

**OCCUPATIONAL REGISTERS IN SELECTED RUBBER AND  
OIL PALM ESTATES IN SELANGOR:  
AN EXAMINATION OF SOME LEXICAL ITEMS – PART ONE**

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**1.1. Introduction:**

The paper examines some of the lexical features that are found in the verbal repertoire of the Tamil speaking community in Malaysia involved in the processing of cash crops such as rubber and oil palm. The lexical items to be studied here come under the umbrella of occupational registers which may be defined as a list of words or phrases that are used in relation to a particular job or occupation.

**1.1.1. Data Collection and Sampling:**

Data for this study was collected over a period of three months by administering five sets of open-ended questionnaires through a snowball sampling of twelve experienced workers in two rubber and oil palm estates in Selangor namely Sungei Choh Estate near Rawang and Pataling Rubber Estate in Carey Island. These estates were chosen because both had rubber and oil palm in them. Accessibility to these estates was relatively easy compared to other estates in terms of distance and entry into them. Besides more than eighty percent of the workforce in both the estates are made up of Tamils. The interviews were conducted in the rubber and oil palm fields, the nursery, the rubber processing factory, the oil palm mill and the labour lines. The informants were able to explain things better when they were interviewed at their place of work. The recording was done with the help of a portable cassette tape recorder. A memo pad was used to draw sketches when necessary, while the informants were explaining certain things in the field.

The research paper is divided into 3 parts. Part I consists of lexical items common to both rubber and oil palm. Part II deals with the lexical usages peculiar to oil palm only and Part III with rubber.

The list of words and phrases in this section are arranged according to the Tamil alphabetical order. The words and phrases contained in Parts I, II and III are only samples and they are not exhaustive. The lexical items<sup>1</sup> explained in this paper deals with the following.

2.0 The physical layout of the estate:

This includes the planted area of the estate, the labour lines, other buildings, roads, etc.

2.1 The estate administrative hierarchy including the terms of reference and terms of address.

Rubber and oil palm being labour intensive crops require not only rubber tappers and oil palm fruit harvesters but also other types of workers such as weeders, general workers, and those who work in the rubber factories and oil palm mills. These workers need people to supervise and oversee them. Others in the administrative hierarchy include the manager, the assistant manager, the conductor, the office clerk, the hospital assistant, etc. The workers use their own terms for addressing and referring to the administrative members of the estate.

2.2. Reporting for work, salary, leave etc;

The workers report for work during the roll call every morning after which they are assigned work in various parts of the estate. The workers are paid once a month. Many minor deductions are made in their monthly salary. The workers have their own arrangements for saving money to help them meet some of their important expenses.

2.3. Significance of the study:

It is hoped that this study would bring forth some of the occupational items present in the speech of the rural Tamils. Besides, this would also help in the identification of linguistic (regional) peculiarities, (if there are any), in the use of occupational terms.

<sup>1</sup>The lexical items are in the phonemic form hence they are given within brackets. The words within commas are the equivalents and not the meanings of the lexical items. The borrowed lexical items are footnoted accordingly. The presence of Malay loan words in Tamil have been dealt with in detail by the author in a research paper entitled "Malay Elements in spoken discourse among the Tamil plantation workers" presented at the "Asian Association on National Languages Seventh Conference" Language Centre, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 22-26 August, 1983.

2.1. The physical layout of the estate.

/allūru/ <sup>1</sup>		‘drain’
/kaṭe/		‘shop, floor’
/kikkate/		‘ground floor’
/mēkkate/		‘upper floor’
/kāṭu/		‘jungle, an area’
/tōṭṭakkāṭu/		‘an estate’
/paccakkāṭu/		‘forest’
/layattukkāṭu/	)	‘area where labour lines are situated’
/vittukkāṭu/	)	
/vēlakkāṭu/	)	
/kāmparā/ <sup>2</sup>		‘place of work in an estate’
/āyutakkāmparā/		‘room, store, shed.’
/marentukāmparā/		‘store room for tools’
/kānu/		‘estate clinic cum dispensary’
/cinna kānu/		‘drainage canal’
/periya kānu/		‘small drainage canal’
/koṭṭāy/		‘large drainage canal’
/attāppukkōṭṭāy/ <sup>3</sup>		‘shed’
/āṭṭukkōṭṭāy/		‘shed with thatched roof’
		‘goat shed’ (This word is alternatively used with /āṭṭuppatti/)

