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## Cruel Substances On “Binding” and “Killing” in the Tamil Siddha Alchemical Texts\*

ABSTRACT: In the paper, I examine the concept of “cruelty” (*kaṭumai*) of physical substances in the Tamil siddha alchemical literature, by taking as the starting point an analysis of the selected texts ascribed to Siddhar Yākōpu alias Rāmatēvar (ca. 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> c.), a prominent author of the Tamil siddha alchemical tradition. The alchemical works of Yākōpu repeatedly describe certain alchemical operations, the names of which allude to acts of violence, such as “binding” (*kaṭṭutal*) and “killing” (*kollutal*). Such operations, according to the texts, should be mastered and performed by alchemists on various material substances. In the paper, I analyze passages that shed light on the purpose and character of such operations in the alchemical tradition of the Siddhars. I also address the issue of the non-human material agency related to the perspective of material ecocriticism as presented in the Tamil siddha texts.

KEYWORDS: siddha tradition, Tamil literature, alchemy, Siddhar Yākōpu, matter

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## Introduction

In this paper, I will examine the concept of “cruelty” (*kaṭumai*<sup>1</sup>) ascribed to physical substances in the Tamil siddha alchemical literature. I am taking as the starting point an analysis of selected texts ascribed mostly to siddhar Yākōpu alias Rāmatēvar, the author dated tentatively to 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> c., famous for his travels to Mecca in search of alchemical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Yākōpu is one of the prominent figures in the tradition of the Tamil Siddhars,<sup>3</sup> and he is credited with more than seventeen works on traditional medicine, alchemy, yoga, religious practices, etc. His works are still highly valued today among traditional siddha practitioners in Tamil Nadu, and used in their medical practice. In this paper I will concentrate on the selected alchemical works of the Siddhar, namely *Cuṇṇakkāṇṭam ārunūru* (*Six Hundred [Verses] on [Alchemical] Powders*, hereafter abbreviated as CuṇKāṇ), *Cuṇṇam muṇṇūru* (*Three Hundred [Verses] on [Alchemical] Powders*, hereafter abbreviated as CuṇMuṇ), *Kurunūl aimpattaintu* (*Fifty five [Verses] of the Book on Kuru*<sup>4</sup>, hereafter abbreviated as KuNū), *Lōkacentūram*

<sup>1</sup> The noun *kaṭumai* means also: “severity,” “strictness,” “ferocity,” “rapidity,” “speed,” “tenacity,” “roughness,” “excessiveness,” “intensity,” “anger,” “heat,” “strength,” “sturdiness” (see *kaṭumai* in Tamil Lexicon (1924–1936)). I translate it as “cruelty” because, as will be shown further in this paper, the substances in the texts are indeed presented as cruel and violent.

<sup>2</sup> On the figure of the Siddhar Yākōpu and autobiographical passages from his works, see Natarajan 2004, Kędzia 2016. For references to the travels to Mecca in Yākōpu’s texts, see e.g., CuṇKāṇ 287, 379, CuṇMuṇ 151–152, VāVait 65. According to the autobiographical accounts, the Siddhar, first called Rāmatēvar, lived in South India in the region of Nagapattinam. Later, during his journey to Mecca, he converted to Islam and adopted a Muslim name, i.e., Yākōpu.

<sup>3</sup> The Sanskrit term *siddha* literally means “perfected,” “accomplished,” “one who has attained supernatural powers (*siddhi*).” It refers to members of several groups found in India, in different historical periods, particularly after the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, who share common set of beliefs and practices aimed at achieving immortality and perfection. The tradition of the Tamil Siddhars is one of the streams of the pan-Indian siddha tradition (see e.g., White 1996: 2, Sieler 2022, Little 2003: 14).

<sup>4</sup> *Kuru* is the name of an alchemical substance. See below.

*munñūru* (Three Hundred [Verses] on the Metallic Centūram<sup>5</sup> Preparations, hereafter abbreviated as ‘LōCen’), and *Taṇṭakam nūrrupattu* (One Hundred and Ten [Verses] of the Helping Stick, hereafter abbreviated as TaṇNūr).

The alchemical works of Yākōpu repeatedly describe certain alchemical operations, the names of which allude to the acts of violence, namely “binding” (*kaṭṭutal*<sup>6</sup>) and “killing” (*kollutal*). Such operations, according to the texts, should be mastered and performed by alchemists on various material substances, such as mercury, lead, iron salt, etc. In the paper, I will explore passages that shed light on their purpose and character, as well as the verses on the substances that are seen as important agents of such operations in the alchemical tradition of the Siddhars. Studying the concept of the cruelty of the materials that are able to bind and kill other substances, I will also address the issue of the non-human material agency and creativity of matter related to the perspective of material ecocriticism.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The term *centūram* in the Tamil siddha alchemy refers to the class of preparations in the form of fine red powder produced during calcination. On the types of *centūrams*, see *centūram* in Sambasivam Pillai 1931–1994, v. 3. Cf. Subbarayappa 1997: 1844.

