

A songster's hair style, a waistcloth, and a pregnant lizard
Herman Tieken

Kuṛuntokai 23 reads:

*akavaṇmakaḷē yakavaṇmakaḷē
maṇavukkōppanna naṇṇetuṇ kūntal
akavaṇmakaḷē pātuka pāṭṭē
yiṇṇum pātuka pāṭṭē yavar
naṇṇetuṇ kuṇram pāṭṭiya pāṭṭē.*

Eva Wilden's translation runs as follows:

Soothsayer woman, soothsayer woman,
like a string of chank beads good, long tresses,
soothsayer woman, please sing the song.
Again, please sing the song.
The song (you've) sung of his good long hill!

Apart from the fact that in this translation some words which would link the long tresses to the singer seem to be missing — compare Shanmugam and Ludden's translation, "O woman who sings the *akaval* ... with your beautiful, long hair, as white as a string of pearls" (1976: 166, my italics), and the one by Hart, "Singer of rhymes, ... your long hair as white as strings of shells (1975: 145, my italics)" — all three translators agree on the point of the comparison, which is the whiteness of the woman's hair (chank beads in Wilden's text). For the meanings of the *upamāna*, they possibly rely on the the *Tamil Lexicon*, where on p. 3135 one of the meanings provided for *maṇavu* reads "mock pearl, chank bead" (with reference to *Perumpāṇāṟruppaṭai* 132; see below) and "conch" (with reference to the traditional dictionary *Cūṭāmaṇi Nikaṇṭu*). However, in the other poems about the singer of *akaval* songs, or her husband, the colour of their hair, and consequently their advanced age, does not play a role. Furthermore, rather than describing its colour, *kōppu* in *maṇavukkōppu* (line 2) refers to the way the hair is arranged.

At first sight, the other meaning of *maṇavu* supplied in the *Tamil Lexicon*, namely "girdle for the waist", does not make sense in the above *Kuṛuntokai* poem. For this meaning reference is made to *Taṅcaivāṇaṅ Kōvai* 373. Unfortunately, I do not have access to an edition of this *kōvai* poem; all I have is the passage quoted in the *Tamil Lexicon*, which reads: *maṇavēy akalalkul valliyaṇṇaḷ*, "she who resembles a slender woman with broad hips fitted (*ēy*) with a *maṇavu*". In fact, the same combination of the words *maṇavu* and *alkul*, a woman's hips, or, as some would have it, her "mound of venus", is found in *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* 466, the relevant, second part of which reads:

*maṇaviri yalkulār tam maṇattoṭu mayaṅki yoṇṇrum
viṇavunar iṇri niṇru vēṇṭuva kūruvārum.*

The poem describes some women's reactions on seeing the hero of the epic, *Cīvakaṇ*; see Ryan's translation (2005: 126):

And some women with their mounds of venus
spreading the light of gems, bewildered
in heart, without anyone asking them, would say
what they wished, just standing there.

For the meaning “gem” of *maṇavu* Ryan seems to base himself on the *Tamil Lexicon*, which gives this meaning for this particular passage. At the same time, the translation suggests that he analysed *maṇaviriyalkul* as *maṇa-viri-(y)alkul*. If the first word is indeed *maṇavu*, then it is to be analysed as *maṇav(u)-iri-(y)alkul*, “the hips/mound of venus which have (has) escaped (*iri*) from the *maṇavu*”. In order to attract Cīvakaṇ’s attention and make clear what they want of him, the women have removed their waistcloths.

In both *Taṅcaivāṇaṅ Kōvai* 373 and *cīvakacintāmaṇi* 466, *maṇavu*, if not a waistcloth, must be some part of it. In fact, the *maṇavu* is not only worn by women, but also by men, for in *Tirumuṟai* 3.78.1 Śiva is described as being covered with ashes (*nīru*), wearing a swaying snake (*āṭu aravoṭu*), a tortoise (*āmai*), a *maṇavu*, and a garland of bones (that is, skulls) (*eṇṇu nirai pūṇṇar*). The passage describes Śiva in his *bhairava* aspect, in which he also wears a loincloth. At the same time, it is highly unlikely that the songster’s hair in *Kuṟuntokai* 23 is compared to a waist- or loincloth. And indeed, the *Tirumuṟai* instance shows that *maṇavu* is not a word for waist- or loincloth, but for a specific part of such a piece of clothing; for Śiva’s loincloth, for instance, the word *kōvaṇam* is used, sometimes together with *kīḷ*, or “waistband”: e.g. *Tirumuṟai* 4.97.7: *kīḷ koṇṭa kōvaṇam*, 7.24.2: *kīḷ ār kōvaṇam*, 7.53.6: *tunī vār kīḷum kōvaṇamum tutaittu*).

In order to find out what a *maṇavu* actually is, I want to have a look at *maṇā* in *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* 2781. At the outset it should be noted that *maṇā*, like *nilā* alongside *nilavu*, “moon(light)”, is a variant of *maṇavu*. The passage reads:

maṅkai maṅāvaṇaiya meṅcūlmaṭavuṭumpu
ceṅkaṅ varivarāl cennīṟavālai
veṅkaruṇai pullutaṟku vēruvērākkuraippa
aṅkāntalukiṇrat ’ār kaṅṅē nōkkumē.

