

Ground Snakes and Chameleons in their Summer Garbs

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The word *vaḷalai* in *Narriṇai* 92.2 is otherwise rare, though the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 3542) mentions no fewer than five meanings, including four substances and one animal. The four substances are: “a kind of salt” (*Vaittiya Mūlikai virivakarāti*, a dictionary of medicinal roots and plants), “soap” (with reference to *Patārttakūṇa cintāmaṇi* 1106), “phlegm” (*caturakarāti*, an eighteenth-century dictionary by Beschi), and “exudation from a sore”. For the latter meaning the *Tamil Lexicon* refers to the old commentary on *Puranāṇūru* 22, line 7: *ayaṛu cōrum iruṅ ceṇṇiya*, “their enormous heads oozing pus” (tr. Hart and Heifetz 1999). The commentary reads: *ayaṛu nīr kaciyum puṇ, itaṇaip puṇ vaḷalai yeṇpar*, “*ayaṛu* is a wound oozing fluid; this they call *puṇ vaḷalai*, ‘fluid oozing from a wound’”.¹ For the fifth meaning, “ground snake”, the *Tamil Lexicon* refers to *Cīvarakṣāmirtam*.

The meanings “phlegm” and “exudation from a sore” may well be related, “Soap”, as a combination of oils and fat, may belong here as well, while the meaning “salt” has, like phlegm and fluid oozing from wound, been retrieved from a text on medicines. However, the question if salt belongs to the same category of the three fluids depends on how it is taken or applied: in dry or fluid form. The meaning “ground snake” is thus clearly the odd one out, though it is the only one which has made it into the *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*, which also adds a Malayāḷam cognate, *vaḷala*, in entry no. 4332, though unfortunately without any reference to textual sources. In this connection it should be noted that the meaning “ground snake” for *vaḷalai* in the *Cīvarakṣāmirtam* (pp. 452-3) is not self-evident. In *vaḷalaiccarppaviṣam* and *karuvaḷalaiccarppaviṣam*, *vaḷalai* is prefixed to a general word for snake (*carppam*) to identify a certain species. As such it could equally well be a word describing a specific characteristic of the snake, like rattle in rattlesnake, or its habitat or way of moving. The only other instance of *vaḷalai*, “ground snake”, in Tamil literature that I know of is *Narriṇai* 92, at least according to the modern commentator,² though Eva Wilden (2008) is the only one who follows him; in the translations by Kandasamy (posthumously published in 2008) and Dakshinamurthy (2001) *vaḷalai* is not accounted for. As I will show, however, in *Narriṇai* 92 we most probably have to do with another instance of *vaḷalai* “exudation from a sore”. Consequently, as far as Tamil is concerned, the evidence of *vaḷalai*, “ground snake”,

¹ For the old commentary on the *Puranāṇūru*, available only for 1-266, see Marr (1985: 69).

² The modern commentary is by the editors of the text, A. Nārāyaṇacāmi and Po.Vē. Cōmacuntaraṇār (1967). For the *Narriṇai* no old, medieval, commentary exists; see Marr (1985: 340).

becomes very thin and starting from the meaning “exudation from a sore” it might be useful to have another look at the compound (*karu*)*vaḷalaiccarppaviṣam* in the *Cīvarakṣāmirtam*.

Wilden’s (2008) reconstruction of the text of *Narriṇai* 92 reads (with the Sandhi dissolved):

uḷḷār kollō tōḷi tunaiyoṭu
vēṇil ōtip pāṭunaṭai vaḷalai
varimaral nukumpiṇ vāṭi avaṇa
varaṇ poruntu kuṇṇatt’ucci kavāṇ
vēṭṭac cīr’ūr akal kaṇ kēṇi
paya niraikk’eṭutta maṇi nīr pattar
puṇ talai maṭap piṭi kaṇṇōṭ’āra
vil kaṭint’ūṭṭiya peyarum
kol kaḷiṇṇ’oruttal curaṇ iṇantōrē.

