

Mud in the Mouth: *Akanāṇūru* 101

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In *Akanāṇūru* 101, a woman asks a confidante what she has done wrong that her husband has to pass through such inhospitable country. The passage describing this country contains the phrase *vāyppakai kaṭiyum maṇ(ṇoṭu)*. In the commentaries, both old and modern ones, *maṇ* in this phrase is taken to refer to the mud which the robbers in the poem hold in their mouths to keep them from coughing, presumably because this sound would betray their presence behind the bushes. As I will try to show, this fanciful interpretation is a somewhat desperate attempt to make sense of a text which was completely misunderstood. First, however, I will present the relevant part of the text (lines 4-12) and two translations, one by Hart (2015) and the other by Wilden (2018).

takarmaruppēyppac currupu curinta
cuvanmāy pittaic ceṅkaṇ maḷavar
vāyppakai kaṭiyum maṇṇoṭu kaṭuntīral
tīppaṭu cirukōl villoṭu parri
nuraiteṛi mattaṅ koḷi niraippuratt-
aṭiputai toṭutōl paraiyav ēkik-
kaṭipulaṅ kavārnta kaṅruṭai koḷḷaiyar
iṅṅan talai peyarkkum naṅantalai peruṅkāṭṭu.

Hart's translation runs as follows (it was impossible to maintain the layout of Hart's translation because of the additions made by me between square brackets):

A forest [*kāṭṭu*] where red-eyed young men [*ceṅkaṇ maḷavar*], the napes of their necks covered with hair curling like rams' horns [*takar ... pittai*], **stuff their mouths with clay to keep from coughing** [*vāyppakai kaṭiyum maṇṇoṭu*], hold their bows [*villoṭu parri*] and small sticks for making fire [*tīppaṭu cirukōl*],¹ and take churning rods still covered with foam [*nuraiteṛi mattaṅ koḷi*] as prods.

Going where the herds are [*niraippuratt(u) ... ēki(k)*], wearing down the leather sandals on their feet [*aṭiputai toṭutōl paraiya(v)*], they steal the cows and calves

¹ *kaṭuntīral* is skipped in the translation.

[*kaṅṛuṭai koḷḷaiyar*] from that guarded place [*kaṭipulaṅ kavārnta*] and return with them [*iṅṅan talai peyarkkum*].

Wilden’s translation of the same lines runs as follows:

The great wilderness of vast area, where the herds are recovered [*iṅṅan talai peyarkkum*] from plunderers in possession of the calves [*kaṅṛuṭai koḷḷaiyar*] seized [*kavārnta*] from protected fields [*kaṭipula(m)*] by red-eyed warriors [*maḷavar*] with tufts of hair, all curled up so as to resemble goats’ horns, that hide (their) necks, (their) power [*tīral*] (made) fierce [*kaṭun*] **with the earth [*maṅṅoṭu*] that chases [*kaṭiyum*] the enemy from (their) mouths [*vāyppakai*]**, grasping, along with (their) bows [*villoṭu*], small arrows set on fire [*tīppaṭu ciṛukōl*], holding churning sticks [*mattaṅ koḷī*] (for) testing the foam [*nuraiteri*], going outside the herds [*niraippuratt(u)*] so that the sandals covering (their) feet are worn out [*aṭiputai toṭuṭōl paṛaiya(v)*].

Wilden’s translation of *vāyppakai kaṭiyum maṅṅoṭu*, or rather of *vāyppakai kaṭiyum maṅṅoṭu kaṭutīral*, as “(their) power [*tīral*] (made) fierce [*kaṭun*] with the earth [*maṅṅoṭu*] that chases [*kaṭiyum*] the enemy from (their) mouths [*vāyppakai*]” is her own solution of the problem presented by this mysterious passage. In a footnote, she refers to a gloss included in the so-called *kiḷavi*, which otherwise restricts itself to identifying the speakers in the poems and the circumstances under which they are speaking. The gloss reads:

*māyppittai ceṅkaṅ maṛavar vāyppakai kaṭiyum maṅṅeṅṛatu irumal tīrkkum maruntu,*²

What is called “earth that chases away the enemy from the mouths of bold men with red eyes (and) hair tufts that hide” is a remedy that ends cough”.

In a footnote Wilden adds that “if this [the gloss] is pertinent, one may add that the context suggests the use of this cough remedy as a stimulant in fight”. In a more recent publication, which deals with an anonymous commentary on the *Akanāṅṅūru* (Wilden 2020: 177-8), she discusses this gloss again, mainly focusing on the various forms in which it has come down to us. She also notes that this meaning, or use, of *maṅ*, which has not found its way into the

² Note *maṛavar* instead of *maḷavar*.