<sup>6</sup> The verb *kaṭṭu* means also f. ex. “to build, construct, fix, erect,” “to support, sustain,” “to harden, condense, coagulate” (see *kaṭṭu* in *Tamil Lexicon* (1924–1936)).

<sup>7</sup> Material ecocriticism reconsiders ideas such as agency, creativity, narrativity, etc., extending them to the physical world of the nonhuman matter, and therefore challenging the anthropocentric notions. This approach emphasizes the variety of the material agencies which interplay with humans; as Oppermann (2013: 64) puts it, “we dwell in a world crisscrossed by nonhuman agencies, which combine and collide with the agentic field of our species.” In the Tamil siddha alchemical texts, the agency of matter is manifested, e.g., in the descriptions of the alchemical processes in which certain substances “kill” and “bind” other materials. As I will show, the texts anthropomorphize and even divinize some alchemical substances, crediting them with extraordinary agentive, creative, or destructive powers (see below). On the perspective of the material ecocriticism, see e.g., Iovino 2012, Iovino and Oppermann 2012a, 2012b, 2014, Sörmus 2016; on the concept of material agency, see also e.g., Barad 2007.

## Binding

The texts of Yākōpu present the formulae for operations of binding (*kaṭṭu*) of various substances, such as lead (*nākak kaṭṭu*, e.g., LōCen 84), orpiment (*tālakak kaṭṭu*, e.g., CuṇMuṇ 106), borax (*veṅkarak kaṭṭu*, e.g.), etc. However, there are two kinds of binding which are credited with special status especially in Yākōpu's book CuṇKāṇ, namely the binding of salt (*uppuk kaṭṭu*), and the binding of mercury (*racak kaṭṭu*). Binding of salt is presented in the text (CuṇKāṇ 121–126) as a long procedure, performed on the common sea salt. The salt is first ground in the mortar with lemon juice for three days and left to dry in the sun. Then, the previously prepared substance called *cavukkāram*, which is presented as an important catalyst,<sup>8</sup> and two mercurial compounds, namely calomel (*vīram*) and corrosive sublimate (*pūram*), are mixed with acidic liquid containing saltpetre. Next, this preparation is ground with salt and the mixture is left to dry. Then the same amount of salt and lime are joined together, and they are used for coating the vessel containing previously prepared salt mixture. The vessel is left to dry in hot sun. Next, the obtained preparation is put in a separate vessel, between two layers of the lime of seashells. The alchemist praises Allah, and the preparation is heated in an oven. As a result, the bound salt is created.

The text calls the bound salt the “wealth” or the “cause” (*ētu*, CuṇKāṇ 121), which suggests that the substance is credited with special alchemical powers, enabling a Siddha alchemist to create gold, and causative potency, related to catalysing the production of other important preparations. CuṇKāṇ 366–374 provides a recipe for the object called the wand of salt (*uppu kēṭai*) which is prepared with the bound salt as the main ingredient. The wand is described as a mysterious item, composed of four plates, each of which is of different colour and made of the bound salt mixed with one of the four substances, namely sulphur (yellow plate), orpiment (red plate), vitriol (blue plate) and corrosive sublimate (white plate). An alchemist uses the wand during the pilgrimage to Mecca. During the travel, a pilgrim

<sup>8</sup> On *cavukkāram* see below.

takes, one by one, a little bit of each of the four plates of the wand and in the local blacksmiths’ houses on his way to Mecca he easily creates fine gold to use for the living expenses during the travel. The bound salt is therefore presented as a wonderful and powerful tool provided with creative powers, which enables siddha practitioners to produce gold anytime needed.

The bound salt is compared to a diamond three times in one stanza (CuṅKāṇ 125). The text describes it in the following manner:

In an excellent way, [the bound salt] **will harden like a diamond**. In abundance, it will produce thousands of alchemical preparations. It will **become like a valuable diamond**, [in regard to its colour] it will become like a pearl. Certainly, it will become **like a diamond jewel**, look!<sup>9</sup>

The triple repetition of the comparison to a diamond emphasizes that the bound salt, similarly to the hardest mineral, becomes impenetrable and fixed. This also implies that binding is understood in the Siddhars’ texts as an operation of rendering substances solid, hard and resistant to changes. The naming of the operation (*kaṭṭu*, “binding”) further suggests that the substance subjected to the procedure becomes fully controllable and is prevented from spontaneous transformations, e.g., during heating. Additionally, the passage quoted above again highlights creativity ascribed to the bound salt, which can produce a substantial number of alchemical preparations.

It is also noteworthy that similar comparisons to a diamond appear as well in the context of the descriptions of the fulfilled alchemists, who have achieved immortality, for example, through the intake of the special panacea drug,<sup>10</sup> e.g.:

<sup>9</sup> *kuṇamāka vayirampō liṟukinīrkum*  
*koḷḷaiyitil vātamatu kōṭikkokkum*  
*taṇamāṇa vayirampōl muttuppōlām*  
*tāttikamāy vayiramaṇi pōlāmpāru* (CuṅKāṇ 125). Emphasis added. All translations are mine.