In the poem a woman is speaking to her friend (*tōḷi*), saying she can’t believe that her husband will not think of her when crossing a parched desert. Lines 1 and 4-9 may be paraphrased as follows:

Will he not think of me (*uḷḷār kollō*), o friend, when, hit by drought (*varaṇ poruntu*), he passes through the desert (*curaṇ iṇantōrē*), where a fierce, lonely elephant bull (*kol kaḷiṇṇ’oruttal*), to feed (*ūṭṭiya*) the young female elephant and the calf, disregarding the bows (*vil kaṭintu*) returns (*peyarum*) to the trough with glittering water (*maṇi nīr pattar*) made ready (*eṭutta*) for the herd of dairy cows (*paya niraikku*) near the wide well in the little hunting village (*vēṭṭaccīrūr*) on the slope of the high mountain?

As to this paraphrase, note that where Wilden opted for the participial noun *ūṭṭiṇa*, “they (the elephants, of which, however, there is only one here, *oruttal*) who feed”, found in the majority of sources (manuscripts and editions), I adopt the infinitive *ūṭṭiya*, transmitted in only one manuscript. In addition, as may be seen, I construe *varaṇ poruntu* in line 4 with *curaṇ iṇantōrē* in line 9. Wilden, however, links it with the immediately following *kuṇṇattu*, “hill”: “the summit of the hill approached by draught [sic]”, which is grammatically impossible. For *vēṭṭaccīrūr*, “small (*cīr(u)*) hunting (*vēṭṭa(m)*) village (*ūr*), see, for instance, *vēṭṭaccīrāar* in

Puṛaṇāṅgūru 326.8 and *vēṭṭakkuṭi*, id. 333.14. Instead, Wilden takes *vēṭṭa* as the past participle of *vēḷ-*, “to want”. For contrast’s sake, Wilden’s translation of the passage is provided below:

Won’t he remember, friend,
the one who traversed the desert of the killing elephant bulls
that return, after having been chased away by the bow,
with bits (of water) [*ūṭṭina*] for the ruddy-headed inexperienced
she-elephants with (their) calves to become full,
from the trough of sapphire water raised for the yielding herd
from the wide-eyed well in the desired small village
on the slope near the summit of the hill approached by draught [sic].

This leaves us with the *vaḷalai* passage (lines 1-3 of the original text):

tunaiyoṭu
vēṅil oṭip pāṭunaṭai vaḷalai
varimaral nukumpiṅ vāṭi avaṇa.

Before giving Wilden’s translation, it should be noted that for *maral* (*marāṅ* before the *n* of *nukumpiṅ*) “bowstring hemp, sanseveria”, she has *māṅ*, “animal”, reading the syllable *r(a)* as post-consonantal *ā*, which results in the following:

[on the slope near the summit of the hill,] the striped animals [*vari māṅ*] of that place [*avaṇa*] fading [*vāṭi*] like banana leaves [*nukumpiṅ*], the sleepy-gaited [*pāṭunaṭai*] serpent [*vaḷalai*], the chameleon in summer [*vēṅil oṭi*], with its mate.

The first point that would have merited an explanation is how this passage is to be construed with the one that follows. As I see it, *avaṇa*, “things which are there”, is to be linked to either the mountain slope (*kavāaṅ*) in the following sentence or else the desert (*curaṅ*) in line 9. “The things which are there” are contained in the phrase *tunaiyoṭu ... vāṭi*. Wilden, however, takes *vāṭi* as the absolutive of the verb *vāṭu-*, “to fade”, though this leaves the absolutive dangling, as it requires a following finite verb of some kind, which is not there. Its link with the verbs that follow, namely the absolutive *poruntu*, the participle *peyarum* or the past participial noun *iṛantōr*, is interrupted by *avaṇa*. Therefore, the only possible conclusion is

