadu. If Geography's world is stable, static, and enduring, the antediluvian earth of these Tamil spatial fables is volatile, subject to all manner of cataclysms and convulsions. For these fabulists, the earth, too, has a history, and it is a history marked by catastrophic losses. Above all, if in the "new" Geography the Tamil realm was just one "small" part of (British) "India," and of an expanding world ultimately dominated by "the West," in Tamil spatial fables about Lemuria, it was the center of the world, "the birthplace of humanity," "the cradle of civilization."

Yet, because this insurrection takes place in the shadow of Geography, it does not reject the latter's procedures and principles, borrowing haphazardly from its empiricism, its scientism, even its rationalism, in order to prove the "reality" of its imagined elsewhere, as we have seen. More strikingly, the insurrection is limited to the prelapsarian past, and rarely, if ever, threatens the geographical realities of the postlapsarian world that Tamil fabulists take on board without question. Rather than overturning spatial reality as we know it, Tamil spatial fables of Lemuria function as supplements, offering a prelapsarian addendum to the geography and history of the world whose postlapsarian condition is accepted, more or less, along normative lines. As such, the subversion of "reality" attempted by this fabulous imagination is contained, and thus rendered safe. It is confined to a lost past that not even the most

³²Although I have found no geography textbooks that discuss Puranic spatial conceptions, the occasional history textbook does present these, often under the heading "ancient geography." See, for example, Arunachalam and Raghavan 1967, 1; Krishnayya 1881, 1–2; Rangaswami Ayyangar 1927, 1.

ardent fabulist seeks to recover, only to *remember* as evidence of the greatness of the Tamil people, once upon a time, long, long ago. As Marilyn Ivy, following Susan Stewart, has noted in another context, “the loss of nostalgia—that is, the loss of the desire to long for what is lost because one has found the lost object—can be more unwelcome than the original loss itself. . . . Modernist nostalgia must preserve . . . the sense of absence and lack that motivates its desire” (Ivy 1996, 10). So, spatial fabulism in Tamil India remains at the level of yearning for an unreclaimable past plenitude and for a lost elsewhere that it should not—and cannot afford to—find.

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