<sup>10</sup> The passage refers to the intake of the “herbal panacea” (*mūli kaṟṟam*), prepared with *āvārai* (*Cassia auriculata* L., see *āvārai* in Pandanus Database of

If you eat this panacea for the period of 40 days, the body will be strong and become like a diamond. All the celestials have eaten this panacea before [and] their bodies became indestructible.<sup>11</sup>

The above quoted passage suggests that the comparison to a diamond in the context of the bound salt implies also the indestructibility and strength of the material, as well as its permanence. Comparisons similar to those that appear in the two translated passages suggest that the salt and an alchemist undergo alchemical processes, which lead to the common goal, i.e. to become imperishable, firm and perfected.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the bound salt is depicted in the text as a secret preparation. Yākōpu states that the material is not described in many texts. The author also reports that because he reveals the secrets of the bound salt in his books, the other Siddhars became angry with him (CuṅKāṅ 121). Such presentation of the preparation also suggests that it is seen in the Tamil siddha tradition as a very valuable and powerful substance.

Immensely important for the Tamil Siddhars is the operation of binding of mercury, which results in creation of the mercurial jewel (*raca maṇi*). As indicated several times in CuṅKāṅ (e.g., CuṅKāṅ 361, 404, 427), binding of mercury is one of the essential alchemical operations which an alchemist should master. It aims at rendering the liquid metal solid and hard. The texts of Yākōpu provide several recipes for the binding (e.g., CuṅKāṅ 428, 471, see Kędzia 2017: 133). According to the contemporary siddha practitioners, the jewel is worn on the neck, and is credited with powers that enhance meditational yogic practices.

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Indian Plants (1998–2009), *civaṅvēm̐pu* (wiry indigo, see *civaṅār̥vēm̐pu* in *Tamil Lexicon* (1924–1936), and *vēṅkai* (*Pterocarpus marsupium* Roxb., see *vēṅkai* in *Pandanus Database of Indian Plants* (1998–2009), mixed with *muppu* (i.e., the mysterious catalytic substance, sometimes identified with *cavukkāram* (see below); see also *muppu* in *Sambasivam Pillai 1931–1994*, Vol. 5).

<sup>11</sup> *maṅṭalam iḱkaṅpam koṅṭāyāṅāl*  
*vayirampōṅ rēkamatu valuttuppōkum*  
*aṅṭarellāṅ koṅṭakaṅpa mitutāṅmuppu*  
*aḷityāta tēkattō ṅirukkalāccu* (KuNū 21)

<sup>12</sup> The theme of the adamantine body as a result of yogic practices appears also in the Sanskrit yogic literature. See Ondracka 2015.

It rubs into the skin, and it is believed to render the body imperishable, ever youthful, and prosperous.<sup>13</sup> According to CuṅMuṅ 66, the jewel enables one to achieve liberation as well as supernatural powers associated with yoga (*citti*)<sup>14</sup> and material wealth:

Look, [with the mercurial jewel] everything that comes to [your] mind will be within [your] reach! There will be salvation, there will be wealth, and there will be supernatural powers.<sup>15</sup>

Binding of mercury allows an alchemist to prepare the magical mercurial pill (*kuḷikai*), which endows a person with an ability to fly (see e.g., CuṅKāṅ 287; CuṅMuṅ 154). Binding is presented as an operation that makes it possible to tame mercury, which otherwise is depicted as a swift, elusive, and unpredictable metal. For example, the passage CuṅMuṅ 153–156 refers to Yākōpu’s fabulous pursuit of mercury which has escaped from the well of mercury (*racakkiṅaru*) located near Mecca when the Siddhar was trying to collect it; mercury runs away and the Siddhar must chase it beyond the boundries of the universe:<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication from Arumugam Sugumaran, collector of the Tamil siddha manuscripts and founder of the *Tamil Siddhars Heritage and Traditional Knowledge Research Foundation* and *Tamil Siddhars Manuscript Research Foundation*, Auroville 2018.

<sup>14</sup> *Citti* is a tamilized version of the Sanskrit noun *siddhi* (literally “accomplishment,” “fulfilment,” “personal success,” “perfection,” “supernatural power”), which in yogic traditions refers to extraordinary powers acquired through yogic practices. Jacobsen 2012 attests to the wide spread of the concept of the yogic powers in traditions related to various religions also beyond India. On the *siddhi* powers in the Sanskrit yogic literature, see Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 358–394. On the concept of the extraordinary powers in the Sanskrit medical texts in the context of the life-prolonging elixirs (*rasāyana*), see Wujastyk 2021.