that *vāṭi* is not an absolute. Most likely, we have to do with the noun *vāṭi*, “garden, fenced place, field”, here, a field with the tender leaves (*nukumpu*) of the striped (*vari*) bowstring hemp (*maral*), a plant also known as sansevieria. *nukumpu* refers to any type of tender leaf: in *Kuṛuntokai* 308.1 that of the banana plant (*vālai*), in *Puranānūru* 249 that of the palmyra palm (*paṇai*), but in *Akanānūru* 283 the word means grass shoots (*puṇṇukumpu*). *pāṭunaṭai*, “sleepy gait” in Wilden’s translation, is not really a fitting description of the way snakes move; it is a much better description of how *ōti*, or chameleons, move: though these animals can, if necessary, move fast, by nature they are strikingly slow movers (see entry in [Wikipedia](#)) In this context it may therefore almost certainly be ruled out that *valalai* refers to any other animal than the chameleon, and the word may be taken to express what has happened to the tender bowstring hemp leaves under the influence of the chameleon’s *pāṭunaṭai*. Chameleons have sharp claws, as the pictures illustrate, so sharp in fact that people who intend to keep chameleons as pets are told to resist the temptation to trim these claws because the animals would lose the ability to climb. It is not difficult to imagine what these claws do to plants that have tender leaves: they pierce them, which thus causes the plant lose sap and may eventually die. Consequently, *valalai* may be interpreted as “fluid oozing from a wound”. As the scene of the poem under consideration is set in the summer, the plants are likely to lose the very last drop of liquid before shrivelling up completely. The above passage may then be translated as follows:

[On the slope near the summit of the hill] where are fields with striped bowstring hemp plants, the tender leaves (*nukumpu*) of which are oozing (losing the little fluid left) from wounds made when the summer chameleons together with their mates sleepily climb into them.³

Before discussing the “summer chameleon” (*vēṇil ōti*) in the above translation I want to go back to *valalaiccarppaviṣam* and *karuvalalaiccarppaviṣam* in *Cīvarakṣāmirtam* (pp. 452-3) to see if in these compounds we can fit in the meaning “fluid oozing from a wound”.⁴

³ For the meaning of *valalai* it does not really matter if we ignore *avana*. Taking *vāṭi* as an absolute we get: “the elephant/the woman’s husband, having dwindled like (or more than) the bowstring hemp plants, the tender leaves of which are oozing (losing the little fluid left) from wounds made when the summer chameleons together with their mates sleepily climb into them”.

⁴ The passages in question deal with the effects of snake bites and their cures. Oozing wounds are not mentioned among the effects, which for *valalaiccarppaviṣam* include giving up blood and having a burning mouth, and for *karuvalalaiccarppaviṣam* a high fever, excessive sweating, red soles and palms and a dry cough. Apart from that, oozing wounds do not tell us anything about the snakes, but only refer to the person bitten.

While there is as such no obvious connection between this meaning and a snake, it may be questioned if we could not be dealing with a snake and a black (*karu*) snake respectively here, which, like a snail, is covered by a slimy liquid produced by the skin or makes the impression of being covered by such matter. As such, *vaḷalai* might, as already suggested by the authors of the *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* in 4337, belong to same words as Tamil *vaḷukku*, “slimy substance, mucus as on fat or on new-born calf”, *vaḷumpu*, “id., fat suet”, *vaḷunīr*, “rheum of the eye”, Malayāḷam *vaḷukku*, “unctuous fat”, *vaḷuppu*, “glue, mucus” and Kannaḍa *bampu*, *bompu*, *bombalu*, “a slimy and sticky vegetable substance used as soap”. Whether the 4332 entry, *vaḷalai*, “ground snake” is to be maintained or not depends on the context, or contexts, in which the Malayāḷam cognate *vaḷala* is found, which I have unfortunately been unable to check.

To turn to the summer chameleons in the above passage, The combination *vēṇil*, “summer”, and *ōti*, “chameleon”, is also found in *Narriṇai* 186, the text of which, as reconstructed by Wilden (2008) reads as follows (with the Sandhi dissolved):

kal ūrr'ṭṇṭala kayan vāṅki
irum piṇar taṭam kai nīṭṭi nīr koṇṭu
perum kai yāṇai piṭi etir oṭum
kāṇam vempiya vaṇam kūr kaṭatt'itai
vēṇil oṭi nīram peyar mutu pōttu
pāṇ yāl kaṭaiya vāṅki pāṅkar
neṭu nilai yāam ērum toḷila
piṇakk'eṇa muyalum per'āḷ neṅcamoṭu
kāmar poruḷ piṇi pōkiya
nāṃ vēm kātalar ceṇṇra āṇē.

As in *Narriṇai* 92 discussed above, in this poem the woman speaking describes a parched landscape her husband is passing through in his attempt to make a living and support his family, and as in 92, in the first three lines she describes an elephant who collects water with his trunk to slake the thirst of his mate. The passage which needs a more detailed discussion is the following:

vēṇil oṭi nīram peyar mutu pōttu

pāṇ yāl̥ kaṭaiya vāṅki pāṅkar
neṭu nilai yāam ērum toḷila

..... *kātalar cenra āre*.