Ryan’s translation (2018: 236) runs as follows:

When women cut up in pieces the young lizard with
soft eggs, like chank beads, the red-eyed varāl fish, and
the vālai fish of the fine waters to make a delectable
curry, to whom will the sin of their gaping mouths crying go?

This stanza is part of a long section in which the ascetic Maṇivaṇṇaṅ instructs Cīvakaṇ in the Jaina worldview. In doing so he points to how people kill animals, blind and deaf to the victims’ cries (*aḷukiṇratu*) escaping from their wide-open mouths (*aṅkāntu*). The animals concerned, a female (*maṭa*) pregnant (*cūl*) lizard (*uṭumpu*) and two fishes, *varāl* and *vālai*, were cut into pieces (*vēruvērāk kuraippa*) to prepare (*pullutaṟku*) a nice hot curry (*veṅkaruṇai*). In the text, the pregnant lizard stands out by being compared to a *maṅā/maṇavu*. As can be seen, in Ryan’s translation *maṅkai* in *maṅkai maṅā* is taken as the subject of the infinitive *kuraippa*, “When women (*maṅkai*) cut up in pieces”. However, given the position of the word at the beginning of the first line of the stanza, it is most likely to be linked to the

immediately following word *maṇā*: “a woman’s *maṇā*”. What does this comparison with a pregnant lizard tell us about the form or appearance of the *maṇavu*? A lizard generally has a slender body, which during pregnancy turns in its entirety into a thick cylinder, or even a ball, with four thin legs, a head and a long tail sticking out on all sides (see the images provided below). Taking the leap to the woman’s hairdo in *Kuṛuntokai* 23, it is possible to imagine a thick knot from which on all sides the tail ends of curls (*kuḷal*) issue. In the case of the waistcloth, we may think of a piece of cloth tied in a bow with a relatively big knot in the middle. In this connection I want to draw attention to two poems from Hāla’s *Sattasāi*, in which the husband is trying to untie the knot (*gaṁṭhi*) in his wife’s waistcloth, which forms the last hurdle in the love-making. *Sattasāi* 351 reads:

*jāo so vi vilakkho mae vi hasiūṇa gāḍham uvaūḍho
paḍhamosariassa ṇiamaṇassa gaṁṭhiṁ vimaggaṁto,*

He was embarrassed
But I laughed and gave him a hug
When he groped for the knot
Of my skirt and found it
Already undone.¹

Poem 648 reads:

*aliapasuttavalaṁtaṁmi ṇavavare ṇavahūa vevaṁto
saṁvelliorusaṁjamiavatthagamṭhiṁ gao hattho,*

Feigning sleep
The husband turned over
And let a trembling hand fall as if by accident
On the knot of his young wife’s skirt
Which she held firmly between her thighs.²

The combination of a *maṇavu* and pregnant lizard, moreover, is also explicitly found in *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai* 131-33:

*coṅṛi
ṇamali tanta maṇavucūluṭumpiṅ
varai kālyāttatu.³*

Rice mixed with the roasted meat of a pregnant lizard (which resembles) a piece of cloth tied in a knot, which was caught by a dog.

The commentator Nacciṅārkkīṇiyar translates *maṇavucūluṭumpu* with “lizard pregnant with chank beads (*akkumaṇi*)”, the chank beads describing the white eggs in the lizard’s body. Or rather, because the lizard lays whitish eggs, *maṇavu* was

¹ Translation Khoroché and Tieken, 2009: 59-60.

² Translation Khoroché and Tieken, 2009: 58.

³ The text reads *varai*, though the passage as quoted in the commentary has *valai*, but the commentary, which glosses the word with *pori*, “roasted meat”, appears to assume *varai*.

taken to mean chank beads, an *ad hoc* meaning which next found a place in the *Tamil Lexicon* (see above). The *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* passage discussed above suggests that the pregnant lizard *resembles* (*aṇaiya*) a *maṇavu*, so between *maṇavu* and *cūluṭumpu* we have, as done in the above translation, to mentally supply a word for “resembling” or “looking like”, or else to take the compound as a Karmadhāraya of sorts: “the pregnant lizard, which has the form of a *maṇavu*”.

All this suggests that the word *maṇavu* refers primarily to things tied into knots and as such came to be used to describe a woman’s scrunchy hairstyle, her waistcloth as well as Śiva’s loincloth. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find any pictures of hair styles and waistcloths in contemporary, eighth or ninth century South Indian art which match the descriptions in the above text passages to the letter. Possibly though, the stone reliefs and bronze statues present stylized, more formal types of hair and dress than the poems do. Just to give an idea of what a hairknot with loose strands of hair issuing from it might look like, below an example is given from Ajanta, taken from Krishna Murthy (1982).

