

Murukaṅ in the Molucca beans

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When in Caṅkam poetry a young village girl is suffering from love sickness, her mother calls in the *vēlan* priest to determine the cause of the illness. This priest has dedicated his life to the god with the spear (*vēl*), Muruku or Murukaṅ. Therefore, his diagnosis is always the same: she is possessed by this handsome young god from the mountains; and so is his treatment: bringing an offering to his god. Ironically, for both the girl and her family this works out well: the girl is freed from the odium of having a love affair and therefore the parents can continue the search for a suitable husband for their daughter.

The *vēlan* priest arrives at the diagnosis with the help of Molucca beans (see picture below). What he does with these beans is not made clear. However, at the end he “lifts a *kaṅṅam*” (*kaṅṅan tūkki*) and declares that the girl’s illness is the work of Murukaṅ. The expression *kaṅṅan tūkki* is found in both *Aiṅkurunūru* 245 and 247. For his translation of *kaṅṅam* in *Aiṅkurunūru* 245, Lehmann relies on an anonymous, supposedly old, commentary, which glosses *kaṅṅam* with *paṭimam*, i.e. Skt *pratimā*, and ascribes healing properties to it: *kaṅṅam enpatu nōyṭaṅṅittarkup paṅṅik koṭukkum paṭimam. keḷutakai enpatu urimai*, “What is called a *kaṅṅam* is an image [*paṭimam*] that is made to cure a disease (Lehmann 2020: 218). What is called *keḷutakai* is right of possession”.¹ *Aiṅkurunūru* 245 reads:

poyyā marapiṅ ūr mutu vēlan
kaḷaṅku meyppaṭuttuk kaṅṅan tūkki
murukeṅa moliyum āyir
keḷutakai kall ivaḷ aṅṅkiyōrkē.

Lehmann (p. 217):

If the elderly priest of (our) village,
who is from an unfailing tradition,
predicts the truth with (the help of) Molucca beans,
holds up the *Kaṅṅam* (image) and utters “Muruku,”
will this be rightful to the one, who causes her suffering?

Selby (2011: 102), evidently on the basis of the same commentary, translates *kaṅṅam* with “talisman”:

Having made his predictions
from his molucca beans,
if that old town priest
for whom lying is not customary
lifts up a talisman [*kaṅṅan tūkki*]
and utters “Muruku!”
will the one who really caused
the suffering of this girl
still be eligible?

¹ In the present context the translation of *urimai* with “possession” is ambivalent, as if the speaker asks if the girl’s lover is eligible to take the place Murukaṅ occupies in her heart. In itself an interesting question, but not implied by *urimai*, which refers to possession in the legal sense.

See also her translation of *Aiṅkuṛṇūru* 247 (p, 103):

aṅṅai tantatākuvataṛivaṅ
poṅṅakar varaippir kaṅṅan tūkki
murukeṅa moliyum āyiṅ
aruvarai nāṭaṅ peyar kolōv atuvē,

Our mother has arranged it.
The priest knows what will happen.
Having lifted up the talisman [*kaṅṅan tūkki*]
in the backyard
of our beautiful house,
if he utters “Muruku!”
might that just be the name
of the lord of those treacherous mountains?

However, as I will argue below, *kaṅṅam* is not part of the cure but is part of the divination process, which is to reveal the name of the girl’s lover. First, however, I would like to have a closer look at the only other instance of *kaṅṅam* in the Caṅkam corpus, in *Akanāṅṅūru* 317, and at Hart’s translation of the passage concerned.² As we will see, Hart did not know what to do with *kaṅṅam*, “image”, and translated the word with “plate of a balance”. In doing so, he seems to base himself on the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 831), which records a meaning “scale-pan of a goldsmith”, with reference to the indigenous dictionary *Tivākaram: poṅkollar kaiyāḷum ciṅṅattarācuttaṭṭu*. *Akanāṅṅūru* 317. 8-11 reads:

poṅ cey kaṅṅam poliya vellī
nuṅkōl arai kuraintutirvaṅa pōla
arava vaṅṅiṅam ūtutoruṅ kuravattu
ōṅku ciṅṅai naruvī kōṅkalar uṛaiṅpa,

for which Hart offers the following translation (2015: 322-23):

Fragrant kuravam flowers
are knocked from their high branches
as bees alight on them and,
as they tumble onto the kōṅku flowers below,
look like small pieces of silver cut from a thin rod
and falling, shining, onto the golden plate of a balance.

