



Kavadiyattam: A Cross-Cultural Comparison between Kerala and Tamilnadu

JANAL Team and Sreelakshmi

Summary: *The article compares Kavadiyattam in Kerala and Tamilnadu, highlighting its spiritual significance in Tamilnadu versus its secular nature in Kerala. It also discusses the craftsmanship, rituals, and societal perspectives related to Kavadiyattam in both regions.*

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“In Tamilnadu, Kavadiyattam is a spiritual performance, whereas in Kerala, it is a public celebration.”

- A.K. Saju, a Kavadi maker, Kerala, 2024

Devotion to a deity is a part of culture and social identity for several people. Tamil culture and identity are two such manifestations that have existed since ancient times.¹ The fruit of Tamil knowledge²—Murugan was originally a hero warrior who was worshipped by the tribals of the Kurunji land, which later emerged into a separate cult and became part of the Tamil identity. The lord was characterised as an eternally youthful, handsome, and mighty warrior.³ Originating in the shadows of prehistory, when people believed in the mysticism of the world around them, Murugan, or Murugu, is a spirit with both positive and negative valences that can possess humans, make them break into a frenzied dance, cure illnesses, and predict the future. He is Seyyon, or Sevel, the Red One, hailed in Sangam Age poetry as a god of beauty, youth, and valour. His symbols—the cock that is his insignia, the peacock he sits atop, and the spear or the *vel* that is his weapon—are ancient totems that have been found at megalithic sites, including Adichanallur in southern Tamilnadu. The Murugan cult is characterised by an overt depiction of

¹ Chandran, Subramaniam, *Devotion as Social Identity: The Story of the Tamil Deity*. May 2, 2016.

² “Pazham neeyappaa, Gyaana pazham neeyappaa, Thamizh gyaana pazham neeyappaa..’ is a song by K. B. Sundarambal from the movie *Thiruvilayadal* (1965) which praises lord Muruga. This means Murugan is the fruit of Tamil knowledge.

³ Shrikumar, A.

<https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/tracing-the-roots-of-the-tamil-god/article6808508.ece>.

Bhakti, where devotees dance in trance, pierce themselves with spears, carry *Kavadis*, and walk barefoot for miles. The cult has a visible folk tradition.

The Kavadi, meaning "burden," is a physical load carried by devotees to seek assistance from Murugan. Typically, it symbolises a plea to heal a loved one or serves to fulfil a spiritual obligation. After the Bhakti movement that swept the south, Vedic gods like Shiva and Vishnu became popular, and the Muruga cult became restricted to pockets of Tamilnadu.⁴ However, Murugan worship can still be traced in Kerala, with the Kavadi culture being evident in both states.

Early Impressions

Growing up in a place known for Kavadi, I never considered it something that originated in Tamilnadu. My hometown, Kodakara, situated in the Thrissur district of Kerala, hosts a festival called Kodakara Shashti where everyone joyfully participates in the Kavadi festivities. However, what prompted me to contemplate the Tamil origin of Kavadi was noticing the steps at the Kunnathrikovil Temple in Kodakara, where the Shashti festival takes place. These steps bear a striking resemblance to those of the Palani temple in Tamilnadu. This observation sparked my interest in the cultural similarities between Kerala and Tamilnadu.

In a small town called Palani, nestled in the Dindigul district of Tamilnadu, there is a tale that explains its name. It is said to have stemmed from a myth about Lord Murugan, also known as *Pazham-nee*, meaning 'You are the Fruit'.

⁴ *ibid*



Figure 1. Steps of the Palani Temple, Tamilnadu. Image: Renju George, 2006



Figure 2. Steps of Kunnathrikovil Temple, Kodakara. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

The story goes that once, Murugan and his brother Ganesha were tasked by their parents, Siva and Parvati, to circle the world. Ganesha cleverly circled their parents, considering them as the whole world, and won a prized fruit. Murugan, who travelled around the world, lost. Enraged, Murugan left his home and family in Mount Kailash and came down to the foothills of Sivagiri. Lord Siva, as an act of pacification, implied that Murugan himself was the fruit (*pazham*) of all wisdom and knowledge. So, Palani became known as Pazham-nee, the hilly abode of Murugan.

Another legend involves Sage Agastya, who wished to take the two hills, Sivagiri and Saktigiri, to his southern abode. He assigned his disciple, Idumban, a demon, to carry them. Strapping each hill to his shoulders like a Kavadi, Idumban journeyed south. But when he paused to rest, he found it impossible to re-lift the hills. Angry, he challenged a little boy atop the hill, who turned out to be Lord Murugan. Idumban was defeated in their fierce battle but was later revived by Murugan's grace. Murugan then blessed Idumban and ordained that those who carry the Kavadi and visit his temple shall be blessed. Idumban was honoured by being placed as a sentinel at the Palani Hill entrance.

Since then, devotees visiting Murugan's shrine have paid their respects to Idumban by visiting the Idumban Lake to rest and cleanse themselves. Pilgrims to Palani bring their offerings on their shoulders in a Kavadi. At some point, the pilgrims introduced music and dance as part of the pilgrimage, and hence the name Kavadiyattam emerged (here, *attam* refers to dance).