<sup>15</sup> *kaṅṅukolḷu niṅaiattatellāṅ kaiyirḱūṭum katiyākum viṅiyākuṅ cittiyaikum* (CuṅMuṅ 66)

According to Siddhar Pōkar the mercurial jewel bestows immortal life: “There is no death for the one who has bound the semen of Śiva [i.e. mercury].” (... *civaviṅṅaiḱ kaṅṅi nōrḱku / orukālum cāvillai uṅmai tāṅē* (PōKaṅVi 60).

<sup>16</sup> The theme of the well of mercury is present also in the literature from beyond the Tamil siddha tradition. See White 1997.

At the time of chasing the respectable mercury, immediately I flew to the higher universe. Without dispute, I caught the mercury and according to the method, I took it in an excellent way to the land of Mecca. With the prophets (*napimār*)<sup>17</sup> I added [to it] the powder of blue vitriol (*turucucuṇṇam*) in an equal measure, and truthfully, I have bound the mercury. I have obtained two fixed mercurial pills (*kuḷikai*).<sup>18</sup>

As evident in the presented examples, binding is thus an alchemical operation that aims at rendering substances fixed, stable, and controllable. Certain bound materials are used to prepare items credited with some fantastic features, such as e.g., the wand of salt, the mercurial jewel, or the mercurial pill.

Certain substances in the Tamil siddha alchemical tradition are credited with extraordinary capabilities of binding other substances. The Yākōpu's texts present a special substance called *cavukkāram* as a very important binding agent. *Cavukkāram* is a processed mixture of three main mineral ingredients.<sup>19</sup> The first, and the most important one, is described as a salty efflorescence, called *pūnīru*, which appears in special spatiotemporal conditions. It can be found on the sites of a salty ground during the three months of the Tamil calendar, i.e., *paṅkuni* (mid-March to mid-April), *cittirai* (mid-April to mid-May), and

<sup>17</sup> In the literature of Yākōpu, the alchemical masters are often referred to as “prophets” (*napi*), which is related to the Siddhar's travels to Mecca, where the local Muslim alchemists taught him the alchemical knowledge. The term *napi* is the Tamil form of the Arabic *nabī*, the term that refers to the Islamic prophets, including Jesus and Muhammad, who according to the Quran have been sent by God to all the people. See *nabi* in Bowker 2003 and *nabī* in Esposito 2003.

<sup>18</sup> *pōtumē cūtamatu turattumpōtu*  
*tuṭiyāka mēlaṅṅam paṅantupōṅṅē*  
*vātumē ceyyāmal cūtantanṅṅai*  
*vakaiyāka yeṭuttumē makkātēcam*  
*cātuvāy vantuvīṭṭēṅ napimārōṭē*  
*cariyāṅa turucucuṇṇam vaittuṅṅum*  
*nūtiyāy cūtattaik kaṭṭināṅum*  
*nilaiyāna kuḷikaireṅṅu ceṅṅṅēṅē* (CuṅMuṅ 155).

<sup>19</sup> For the recipes for *cavukkāram* in CuṅKāṅ see Kędzia 2022.



*vaikāci* (mid-May to mid-June),<sup>20</sup> at dawn or dusk. Two other ingredients for *cavukkāram* are: lime (*kaṛcuṇṇam*, *cuṇṇāmpu*) and saltpetre (*veṭiyuppu*) or rock-salt (*kalluppu*), described as salt rising out of the sea (CuṇKāṇ 287).

*Cavukkāram* is depicted as an essential material that enables a successful operation of binding. Yākōpu, in order to emphasize binding powers of *cavukkāram*, compares the operation of binding without the use of this substance to making a broom:

Come and watch! Without *cavukkāram*, the binding will be [nothing more than] the binding of a huge broom! (...) Even if you are successful, without the salt [i.e., *cavukkāram*] the binding of any [substance] will be [nothing more] than the binding of a broom, learn this truth!<sup>21</sup>

Brooms, not sophisticated items in themselves, are typically manufactured in Tamil Nadu by taking dry coconut leaves and simply binding them together with a string; as a result, they are not particularly solid or durable. Therefore, a failed alchemical operation unsuccessful due to the absence of the *cavukkāram*, is highlighted in the verse by comparing it to the unrefined act of fashioning a makeshift, impermanent broom. The passage, with the use of the negative picture of the flimsy object in the comparison, emphasizes the main goal of binding, which is the creation of hard, strong and solid material.

## Killing

Another important alchemical operation described in the Tamil siddha texts is the killing (*kollutal*) of various substances, such as metals and minerals. In the alchemical Tamil siddha literature, killing refers to the

<sup>20</sup> See e.g., CuṇKāṇ 10, 325, 386.