Wilden's (2008) translation runs as follows:

[T]he paths taken by the lover [*kātalar cenra āre*] are full of toil [*toḷila*], where the colour-changing [*niṛam peyar*] old male [*mutu pōttu*] of the chameleon in summer [*vēṇil oti*] ascends [*ērum*] the Yām tree with broad base [*neṭu nilai yāam*] nearby [*pāṅkar*], greedily [*kaṭaiya*] taking in the melodious lute [*pāṇ yāl̥ kaṭaiya vāṅki*].

The unlikely translation of *pāṇ yāl̥ kaṭaiya vāṅki* as a chameleon climbing in the Yām tree while listening to lute music, suggests that Wilden had difficulty interpreting the text. To provide a more satisfactory translation, it is worthwhile to consider some variant readings for this passage, brought together in Wilden's edition of the text, such as the following one: *pāṇ yāl̥ kaṭaiyiṇ oṅki*, “(the chameleon climbs) higher (*oṅki*) than the neck (*kaṭaiyiṇ*) of the bards' lutes (*pāṇ yāl̥*)”.⁵ In other words, the chameleon climbs into the Yām tree to stay out of reach of the long neck of the lute with which an attempt it made to capture him: like lizards,⁶ chameleons are eaten and the passage suggests that bards passing through the desert beat them out of the trees by using the neck of their lutes. The fact that they use their lutes for this purpose only shows how desperate they are for food.

As for *vēṇil oti* we have already seen that in both instances Wilden treats it as a phrase meaning something like “in the summer, the chameleon”. Instead, however, we seem to have to do with a compound of sorts, describing a chameleon in its summer garb. The point may be that during the hot season chameleons have a lighter colour to reflect the sunshine and prevent overheating (see entry in [Wikipedia](#)). The passage may then be translated as follows:

The path, on the side of which (*pāṅkar*) the old male chameleon, which changes colour assuming his summer garb, climbs (*ērum*) with difficulty (*toḷila*) into the wide Yām tree, going higher than the neck of the bards' lutes.

⁵ For a comparative *kaṭaiyiṇ*, see Rajam (1992: 916).

⁶ For lizards being eaten, see Tieken 2021.

Finally, a brief note on *ōti*, “chameleon”. The *Tamil Lexicon*, s.v. *ōti* (p. 623), refers to *ōtti* (p. 622), treating both words as deriving from *ōnti* (p. 624), a form which is apparently only attested in the *Piṅkalanikaṅṭu*, a traditional dictionary. On p. 622 the *Tamil Lexicon* also mentions *ōṇāṇ* (source: *Tamiḷ Nāvalar Caritai*, a late, possibly eighteenth-century history of Tamil literature), which is also found in the compounds *kāṭṭōṇāṇ*, *paccōṇāṇ*, etc. (source: Fabricius’ dictionary) and *ōṇāṇkutti* and *°kotti* (source: Winslow’s dictionary) and on p. 625 *ōmāṇ* (source: the *Tivākaram*, a traditional dictionary; for *ōmāṇ* Fabricius refers to *ōnti*). We may in fact distinguish two sets of words here, the first comprising *ōti/ōtti/ōnti*, of which at least one, namely *ōti*, is attested in a literary text, and the second group *ōṇāṇ* and *ōmāṇ*, of which only the first one is found in literary texts. For all we know, *ōmāṇ* may have been a textual corruption, which as such had come to be entered into the *Tivākaram* as a rare word in need of a meaning.⁷ Note also that of *ōṇāṇ* and *ōmāṇ* only the former has a possible cognate in another language, namely in Malto *qése-ōnu*, “bloodsucker” (*Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*, entry no. 887). If the details of the relationships between *ōti*, *ōtti* and *ōnti* are unclear, this is even more so for the relationship between *ōti/ōtti/ōnti* and *ōṇāṇ*.

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Source: Wiki Commons

Becker 1999, Grove City, OH



⁷ In this respect the traditional Tamil dictionaries will not have differed from their Prākṛit counterparts. For the latter dictionaries, see Tieken (1992)

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