Tamil Lexicon, has been generally accepted by the modern commentaries – for instance, Po.Vē. Cōmacuntaraṅār of the Kaḷakam edition – and translators such as Hart, to conclude that “it will be interesting to look for parallels”. That is what I have done, though not starting with *maṅ*, but with *vāyppakai*.

The *Index des mots de la littérature tamoule ancienne* mentions one other instance of *vāyppakai*, in *Tirikaṭukam* 17, in which the word clearly and indisputably means “dispute”

vāyppakaiyuḷ colvenṛi vēṅṭum ilin̄ki,

An ascetic (*ilin̄ki*) who desires victory (*venṛi*) by words (*col*) in a dispute (*vāyppakai*).

As I will show presently, *vāyppakai*, or shouting abuse and threats, is the first step in a conflict between two groups of herdsmen, ending in one of them making away with the calves of the other. In the text itself the word for herdsman does not occur, neither for the owners of the herds nor for the thieves. The latter are called “warriors” (*maḷavar* in the second line of the text, *maṛavar* in the gloss) and *koḷḷaiyar* in the seventh line, which refers to them as “making away with the *koḷḷai*, or loot”. However, the weapons they use include churning sticks (*matta(m)*), an instrument that is typically in use by herdsmen.³ Another weapon they use is *tīppaṭu cirukōḷ*, which, as may be gathered from *Akanāṅūru* 274, is another item in a herdsman’s kit. The passage in question, which describes a herdsman of a flock of goats (*iṭaiyaṅ*), reads:

*āṭutalai turuviṅ tōṭēmārppak-
kaṭaikōṛ cirutī aṭaiya māṭṭi,*

The scene is set in a dark night in the rainy season; it rains heavily and the thunder roars:

When the flock of goats, their heads swaying, was safely settled, he (the *iṭaiyaṅ*) fed the small flames he had made by rubbing sticks so that they turned into a real fire.

³ It should be noted that the addition in Hart’s translation that the thieves use the churning stick to prod the cattle is not supported by the text. As we will see, the churning stick is mentioned side by side with a bow and arrow.

The herdsman stays with his flock day and night, and in good and bad weather. Therefore he requires sticks (*kaṭaikōl*) for making a fire – in *Akanānūru* 101 they are said to be small (*cīru*), but also to be made of hard wood (*kaṭuntīral*). In *Akanānūru* 274 the herdsman is, moreover, described as *tiṅkāl urīyaṅ*, or as walking with a pole (*tiṅkāl*) on the shoulder, at the end of which hangs an *urī*, a net made of ropes which can hold vessels in an upright position; as *pāṅaiyaṅ*, or carrying a *pāṅai* type of vessel; and as *ataḷaṅ*, possessing a hide (*atal*) to sit or sleep under when it rains. In addition, he leans on a staff (*taṅṭu kāl ūṅriya*) and has a whistle (*vīlai*) making a shrill noise.⁴

As said, the conflict between the two groups of herdsmen starts with *vāyppakai*, or shouting abuse and threats. After that, it escalates quickly, from throwing mud (*kaṭiyum maṅṅoṭu*)⁵ to throwing red-hot pieces of wood (*tīppaṭu cīrukōl*) and (-*oṭu*) shooting arrows (with their bows, *vil*), to culminate in wielding churning sticks, the butter still clinging to them (*nuraiteri matta(m)*). It is followed by a description of the winners leading their herds away from the scene (*iṅan talai peyarkkum*) together with the loot (*koḷḷai*) consisting of the calves they had stolen from the cattle pen (*kaṭipulaṅ kavārnta kaṅṅruṭai*), having roamed around on the outside of the flock (*niraippuṅatt(u) ... ēki*), and having worn down the soles of their sandals (*aṭiputai toṭutōl paṅaiya*).

The enumeration of the “weapons” at the disposal of the herdsmen is neatly organised, with two pairs of “X, X-*oṭu*”,⁶ followed by a fifth standing on its own. In the two pairs it is possible to detect an increase on the scale of physical violence, from shouting abuse and mud throwing, to throwing embers and shooting arrows. As I have tried to show, in their interpretation of the *Akanānūru* 101 the modern translators would have done better to ignore the so-called traditional interpretation. What is particularly striking is their uncritical attitude towards the information supplied by the commentary: they are prepared to believe anything, as long as it fits with a portrait of an ancient culture still using the most primitive kinds of natural medicines. However, they may redeem themselves, at least in my eyes, by retrospectively producing passages from the extensive medical literature in Tamil or Sanskrit mentioning mud as a cough syrup.

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⁴ A similar list is found in *Narriṅai* 142, which describes the same situation in practically the same words.

⁵ Throwing mud can hurt, as we see in Sanskrit *loṣṭa* in the expression *loṣṭaghātaṃ han-*, “to kill with clods”, quoted in *Monier-Williams*, p. 908.

⁶ For this function of the ending *-oṭu* in enumerations, see Rajam (1992: 348).

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