<sup>21</sup> *tōyntupār cavukkāra millākkattu*  
*corperiya vārukōr kaṭṭumākum*  
(...) *vāyntumē uppillāk kaṭṭuvellām*  
*vārukōl kaṭṭākum vaṇmaipāru* (CuṇKāṇ 70. Cf. Kędzia 2022: 74).

operation of reducing substances to the form of fine powder, during calcination of the previously prepared mixtures of metals, minerals and herbal juices, with the use of earthen capsules heated in fire. Substances subjected to this operation “die” (*cākum*, CuṅKāṅ 571), which probably refers to complete transformation of their previous material appearance and qualities. The killed substances, in an amorphous form of incinerated powder, are, according to the beliefs of the Siddhars, a more powerful and digestible version of the metals and materials. The siddha literature often speaks of the killed substances as *cuṅṅams* or *cuṅṅams* (“powders”). Siddha practitioners claim that such calcined materials, which are often prepared with metals or toxic minerals, are edible and devoid of any toxic properties. They are employed also nowadays in the siddha medicine for internal use (e.g., *veṭṭiyuppu cuṅṅam*, see *Citta maruntukaḷiṅ ceymurai* 2013: 207). The calcined powders, being the result of the “killing,” are, in the Tamil siddha literature, an object of comparison for fulfilled yogis, as, similarly to the successful yoga practitioners with firm body and mind, incinerated substances are not subjected to transformations, such as decay:

The perfect prophets (*napimārkaḷ*)<sup>22</sup> experienced the alchemy. In order to achieve perfection, **they attained the quality of the [alchemical] powder (*cuṅṅam*)**. The yogis understood the body and achieved firmness. They achieved the perfection of the great ones who saw [many] eons [i.e., the immortal Siddhars].<sup>23</sup>

The comparison in the above quoted passage suggests that the killed materials are resistant to changes caused by the passage of time;

<sup>22</sup> Although, as already mentioned, the term *napi* refers to the Muslim prophets, it is evident in the texts of Yākōpu that the appellation *napi* is used not only in the reference to the Arabic alchemists, but also other fulfilled siddha alchemists and yogis.

<sup>23</sup> *pākattōr napimārkaḷ vāraṅkaṅṭōr*  
*pakkuvamāyc cuṅṅameṅra patamuṅṅōrkaḷ*  
*yōkattōr karuvaṅtōr uṅṅipeṅṅōr*  
*yūkankaṅṭa pērkaḷuṅṅa pātampeṅṅōr* (CuṅMuṅ 160). Emphasis added.

in other words, they cannot be further transformed. As such, they are seen as perfected, just as the fulfilled yogis.

Similarly, as in the context of the alchemical binding, the texts present certain materials as essential for effecting the killing on other substances. A remarkable example of such killing material is the already mentioned *cavukkāram* that underwent proper processing. According to Yākōpu, *cavukkāram* kills all substances, for example cinnabar, orpiment, realgar, or sulphur. The Siddhar describes its incinerating (i.e., killing) capabilities, for example, in the following verse:

Look, *cavukkāra vaḷalai*<sup>24</sup> came into being. In its presence, all substances turn into ashes. Look and understand, in a moment all the metals turn into ashes. In contact [with] a little bit [of it], copper immediately turns into ashes. (...) Like the Sun, this powder is the [embodiment of] power for the people of the Earth.<sup>25</sup>

Another substance presented as an especially effective agent of killing is *kuru*<sup>26</sup>. TaṅNūṟ 59 provides a recipe for this preparation, which is produced with *muppu*, i.e., the secret catalyst sometimes identified with the already mentioned *cavukkāram*.<sup>27</sup> *Kuru* is a result of incineration of *muppu* mixed with herbal and metallic ingredients during

<sup>24</sup> *vaḷalai* is a synonym of *cavukkāram* (see CuṅKāṇ 78, which provides also other secret names of *cavukkāram*). Both synonymous names of the substance appear in the same verse probably to maintain the metrical pattern.

<sup>25</sup> *parintupār cavukkāra vaḷalaiyāccu*  
*paṭumunṇē carakkellām nīrippōkum*  
*arintupār lōkamellā muṭaṅṇērūm*  
*aṇuvaḷavu toṭṭavuṭaṅ cempunīrum*  
(...) *pakalavaṅpōr patiyākum pārilōrkkuc*  
(...) *iccuṇṇan tiramatākum* (CuṅKāṇ 90)

<sup>26</sup> The name of this substance is an ambiguous term, as *kuru* denotes “brilliance,” “lustre,” “excellence,” “guru,” “heaviness” etc. See *kuru* in Tamil Lexicon (1924–1936).

<sup>27</sup> TaṅNūṟ 55-56 presents this substance as a mysterious material, stating enigmatically that it is identified with the universe (*aṅṭam*), and endowed with amazing all-controlling power, to which the whole world is subservient.

heating in clay capsules placed in the fire.<sup>28</sup> The text emphasizes its ability to kill other substances:

Come close, dear, *kuru* will appear after incineration [of the previously mentioned ingredients]. Indeed, it will kill all substances that [you can] think of. Dear, *kuru* by its grace will kill sixty-four great ones<sup>29</sup>. As soon as you see it, be cautious!<sup>30</sup>

The text depicts the substance as an aggressive agent of killing of all the imaginable substances, which highlights its extraordinary alchemical activity. The passage describes *kuru* as an active agent of the alchemical operation, rather than a passive material. At the same time, *kuru* is presented as an item dangerous also for humans, as an alchemist is warned to stay alert immediately after the substance appears in the production process. This indicates that it has influence not only on lifeless matter, but living beings as well.

