

On “izai” in ancient Tamil poetry...

Problem: confusion

Basically: “What does ‘izai’ mean or refer to in ancient Tamil poetry?”

Usually, we are given to understand the term “izai” to mean “ornament” when it is used as a noun in poetry, but such interpretation does not specify what **type** of an “ornament” it was and/or identify the **material** with which the “ornament” was made.

To me, an “ornament” is something one would use for decoration/embellishment. So, the usual interpretation triggers some confusion when we analyze Cankam poetry. The confusion gets intense especially when we analyze post-classical texts such as the *cilappatikAram* and *maNimEkalai*, where the major characters *Kannaki*, *Matavi*, and *Manimekalai*, even in their **destitute or austere** circumstances, are described for example as “an *Ayizai*.” “An *Ayizai*” is usually interpreted/translated as “a woman with choice ornaments.” “*Ayizai* < *Ay* + *izai*” is one of the numerous words containing the term ‘izai’ (as the head noun) that are intriguing.

The poetic genius perceived in ancient Tamil poetry provides a broad arena for us and yet the term “izai” is challenging in terms of its basic semantic significance.

Facts about the term “izai”:

1. The term “izai” is used as a verb or a noun.
2. The meaning of “izai” as a verb (transitive or intransitive) is clear: “to, build, daub, draw, fabricate, rub; rub against one another.”
3. When used in isolation, the noun ‘izai’ renders the meanings “thread, strand, fiber”
4. As a noun, “izai” is used only in contexts involving women, elephants, chariots, spear, and a bedstead. It is never used in the context of describing a man, as far as I can tell from my scanning of ancient (pre-bhakti) poetry. (If you come across any contra-evidence, please let me know and I will thankfully update my data.)
5. Here is a list of instances where the term “izai” occurs in pre-bhakti poetry:
 - a. *izai* (in isolation)
 - b. *aNi-y-izai*

- c. avir-izai
- d. Ay-izai
- e. ilank(u)-izai
- f. Ent(u)-izai
- g. oL-L-izai
- h. oLi-y-izai
- i. oN-N-izai
- j. kiLar-izai
- k. cuTar-izai
- l. cE-y-izai
- m. tirunt(u)-izai
- n. teri-y-izai
- o. nuN-N-izai
- p. nuNank(u)-izai
- q. nEr-izai
- r. paru-v-izai
- s. pAcizai
- t. punai-y-izai
- u. pon-n-izai
- v. mAN-izai
- w. min-n-izai
- x. muRR(u)-izai
- y. mel-l-izai
- z. vayank(u)-izai
- aa. vAl-izai
- bb. vil-l-izai
- cc. vizu(m)-izai
- dd. viLank(u)-izai
- ee. viRal-izai
- ff. vInk(u)-izai
- gg. vERR(u)-izai

Contexts in which the above forms occur are quite interesting.

Specific problem areas (in pre-bhakti poetry)

Kannaki, when separated from her husband Kovalan who was spending time with the courtesan Matavi, is described as “not desiring any ornament [‘aNi’] other than the one symbolizing her marital status [coverture]” [“mankala aNi-y-in piRitu aNi makizAL”]. Apparently, she did not wear anything on her ears [“koTum-kuzai tuRantu vaTintu vIZ kAtinaL”]. Nevertheless, she is referred to as an “Ayizai” and a “cEyizai.” How is this possible, or what does it mean?

Matavi, who renounced the life of a courtesan after the death of her lover Kovalan and entered a Buddhist monastery [“mAtavar uRaiviTam”], is described as an “Ayizai maTantai” and referred to as an “aNiyizai.” Even the local Buddhist ascetic, aRavaNa aTikaL, includes her when he addresses a group of women as “Ayizai nallIr.” How is this possible, or what does it mean?

Manimekalai has joined her mother Matavi in the monastery. She is referred to as an “Ayizai” even when she assumes the form of a bikkuNi (for the sake of begging for food so as to feed the hungry), and even when she assumes the form of a man [maNi. 23:53] in order to escape from being molested by someone commissioned by the Chola queen who imprisoned her. How is this possible, or what does it mean?