<sup>1</sup>Malay/alur/ (furrow, trench)

<sup>2</sup>Malay/kamar/ (room, chamber)

<sup>3</sup>Malay/attap (material for making roof)

/āyākkotṭāy/		'creche'
/jāmānkoṭṭāy/ <sup>1</sup>		'laterine'
/takarakkoṭṭāy/		'zinc shed'
/tompukkoṭṭāy/ <sup>2</sup>		'shed for oil drums'
/paṭakkoṭṭāy/		'movie shed'
/māṭṭukkoṭṭāy/		'cow shed'
/tōṭṭam/		'estate'
/rappar tōṭṭam/ <sup>3</sup>		'rubber estate'
/kittāttōṭṭam/ <sup>4</sup>		'rubber estate'
/ōyalpāntōṭṭam/ <sup>5</sup>		'oil palm estate'
/rōṭu/ <sup>6</sup>		'road'
/kavarmentu rōṭu/ <sup>7</sup>		'public road/highway'
/cemman rōṭu/		'laterite road'
/tār rōṭu/ <sup>8</sup>		'tar road'
/layam/ <sup>9</sup>		'labour lines'
/namparu/ <sup>10</sup> )	)	'refers to an area (planted with either rubber or oil palm) consisting of 10 sub-sections known as blocks. The blocks are known as /plokku/, /ṭāskku/or /vettu/.'
)	)	
/male/ )	)	
/onnām namparu/ )	)	'area No. 1'.
/onnāvatu namparu/)	)	
/pattām namparu/ )	)	'area No. 10'.
/pattāvatu namparu/)	)	

<sup>1</sup>Malay/jamban/ (laterine)

<sup>2</sup>Malay/tong/ (drum)

<sup>3</sup>English/rubber/ (rubber)

<sup>4</sup>Malay/getah/ (rubber)

<sup>5</sup>English/oil palm/ (oil palm)

<sup>6</sup>English/road/ (road)

<sup>7</sup>English/government/ (government)

<sup>8</sup>English/tar/ (type of thick sticky black liquid used for making roads)

<sup>9</sup>English/line/ (row of things)

<sup>10</sup>English/number/ (word or sign used for counting)

2.2. The estate administrative hierarchy including the terms of reference and address.

The word/ayyā/‘sir’ is the term of address used for addressing the senior conductors<sup>1</sup>, chief clerks, accounts clerks, office clerks, hospital assistants and dressers. Sometimes the term /kirānī<sup>2</sup> ayyā/ is also used to address the conductors and the office clerks.

The store clerks and the telephone operators whether Indians or non-Indians are simply addressed by their names because they occupy the lowest position in the estate administrative hierarchy.

The term /ayyā/‘sir’ is also used to address the managers and his assistants if they are Indians. The non-Indian (Malay or Chinese) managers and their assistants are addressed as /tuvān<sup>3</sup>/‘sir’. However the European managers and their assistants are addressed as,

/periya tore<sup>4</sup> / ‘manager’  
/cinna tore/ ‘assistant manager’.

Asian engineers, assistant engineers and the shift engineers in oil palm mills are simply addressed as /cār/‘sir’. However European engineers and his assistants are addressed as /tore/‘master’. It appears that the term /tore/‘master’ is synonymous exclusively with European administrators in the plantations.

Visiting medical officers (Doctors) whether Asians or Europeans are addressed as /dāktar ayyā/ ‘doctor sir’. The visiting doctor is referred to as /periya dāktaru/. Surprisingly enough the term /dāktaru/‘doctor’ is used as a term of reference not for a doctor but for the hospital assistant.

The term /kirānī / ‘conductor, clerk’ is used as a term of reference for the conductors and clerks. Indian senior conductor is referred to as /periya kirānī/ whereas his assistant and the trainee conductor is referred to as /kirānī/and/cinna kirānī/respectively.