Kavadi in Tamilnadu

What exactly is Kavadi? 'Kavadi' comes from the words *kaavu* and *thadi*, which mean a slung to carry things across the shoulder. Kavadis come in various shapes, sizes, details, and colours, and so do their names. Thol Kavadi (shoulder Kavadi) is a wooden structure consisting of various components: two differently sized side plates intricately etched and carved, connected by a cylindrical wooden pole roughly two feet long. Bamboo strips form a semi-circular bow that attaches to the side plates, covered with saffron, green cloth, or decorative material. Typically crafted from neem or vengai trees, the

Kavadi is adorned with peacock feathers and other embellishments according to the devotee's preference.

Kavadi in Tamilnadu is not just the structure but also an act or load that a devotee carries as an offering to Lord Murugan. It can be made of many things, such as: Mayil Kavadi (made of peacock feathers—peacock is the sacred vehicle of Murugan); Paal Kavadi (devotees carry pots filled with fresh cow's milk); Paneer Kavadi (bearers carry sanctified water or rose water); Karambu Kavadi, which is usually performed by parents who have been blessed with a child and will carry him or her with sugar cane poles to express their gratitude, and Pushpa Kavadi (flower Kavadi).⁵ Another significant form is the Alagu Kavadi, wherein devotees pierce their cheek, tongue, or skin with a metal skewer resembling a *vel* (spear). This act of mortification aims to silence the devotee and direct their focus entirely on devotion to Murugan, symbolising a profound form of penance and sacrifice.

Thaipusam is an annual Tamil Hindu festival observed on the first full moon day of the Tamil month of Thai, aligning with the Pusam star. It honours the triumph of the Hindu deity Murugan over the demon Surapadman, achieved with the divine spear, or *vel*, bestowed upon him by his mother, Parvati. Devotees commonly offer pots of cow milk, carry Kavadi as part of the celebration, and engage in acts of mortification by piercing their skin, tongue, or cheeks with *vel* skewers. Thaipusam is not only celebrated in India but in all other countries that have a Tamil population,

such as Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.⁶

Panguni Uthiram is another festival wherein 'Panguni' refers to the last month in the Tamil calendar and 'Uthiram' refers to the ruling Nakshatra or star. On Panguni Uthiram, in temples dedicated to Lord Subramaniam, his devotees carry a Kavadi containing offerings for prayers, fulfilling their vows. Devotees also celebrate the marriage between Devasena (the goddess of aspiration) and Lord Muruga on this very day.

Kavadi in Kerala

Kavadi is usually related to Murugan worship. But in Kerala, Kavadiyattam is performed as part of festivals of deities like Ayyappan, Devi, and others. It is performed at all kinds of celebrations, including weddings, political rallies, and church festivals. Shashti is a festival connected to Murugan and observed on the sixth day of each lunar fortnight. Shashti is also a festival for Ayyappan temples in Kerala. In Kodakara, Shashti is a major festival where Kavadi is the most important element.

Thaipusam is called Thaipoooyam in Kerala. Thaipoooyam Mahotsavam in Koorkancherry, Thrissur, is one of the main festivals associated with Kavadi.

The Shoolam Kuthal ritual here involves piercing the cheeks and skin with a spear similar to the Alagu Kavadi in Tamilnadu. Even though it is not widely seen everywhere, Parambanthally Shashti is a major festival where this extreme ritual is practised. While devotees, similar to

⁵ Bernama. "25 Years of Keeping 'Peacock Feather Kavadi' Tradition Alive | New Straits Times," NST Online, January 21, 2024.

⁶ *The Times of India*. "Thaipusam 2022: Check Date, Time & Significance of Thaipooosam." January 18, 2022.

Kavadi, primarily carry out this ritual, sometimes individuals are also hired for it in Kerala.⁷



Figure 3. Peeli Kavadi at Kodakara Shashti. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

Movement and Trance

Kavadiyattam, literally translated as ‘the dance with Kavadi’, embodies a dual significance within its name. For devotees, it symbolises a ritualistic performance where bodily movements serve to activate the Kavadi, integrating it as an extension of the body. Simultaneously, it underscores the skilled and structured nature of community dance performances.⁸



Figure 4. Kavadiyattam dancer in a trance, Kodakara. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

⁷ Interview (telephonic) with Vishnu A.V. of Thrissur, 26 March 2024.

⁸ Rajaram, A.P. “Kavadi Attam” A Dance Ritual”, 2013.

The movements with the Kavadi are of specific types. All movements are constructed with a conscious thought of the body being in alignment with the base of the Kavadi. The smallest Kavadi weighs anywhere between 15 to 20 kg, is balanced on the shoulders, and the performer dances with the accompaniment of vigorous drumming. The upper body and the arms have the responsibility of supporting the heavy prop. Thus, the freedom of the movements in the upper body is restricted to a certain level. The performers train themselves to coordinate their shoulder muscles to balance the Kavadi, and with certain movements, they try to rotate the Kavadi horizontally while the body is perpendicular to the prop. Sometimes the expert performers may not even hold the Kavadi but balance it entirely on their shoulders and the top of their heads, regulate its undulating movements backwards and forwards, and rotate them clockwise and anticlockwise. Thus, the acts of balancing and controlling become the main part of the movements of Kavadiyattam.