## Cruelty

Ability of the substances to kill and to bind other materials is viewed as very desirable by the Siddhars. Substances which are capable of causing a transformation, such as binding and killing, on other alchemical ingredients, are described as cruel in the siddha literature. Their cruelty (*koṭumai*) is presented in the alchemical literature as a quality that an alchemist should strive to increase. For example, in one of the recipes for *cavukkāram* Yākōpu describes special procedure, which enhances the cruelty of this material. The text depicts the production of *cavukkāram* with the use of a special kind of white rock, which

<sup>28</sup> Cf. KuNū, which also provides a recipe for *kuru*.

<sup>29</sup> The text probably refers to sixty-four poisons. See below, footnote 35.

<sup>30</sup> *nērappā nīriyatu kuruvumākum*  
*niṇaittacarak kellāntāṇ kolluntāṇē* (TaṇNūr 59)  
*kollumappā arupattu nālupeṛaik*  
*kuruvuruḷār kaṇṭavuṭaṇ pataṇpaṇṇu* (TaṇNūr 60)

needs to be dug out from the brackish earth that generates salty efflorescence (i.e., the already mentioned *pūnīru*):

Listen to the procedure. After dissolving [the *cavukkāram* components] in water, place the stone [in the prepared liquid], so that [the liquid] consumes it. Keep it [in the liquid] for three days. If you boil it until it is bubbling in order to achieve cruelty, the white stone coagulates, to make you successful. Look, it will become the great *vētāntakkal* [i.e., the stone of Vedanta]<sup>31</sup>

The text suggests that attaining cruelty is related to attaining special powers by the substance because the stone, being the effect of the operation that boosts cruelty of *cavukkāram* as indicated by its name, is presented as a mysterious item, related to sacred knowledge.<sup>32</sup> The final product of the operation, i.e. *cavukkāram*, is called in the following passages “the cruel one that stays in the poison” (*nañcil niṅra koṭiyōṅ*). The cruelty is therefore presented as a crucial quality of *cavukkāram*.

This kind of cruel substances are in the Tamil siddha tradition indeed described as fierce, enraged and dangerous as they are compared e.g., to a tiger (e.g., CuṅKāṅ 50, 56, 181<sup>33</sup>), or even more evocatively, to

<sup>31</sup> (...) *karaittapinpu nāṭṭaṅkēlu*  
*kallavē kallīṭṭut tirināḷvaittuk*  
*kaṭumaiperak kumuṟavē kāycciṭṭākkā*  
*vellavē veḷḷaikkal kaṭṭippōkum*

*vētāntak kallākum viḷaṅkipparē* (CuṅKāṅ 27). See Kędzia 2022.

<sup>32</sup> It is called the “stone of Vedanta,” i.e., “the conclusion of the Vedas.”

<sup>33</sup> In the verse CuṅKāṅ 181, the cruel alchemical powder (*kaṭuñcuṅṅam*) is compared to the tiger, whereas the substance subjected to its action or mercury, is presented as a goat. The binding of the metal is dramatically depicted through the employment of the simile of a frightened goat frozen in its tracks when faced with a tiger:

“[The powder] will become like a young tiger, mercury will become like a mature goat frozen in fear to protect [itself]. It will become a bead [i.e., it will be bound in the form of the mercurial jewel].” (*ciṅṅameṅra vēṅkaipōlām / kaṇivāna āṭupōl kalaṅkiniṅkum/ pāṭiṭavē cūtamatu uṅṭaiyākum*, CuṅKāṅ 181).

the Death personified. For example, Yākōpu describes preparation with *cavukkāram* in the following manner:

[As a result of the previously described operation] the enraged [*cavukkāram*] powder will appear. If you take it with [your] hand, the hand will [be] ripped apart. Do not go astray! If it [i.e., the *cavukkāram* powder] falls on the body, [the body] will tear apart. [This is] *cavukkāram*. This powder is equal to Namaṇ (i.e., the Death).<sup>34</sup>

In another passage Yākōpu presents the preparation with *cavukkāram* as a ruthless killer, as “it will kill (...) all substances without [any] quivering” (*carakkellām (...) pataiyāmal kollum*, CuṅKāṇ 253). Yet another passage (CuṅKāṇ 27) highlights the cruelty, strength and fiery nature of *cavukkāram*, connecting cruelty with killing and binding. The passage refers to the calcined preparation with *cavukkāram* that has been previously described in the text:

[The previously described preparation with *cavukkāram*] will become a powder. (...) [Its] causticity will rise and rise, in order to increase [its] strength in all branches [of alchemy, medicine, etc.]. [It] will become the cruel one for all the branches [of alchemy, medicine, etc.] (...). Look, it will become a fiery and strong one! In it, substances of [various] classes will become bound. (...) All the sixty-four [poisons]<sup>35</sup> will die (...). Indeed, rock salt will die in it. Friendly sal ammoniac will become bound. After becoming bound, corrosive sublimate will become like a jewel. Calomel