The Indian chief clerk is referred to as /āpīs periya kirānī/and other clerks are referred to as /āpīs<sup>5</sup> kirānī/. The term of reference /stōr kirānī/‘storekeeper’ and /telipōn<sup>6</sup> kirānī /‘telephone operator’ are used for both Indians and non-Indians alike.

<sup>1</sup>The field supervisors are known as conductors.

<sup>2</sup>Malay/kerani/ (clerk, person employed in an office, shop, bank, etc.)

<sup>3</sup>Malay/tuan/ (sir, master)

<sup>4</sup>/tore/means master while/periya/and/cinna/ means large and small respectively.

<sup>5</sup>English/office/ (place where clerical and administrations work is done)

<sup>6</sup>English/telephone/ (telephone)

When referring to Malay and Chinese conductors the term /malāykkāre(n) kirāni/ and /cīne(n) kirāni/ respectively are used. Sometimes the term /kirāni/ with the proper noun preceding it is used as in the following example.

/amāt kirāni/ 'clerk Ahmad'

/lim kirāni/ 'clerk Lim'.

In the case of Malay and Chinese office clerks, the word /āpīs/ 'office' is placed before the word /kirāni/.

/malāykkāre(n) āpīs kirāni/

'Malay office clerk'

/cīne(n) āpīs kirāni/

'Chinese office clerk'

Sometimes the terms /malāykkāre(n) 'Malay' and /cīne(n)/ 'Chinese' are replaced by proper nouns as in,

/rōsli āpīs kirāni/ 'office clerk Rosli'

/ciñ āpīs kirāni/ 'office clerk Chin'

Unlike the terms of reference for the conductors, clerks, hospital assistant etc. which are not uniform, those referring to the managers, assistant managers, engineers, assistant engineers and shift engineers are similar irrespective of whether they are Indians, non-Indians or Europeans as can be seen in the following.

/periya mēnējaru<sup>1</sup> /‘manager’  
/cinna mēnējaru/‘assistant manager’  
/periya iñjiniyaru<sup>2</sup> /‘engineer’  
/cinna iñjiniyaru/‘assistant engineer’  
/ciftu iñjiniyaru/‘shift engineer’.

A summary of the terms of address and reference is given in the accompanying chart.

The term /kaṅgāni/or/maṅdru<sup>3</sup> /‘overseer’ is not included in the estate administrative hierarchy because the overseers are never considered as staff even though their role as the ‘middlemen’ between the labourers and the management is crucial in running the day to day affairs of the estates. In fact the overseers were instrumental in the supply of labour to the plantations through the infamous ‘Kangani’ system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Kanganis do not live in staff quarters (bungalows – semi-detached or detached), but among the labourers in the labour lines. They do not enjoy monthly wages, but are daily rated like the labourers. They are not entitled to the annual bonuses as the other staff. There is hardly any opportunity for them to acquire upward mobility by becoming junior or trainee conductors and thus joining the staff. This is directly tied to the lack of English education among them. English was and still is the administrative language in the estates. Unless and until the overseer has some sort of qualification in that direction he will remain as a /kangani/ for the remaining part of his service in the estate.

### 2.3. Reporting for work, Salary and Leave

The workers usually report for work every morning. They are then assigned their work for the day by the senior conductor. The roll call or muster for labourers is known as /peraṭṭu/. The place where they gather is known as /peraṭṭukalam/. Apart from being used to mean ‘roll call’, the term /peraṭṭu/ is also used to refer to the divisions in the estate such as

/tekkupperaṭṭu/	‘south division’
/vālepperaṭṭu/	‘plantain division’
/naṭuperaṭṭu/	‘central division’
/mērkup peraṭṭu/	‘west division’

<sup>1</sup>English/manager/ (person who is in charge of a firm or department).

<sup>2</sup>English/engineer/ (person who works with engines or on the building of bridges, ships, roads, machines, etc.)

<sup>3</sup>Malay/mandur/ (overseer, person who watches and directs workers).