I may begin by noting that in his translation Hart has made a mess of the original text. For instance, the “high branches” (*ōṅku ciṅṅai*) belong to the *kōṅku* tree, not the *kuravam*. The *kōṅku* (Kongu) tree, or the *Hopea parviflora*, is indeed a very high tree. It has whitish flowers, which consist of tiny pins (*nuṅkōl*) (see picture below). Thousands of these individual white (or silverish, *vellī*) pins cover the flowers of the *kuravam*, or red amaranth (Skt *kurabaka*). Though the colour of the amaranth flower is not exactly that of gold, even not of red gold, the

² Lehmann and Malten (1992: 149) mention only the three instances of *kaṅṅam* discussed in this paper.

point seems to be the contrast: white on red is like silver on gold.³ This means that the *kaṇṇam* in the comparison corresponds to the *kuravam* in the natural scenery.

At this point I want to draw attention to *Aiṅkuṟunūru* 344, in which the flower of the *kuravam* is called a *pāvai*, or “doll” or “manikin”:

avarō vārār tāṅ vantaṅrē
naṟumpūṅ kuravam payanta
ceyyāp pāvai koyyum poḷutē,

He (the husband) has not yet returned,
but the Spring has,
when the fragrant amaranth flower,
a figurine, but not one made by man,
is there to be plucked.⁴

Other instances of the construction *peyyā pāvai*, “figurine not made by man”, are *eyyā varivil*, “striped bow that does not shoot”, i.e. “rainbow” (*Akanāṅṅūru* 192) and *ulāa nāñcil*, “plough that does not plough”, i.e. “Mountain Nāñcil” (*Puṟaṅṅūru* 139). It is indeed not difficult to recognize a manikin in the amaranth flower. (For a Rorschach test, go to the picture below.)

Returning to *kaṇṇam* in the *Aiṅkuṟunūru* poems, it should be noted that beside “to hold up, hoist, as a flag,” *tūkku-tal* also means “to consider, reflect, investigate” (compare “to weigh, balance” and *tūkkili*, “a thoughtless person”). Thus, after the *vēlaṅ* has scattered the molucca beans and after he has carefully looked at the figures (*kaṇṇam*) formed by the beans, he declares he has seen *Murukaṅ*.

While the gloss for *kaṇṇam* provided by the commentary quoted by Lehmann is in itself correct, the problem of the meaning of *kaṇṇam* is actually transferred to *paṭimam*, or to what meaning this word is to have in this context. It is clear, though, that the commentator had no idea about the charade performed by the *vēlaṅ*. Finally, it is not unlikely that the entry *kaṇṇam*, “scale-pan of a goldsmith”, in the indigenous dictionary *Tivākaram* was abstracted directly from *Akanāṅṅūru* 317. Note the words *poṅ*, “gold”, and *vēḷi*, “silver”, in the text, in combination with *kōl*, “stick, staff”, which with some imagination may taken be to refer to the beam of the pair of scales used by a goldsmith. This was apparently done by the author of that other indigenous dictionary, the *Piṅkalam* (*Tamil Lexicon*, p. 1194: *tulākkōl*).⁵

By way of conclusion I want to add a note on how I arrived at *Aiṅkuṟunūru* 344, which provided the key to the meaning of *kaṇṇam*. When, as in the case of enigmatic *kaṇṇam*, the number of instances attested is small I turn to the other words in the poems and follow their trail in the *Caṅkam* corpus. In this case I was helped by the *Tamil lexicon*, which on p. 1012 mentions the compound *kuravampāvai*, “Common bottle-flower blossom, as shaped like

³ Interestingly, in *Maṇimēkalai* 19. 67-69 the kongu flower (*kōṅkalar*) is compared with a red-gold plate (*cempon taṭṭu*). Apparently, names and tree had got mixed up. Something similar is seen in English sparrow and Dutch spreuww, the same word for completely different birds.

⁴ Selby’s translation runs as follows (p. 137):

He has not come still,
but the time has come
when the doll-like fruit
borne by the bottle-flower tree
with its fragrant blossoms
is ripe for the plucking.

⁵ Like the Prākṛit dictionaries, Hemacandra’s *Deśināmamālā* and Dhanapāla’s *Pāiyalacchī Nāmamālā*, the indigenous Tamil dictionaries have produced quite a number of ghost words. For the Prākṛit dictionaries, see Ticken 1992.

doll”, culled from *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* 2690. Unfortunately, this text is only available to me in its first volume, which includes only stanzas 1-2556. After that, it was quite easy, with the help of Lehmann and Malten’s word index to find *Aiṅkurunūru* 344. It all took some time, but what are these few hours compared to the more than ten centuries that the poems were kept on hold?

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Molucca beans



Kōhku tree flower



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Red amaranth, kuravam, kurabaka

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