<sup>34</sup> (...) *kaṭuṅcuṇṇa mākuṅkaiyil*  
*tāṇṇuttāl kaiyatuvum virintupōkum*  
*ēṅkiyē tiriyāṭe caṭattipattāl*  
*itamāka virintuviṭum cavukkārantāṇ*  
*pāṅkiyēyic cuṅṇamatu namaṇōṭoppām* (CuṅKāṇ 89)

<sup>35</sup> Tamil siddha alchemy traditionally recognizes sixty-four poisons (*pāṣāṇam*), such as arsenic and arsenical preparations. The poisons are used in the siddha alchemy and medicine, after proper processing. The poisons are divided into two main subgroups, i.e. native poisons (32 kinds) and prepared poisons (32 kinds). The list of all sixty four poisons is provided by Sambasivam Pillai (see *pāṣāṇam* in Sambasivam Pillai 1931–1994, v. 5), cf. Thiagarajan 2008: 11–16.

will be calcined. (...) All the minerals will be well calcined. (...) All the supernatural powers will occur.<sup>36</sup>

The text emphasizes untamed nature of *cavukkāram*, which is presented as a powerful agent of alchemical transformations of other materials. It is depicted as a dangerous entity, but also as a source of the supernatural powers (*citti*) which the siddha practitioners aim to attain.

It is noteworthy that the operations called killing (Skt. *māraṇa*) and binding (Skt. *bandhana*) are also described in the Sanskrit alchemical literature (see White 1996: 265). Binding in the Sanskrit texts also refers to the operation aimed at stabilization of mercury, which otherwise remains volatile and not resistant to heating (cf. *Rasaratna-samuccaya* 11.60, quoted by Chandra Murthy 2013: 159). The twenty-five or twenty-six alchemical bonds (Skt. *bandha*), i.e., the effects of the binding of mercury, have also medical applications (see e.g., Angadi 2014: 119–128, cf. Chandra Murthy 2013: 160–161). Killing in the Sanskrit alchemical texts refers to the operation of reducing metals or minerals to fine ashes (*bhasma*), by subjecting them to various procedures with the use of herbal preparations and then heating them (Angadi 2014: 24). Killed mercury is credited with rejuvenating properties and amazing abilities of transmutation (see Chandra Murthy 2013: 164, White 1996: 267). Although the sixteen or eighteen

<sup>36</sup> *cuṅṅamān tuṛaikkellān kāramērrat*  
 (...) *kaṭuṅkāra mērumērum*  
 (...) *tuṛaikkellān katūramākum*  
*kaṇalāṇa tīravukō lākumpāru*  
*vaṅṅamāñ carakkukaḷitāñ kaṭṭippōkum*  
 (...) *aṛupattu ṅāluñcākum*  
 (...) *kalluppu itilē cākum*  
*taṅṅatāṅa navaccārañ kaṭṭippōmē* (CuṅKāñ 27)  
*kaṭṭiyē vīramatu maṅṅipōlāṭum*  
*kaṭitāṅa pūramatu cuṅṅamākum*  
 (...) *nalamākat tātuvellāñ cuṅṅamākum*  
 (...) *kuṅṅamāka cakalamuntāñ cittiyāmē* (CuṅKāñ 28)

perfecting operations (*samskāra*) performed on mercury<sup>37</sup>, described in the Sanskrit texts, do not appear in the Tamil siddha alchemical literature that I have consulted, the similarities between the concepts of killing and binding in the two alchemical traditions suggests certain influences between them, which are yet to be explored.

As shown in the selected passages that I have presented above, the discourse on binding and killing in the Tamil siddha alchemical texts presents the cruel substances as agentive and powerful. For example, *cavukkāram*, which is an important representative of such materials, is imaged as a substance endowed with extraordinary transformative qualities that enable the performance of alchemy and achievement of the alchemical goals. Furthermore, Yākōpu in his text worships the substance alongside God (Allah) and the prophet Muhammad (CuṅKāṅ 380):

Worship and praise Allah, entirely worship and praise the salt [i.e., *cavukkāram*]! As in lamentation, raise [your] voice! Worship and praise Muhammad, having fallen to his feet! Without hiding, prostrate and worship *cavukkāram* in a proper way!<sup>38</sup>

The above quoted passage suggests that the material is divinized, and its powers are comparable to the divine creative potency. Similar comparison occurs also in another verse, referring to the production of the

<sup>37</sup> For the description of all the alchemical *samskāras* in the Sanskrit alchemical literature, see e.g., White 1996: 265–269. Contemporary attempts to reconstruct perfecting alchemical operations described in the Sanskrit alchemical text have been documented and published on the YouTube channel of the Ayuryog project, led by Dagmar Wujastyk. See the Ayuryog YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4ssviEb\\_KoAtb2U\\_XaXf\\_w?app=desktop&ucbcb=1](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4ssviEb_KoAtb2U_XaXf_w?app=desktop&ucbcb=1); on the Ayuryog project, see the website: <http://ayuryog.org>.