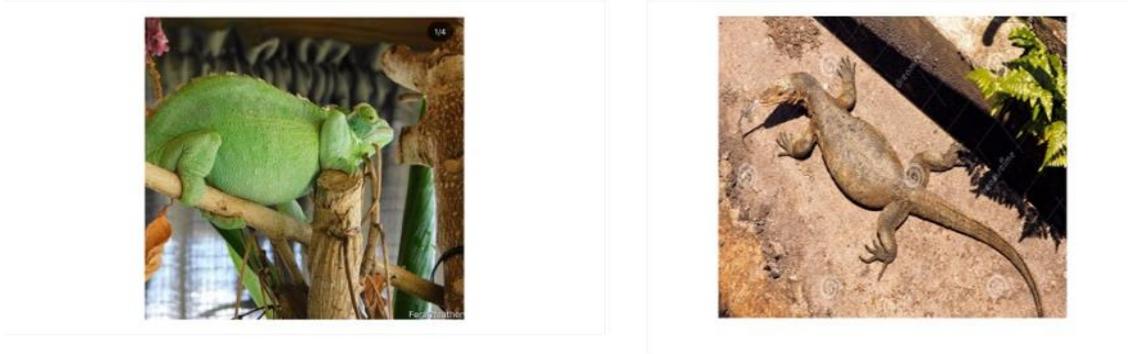
To return to the *akavaṇmakaḷ* mentioned in the poem at the start of this paper, the wife of the *akavunaṇ*, she is also mentioned in *Kuṟuntokai* 298, in which, however, nothing is said about her appearance, let alone her hairdo, except that in her hand she holds a little stick with a white tip (*veḷ kaṭai cīri kōl*). But so does her husband in *Akanāṇūru* 208 (*nunḱōl akavunar*). The stick was evidently used to beat the *kiṇai* drum (see *Akanāṇūru* 249: *vici piṇitti yātta arikōṟṟeṇkiṇai iṅkural akavunar*). While in the other instances the *akavaṇmakaḷ* and her husband are described as ordinary bards trying to make a living by praising a king’s heroic behaviour on the battle-field (*Paṭiṟruppattu* 43, 27: *kaḷam vāḷttum*), in *Kuṟuntokai* 23 the woman plays a role in the people’s love lives: in *Akanāṇūru* 208 the *akavunar* sing of King *Veḷiyaṇ Vēṇmāṇ Āy Eyiṇaṇ*’s mountain (*kuṇram*), and in *Kuṟuntokai* 23 someone, most probably a young girl, asks the *akavaṇmakaḷ* to sing of his (*avar*) mountain, that is, of her lover. In this way her family is misled into thinking that their daughter, rather than having a pre-marital love affair, is infatuated with the god living on that mountain, *Murukaṇ*. As such, the poem varies on those featuring the *vēlaṇ* priest. When in Caṅkam poetry a young village girl is suffering from love sickness, her mother calls in the *vēlaṇ* priest to determine the cause of the illness. This priest has dedicated his life to the god with the spear (*vēl*), *Murukaṇ*. Therefore, his diagnosis is always the same: the girl is possessed by this handsome young god from the mountains; and so is his treatment: to take 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.⁴ The translation of *akavaṇmakaḷ* as “soothsayer” in Wilden’s translation therefore seems at first sight unwarranted. At the same time, it is precisely her hairdo that links her with another type of, female, soothsayer, namely the *kaṭṭuvicci*. This character does not occur in Caṅkam poetry proper, but does make her appearance in Vaiṣṇava Bhakti poetry. The passage I want to draw attention to in this light is 19-26 from *Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār*’s *Cīriya Tirumaṅgal*, in which the family has called in a female soothsayer (*kaṭṭuvicci*) to discover the cause of their daughter’s strange behaviour. After having gone into trance, the *kaṭṭuvicci* explains (*kaṭṭuraittāl*) that the girl’s conduct is caused by her infatuation with Viṣṇu. However, the soothsayer does not mention this god by name, but refers to him by speaking in riddles, asking for instance: “who measured this whole world?” (the answer: Viṣṇu in His incarnation as a dwarf), or referring to Him indirectly, for instance, as the “One with the Thousand Names”. A sentence of the latter category reads *pērttēyūm kārār tirumēṇi kāṭṭiṇāḷ* (22^{ab}): she points to His sacred body (visible) in (*ār*) the black raincloud, which resembled (*ēyūm*) (the

⁴ See Tieken, “Murukaṇ in the Molucca Beans” (2021).

body) in a distorted form (*pērttu*).” The colour is right, the cloud’s form is not; the *kaṭṭuvicci* is in effect doing a Rorschach test.⁵ Interestingly, the *kaṭṭuvicci*’s hairdo is described as: *kār ār kuḷal koṇṭai*. Just as in the case of the *akavaṇmakal*, “her curls (*kuḷal*), which are as black as dark rain clouds (*kār ār*), are tied into a knot (*koṇṭai*)”.

19 October 2021

Pregnant lizards (google search term)



A hairknot



⁵ This passage is dealt with in my forthcoming review of Lynn Ate’s *Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār’s Five Shorter Works: Experiments in Literature*. Pondicherry, 2019, to appear in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. While the *kaṭṭuvicci* recognizes the girl’s lover in the clouds, the *vēḷaṇ* does so in a throw of molucca beans.

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