The Estate Administrative Hierarchy	Term of Address			Term of Reference		
	Indian	Non-Indian Malay/Chinese	European	Indian	Non-Indian Malay/Chinese	European
1. Manager	ayyā	tuvān	tore	periya mēñējaru	periya mēñējaru	periya mēñējaru
2. Assistant Manager	ayya	tuvān	tore	cinna mēñējaru	cinna mēñējaru	cinna mēñējaru
3. Engineer	cār	cār	tore	periya inñiyaru	periya inñiyaru	periya inñiyaru
4. Assistant Engineer	cār	cār	tore	cinna inñiyaru	cinna inñiyaru	cinna inñiyaru
5. Shift Engineer	cār	cār	tore	ciftu inñiyaru	ciftu inñiyaru	ciftu inñiyaru
6. Senior Conductor	ayya kirāni ayyā	kirāni		periya kirāni	malāy k̄kāre(n) kirāni cīñe(n) kirāni or Name + kirāni e.g. Lim kirāni Ahmad kirāni -- do --	
7. Conductor	ayyā/kirāni ayyā	kirāni		kirāni		
8. Trainee Conductor	ayyā/kirāni ayyā	kirāni		sinna kirāni	-- do --	
9. Chief Clerk	ayyā/kirāni ayyā	kirāni		periya kirāni	malāy k̄kāre(n) āpis kirāni cīñ(e)n āpis kirāni or Name + āpis kirāni E.g. Chin āpis kirāni Rosli āpis kirāni	
10. Clerk/Accounts Clerk	ayyā/kirāni ayyā	kirāni		kirāni		
11. Visiting Medical Officer	dāktar ayyā			periya dāktaru	periya dāktaru	periya dāktaru
12. Hospital Assistant	ayyā			dāktaru	dāktaru	
13. Dresser	ayyā			dressaru		
14. Store Clerk	By Name	By Name		stōr kirāni	stōr kirāni	
15. Telephone Operator	By Name	By Name		telipōn kirāni	telipōn kirāni	

The Estate Administrative Hierarchy: Terms of Address and Reference



During the roll call, the workers have to reply or respond as /ājar/ 'present' when his or her name is called. The names are read out from a record book known as /cekku rōlu/'workers record book'. The term /pēru/ which means 'name' is used with adjectives of number to refer to work done as in the following.

/oru pēru/'a day's work'.

/are pēru/'half a day's work'.

However another term /vēle/'work' is used to refer to different types of work such as,

/anti vēle/'late afternoon or evening work'

/kāle vēle/'morning work'

/pul veṭtu vēle/'weeding work'

/velikkāṭṭu vēle/'field work'.

Workers are paid once a month i.e. before the 7th. The pay is known as /campalam/ or /campalakkācu/. The pay slip is known as /campalaccūrā/<sup>1</sup>.

The word/kācu/means money. The following is a list of /kācu/'money' that are deducted from the workers monthly pay. The deductions are not made in the 'advance pay' which is known as /advāṅsu/<sup>2</sup>

/kōyil kācu/ )

) 'temple money'

/cāmikkācu/ )

/cantākkācu/ )

) 'union membership subscription'

/caṅkakkacu/ )

/yūniyan kācu/ )

/cēr kācu/ 'share money for purchasing shares in the National Land Finance Co-operative Society – usually in estates owned by the society'

/nēcākācu/ 'Nesa money'<sup>3</sup>

/paṭakkācu/ 'film show money'

/paṅṭukkācu/ 'Employees Provident Fund money'.

<sup>1</sup> Malay/surat/ (letter, document)

<sup>2</sup> English/advance. (Pay or lend money before the proper time)

<sup>3</sup> Money that is deducted for purchasing shares in NESA – a Holding Company

The cost of living allowance that is paid to the workers is known as /kōlākkācu/.