The Kavadiyattam involves individuals moving while in a trance, which the entire community watches. Trance-induced body movements are not formally taught, but they are visible in Kavadi rites, demonstrating that the breadth of bodily acts that represent the trance is the result of auto-suggestive movement generations supported by community memory. The Kavadiyattam ritual is related to the concept of the deity possessing the devotee for a specific amount of time.⁹

Devotees or not, this trance is visible in the Kavadiyattam performers in both states. In Tamilnadu, devotees experience this state of disconnection from their surroundings

⁹ Rajaram, 2013.

because of sudden movements and religious ecstasy. However, in Kerala, despite many Kavadi performers being individuals on hire, this trance-like experience is discernible from the expressions on their faces.

When inquired about how they manage to dance with the weight of the Kavadi, Suresh, a Kavadiyattam performer from Thrissur, replied, “When dancing this fast, we don't feel it.”

Making the Kavadi

In Kerala, Kavadi is the structure that one carries and dances with as part of different festivities. There are generally four types of Kavadis in Kerala: Abhisheka Kavadi, Peeli Kavadi, Kotta Kavadi, and Chendu Kavadi.¹⁰

Abhisheka Kavadi is the traditional Kavadi that is commonly carried by devotees as an offering. It is one of the smallest ones that even children can carry. Peeli Kavadi is typically the heaviest and tallest of all Kavadis. It is also known as Gopura Kavadi. As the name suggests, it has multiple tiers, which can go up to 15, and the biggest Kavadi can weigh up to 90 kg. Peeli Kavadi is one of the traditional Kavadis in Kerala and is usually danced to the music of Thakil Nadaswaram alone. Kotta Kavadi, or Poo Kavadi, is mostly decorated with plastic and paper flowers. It comes in a wide variety of colours. “A Flower Kavadi can cost up to ₹45,000. The expense can increase with the height and detailing of the Kavadi,” says Vishnu A.V., a Kavadi maker. The shape of the Kavadi is crafted by weaving bamboo baskets (*kotta*). Chendu Kavadi is mostly carried by beginners as it is lightweight compared to others.

¹⁰ Interview with A.K. Saju at Kodakara on 24 March 2024.

A.K. Saju, is a Kavadi-maker in Kodakara, Thrissur, with more than 30 years of experience. He started as a Kavadiyattam performer and later started to make the Kavadis by himself. He has a Kavadi troupe called AKS Kavadi Sangham. He is also a farmer. “My father, Kunjappan, was a Kavadi performer. I used to go with him to all the festivals, which is how I became interested in this field.”

The process of making a Kavadi begins with crafting the wooden base. A metal structure is then constructed on top of it. Over this, layers of cotton dipped in flour are applied. Following this, the detailing is done using Chinese paper, plastic, threads, and other materials. Polyfoam is used to create intricate designs. Unlike Tamilnadu Kavadis, which utilise entirely organic materials, Kerala Kavadis, performed at all kinds of celebrations, utilise materials such as glass and LED lights to highlight the visual appeal. A variety of contemporary materials are used in Kerala.



Figure 5. LED lights used in Kavadis at Kodakara Shashti. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

Kavadi makers and devotees who take Kavadi in Tamilnadu follow a strict *vratham* (practice of austerity). They abstain from the consumption of alcohol, follow a vegetarian diet, and do regular prayers. In Kerala, Kavadi makers do not need to follow such *vratham*. “Alcohol consumption

is present among Kavadiyattam performers. Some cannot even properly perform without it," says A.K. Saju. Moreover, Kavadiyattam performers do not need to be devotees.

One significant distinction between Kavadiyattam in Kerala and Tamilnadu lies in the spiritual aspect. In Tamilnadu, Kavadi is consistently carried by a devotee as an offering to the deity. However, Kavadi serves a more visually aesthetic and celebratory role in Kerala. In Kerala, there are Kavadi troupes comprising individuals experienced in dancing with the Kavadi. Although some devotees carry Kavadis, it is primarily the Kavadi troupes who handle them. Now, even labourers from other states of India perform Kavadiyattam in the festivals of Kerala.

Vishnu A.V. is another 26-year-old Kavadi maker in Thrissur who is also engaged in event management. "I started the Adiyogi Kavadi Sangham with some of my friends.

The Kavadi season starts with the first Shashti (festival) in November and ends with Vishu in April. This is the time of festivals in Kerala." The dispersion of the Kavadi into new ground in Kerala was also commented upon by A.K. Saju, who remembered how, "Traditionally, we only danced with Kavadi to the thakil nadaswaram. Now, we dance to all kinds of music, such as Chendamelam, DJ, and Nashik dhol."

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