<sup>38</sup> (...) *allāvait toḷutupōṛṛit*  
*tupparavā yuppaittān toḷutupōṛṛi*  
*aḷukiratu pōlaḷutu pulampiyēṛṛi*  
*aṭipañintu makamatuvaṭit toḷutupōṛṛi*  
*naḷuviyē pōkāmāl cavukkārattai*  
*nāṭiyē toḷuṭṭiraiñci naṅmaiyaḱa* (CuṅKāṅ 380)



calcined preparation of blue vitriol (*turucu vaippu*), which is further used for binding mercury. Certain ingredients for the preparation are identified with God and other religious figures:

After heating, the salt became Śakti, excellent copper became Allah, dear, [it] became [Allah], curd became a prophet (*napi*), proper lemon juice became indeed (...) a person who is called “a priest” (*levai*). If [with the use of these substances] you turn into ashes this blue vitriol, mercury will be bound, and a mercurial pill we be created. All the supernatural powers will be contained in it.<sup>39</sup>

Such imaging of the material substances creates their picture as powerful and holy beings rather than inert, passive and insentient materials. The materials are therefore credited with a divine status and prestige, similarly to the honourable figures mentioned in the verses. The passage also reflects well religious hybridity of Yākōpu’s text, as he identifies the substances not only with Muslim religious figures, but also with Hindu goddess Śakti. In a similar manner, Yākōpu describes another preparation, namely a powder of sulphur and blue vitriol (*turucukentic cuṇṇam*):

To what is this powder comparable? It resembles Allah who is the refuge. (...) Everything happened by its power. Look, [it is] equal to the four Vedas, which are precious to the world. From its touch, everything becomes calcined. This beautiful powder is very strong. If you are left without it, there will be no proper supernatural powers [for you], learn and see.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *vāṭṭumē uppatuvuñ cattiyāccu*  
*vaḷamāṇa cempuativum allāvāccē* (CuṇKāṇ 475)  
*ācappā tayiratuvum napimārāccu*  
*aṭaivāṇa elumiccam paḷaccārtāṇum*  
 (...) *levaiyenra pērumāccu*  
*pativāṇa yitturucai nūrrīṇākkāl*  
 (...) *racañkaṭṭuñ kuḷikaiyākum*  
*nalamāka cakalacittu miṭarkuḷḷākum* (CuṇKāṇ 476)

<sup>40</sup> (...) *iccuṇṇam yētukkoppum*  
*pōkkāṇa allāvām poruntappāru*

The material, which just by the touch turns other substances into calcined powders (*cunṇams*), in other words: which kills them, is compared in the above quoted passage to the highest God. Such presentation of the substance suggests its extramundane potency in relation to other substances, which it may kill, similarly to the God who takes and gives life to the creatures. By comparison to the Vedic scriptures, the powder of sulphur and blue vitriol is presented as a treasure of special value. The verse ascribes to the substance causative properties, highlights its strength, and suggests that the material is the source of supernatural powers.

### Concluding remarks

The discourse on binding and killing conveys an interesting notion that in the Tamil siddha tradition even non-human lifeless materials are credited with certain agency, for they are depicted as creative and destructive agents of the aforementioned alchemical actions. The substances, like *kuru*, *cavukkāram* and its preparations, etc., are depicted as active participants of the alchemical operations. It is evident in the quoted passages that the texts do not present inanimate matter merely as an inert background of human activities, but they rather credit the substances with their own agentive powers. This notion is reflected especially in the passages that concern the alchemical killing and binding. Not only an alchemist is presented as an agent of the alchemical operations, but also the substances are considered as important agentive entities, which are able to kill and bind other substances.

The references to violence and cruelty ascribed to the substances and compared, for example, to fierce animals or death personified,

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(...) *ellāmu miṭaṇālāccu*  
*nātariya nālvēta moppāmpāru*  
 (...) *ioṭṭatellāṇ cunṇamākum*  
*vaṭivāṇa yiccuṇṇam vaḷuvāmetta*  
*akalavē yitaiviṭṭu niṇṇāyāṇāl*  
*aṭaivāṇa cittiyillai yaṇintupārē* (CuṇKāṇ 61)

evoke the alertness, but also respect, in the recipient of the texts. Comparisons and identifications with various honourable figures, presented in the above quoted verses, anthropomorphize, or even divinize the materials, presenting them as sentient beings able to act and perform transformations on other materials and on human beings. The substances kill, but also bestow longevity and immortality, which implies that they possess God-like powers. Additionally, they are often depicted as entities endowed with certain character traits, such as fierceness and mercilessness, which blurs the boundary in the image of the human and inhuman realm in the Tamil siddha literature.

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