Apart from the above, the plantation workers' spoken language also consists of other monies. They are found in a type of fund which is a common feature in the plantations. The fund is known as /kūṭṭu/. In this, a group of normally around 12 people contribute a certain amount say \$200 towards this/kūṭṭu/ for a period of 12 months. The amount collected per month is \$2,400. The organiser of the /kūṭṭu/ takes the \$2,400 in the first month. The remaining 11 persons will draw lots for the amount of \$2,400 for the second month. In the third month ten persons will draw lots for the amount of \$2,400. This goes on until the last person collects his \$2,400 at the end of the year. This is a form of savings. There is no 'interest' involved.

In a slightly different form of /kūṭṭu/ the organiser also has special 'rights' like the previous one, in that he takes the \$2,400 that is collected in the first month. In the second month the sum of \$2,400 is put up for bidding. The person who bids the lowest starting from \$2,400 downwards gets the money. Say, contributor A bids for \$2,300 and contributor B bids for \$2,200. Then contributor B gets \$2,200. The balance of \$200 for that month is divided equally among the 12 people i.e. \$16.65 per person. This amount of \$16.65 is variously known as

/kalivukkācu/ 'deducted money'

/lāvakkācu/ 'profit money'

/vattikkacu/ 'interest'

The organiser and the successful bidder in the second month continue to pay their \$200 and collect their due of 'profit' until the last of the 12 gets his full amount of \$2400.

The monthly contribution of \$200 and the total amount of \$2,400 (in the above example) are referred to as either /kūṭṭukkācu/or ciṭṭukkācu/.

The former type of /kūṭṭu/where no interest or profit is given is known as /sātāk kūṭṭu/'ordinary fund'. The latter where 'interest' or 'profit' is given is known as /lāvāk kūṭṭu/'profit fund'.

The day off for the workers is generally referred to as /tiṭṭi/. There are many kinds of /tiṭṭi/ as can be seen in the following.

/tiṭṭi/	'day off for workers'
/cāvut tiṭṭi/	'day off due to the death of a fellow worker or anyone in the estate'.
/cīkkut tiṭṭi/	'absence from work due to illness'
/cundirit <sup>1</sup> tiṭṭi/	'workers taking a day off from work to attend to some private matters'.
/potut tiṭṭi/	'public holiday'
/malet tiṭṭi/	'day off for workers due to rain'.
/virundālit tiṭṭi/	'workers taking a day or half a day off to entertain visiting relatives'.

It is interesting to note that the word/tiṭṭi/ is used only for the labourers. Others such as the conductors, hospital assistants, office clerks, engineers and managers when they take a day off, or if they go on a holiday, the word/līvu/<sup>2</sup> 'leave' is used as in

/kirāni līvule irukkāru/	'the supervisor is on leave'
/mēṇējaru līvule pōy/irukkāru/	'the manager has gone on leave'

Similarly, the school holidays are referred to as /skūl līvu/<sup>3</sup> and not as /skūl tiṭṭi/.

### 3.0 Conclusion

It could be observed from the above that most words and terms mentioned under 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 are common to both the rubber and oil palm industries. This is because what are now oil palm estates, either partially or wholly, started originally as rubber estates. The physical layout of the estate, the administrative hierarchy, the work force, and

<sup>1</sup> Malay/sendiri/ (own , self)

<sup>2</sup> English/leave/ (to be absent from one's work or duty).

<sup>3</sup> English/school/ (place where young people are taught)

the manner of reporting for work, etc. that were associated with the rubber estate were maintained even after the estates switched to a different cash crop i.e. oil palm. Many of the estates, already planted with rubber, started the switch to oil palm as the price of rubber fluctuated in the world market. The switch to oil palm was not problematic because the oil palm could easily adapt itself to the physical and climatic conditions as that of rubber. The work force consisting of tappers could easily be trained to be harvesters; overseers and conductors could also be trained for their new jobs in the oil palm field without much difficulty. When a new oil palm plantation is opened up, it needs all the basics associated with a plantation economy such as the necessary work force, the overseers, the conductors and the managers. Along with them comes the labour lines, the administrative staff quarters (bungalows), the dispensary, the factory or the mill, etc. Only the crops are different. Hence, except for words that are strictly related to rubber and oil palm, the rest of the words and terms that are linked with plantation based cash crops would be more or less the same.

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