



# ***Kavadiyattam: A Cross-Cultural Comparison between Kerala and Tamil Nadu***

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**Summary:** *The article compares Kavadiyattam in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, highlighting its spiritual significance in Tamil Nadu and 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 Tamil Nadu, *Kavadiyattam* is a spiritual performance, whereas in Kerala, it is a public celebration.”

- A K Saju, a *Kavadi* maker in Kerala.

Devotion to a deity is a part of culture and social identity for several people. Tamil culture and identity are manifestations that have existed since ancient times.<sup>1</sup> The fruit of Tamil knowledge<sup>2</sup> - 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 frenzied dance, cure illnesses, and predict the future. He is *Seyyon*, or *Sewvel*, 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 Tamil Nadu. Murugan cult is characterized by an overt depiction of Bhakti, where devotees dance in trance, pierce themselves with spears, carry *Kavadis*, and walk barefoot for miles. The cult has a visible folk tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Chandran, Subramaniam, Devotion as Social Identity: The Story of the Tamil Deity .May 2, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> ‘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

<sup>3</sup><https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/tracing-the-roots-of-the-tamil-god/article6808508.e>

The *Kavadi*, meaning "burden," is a physical load carried by devotees to seek assistance from Murugan. Typically, it symbolises a plea for healing for a loved one or serves to fulfil a spiritual obligation. After the Bhakti movement that swept the south, bigger Vedic gods like Shiva and Vishnu became popular, and the Muruga cult became restricted to pockets of Tamil Nadu<sup>4</sup>. 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 as something originating from Tamil Nadu. My hometown, Kodakara, situated in the Thrissur district of Kerala, hosts a festival called Kodakara, *Shasti* where everyone joyfully participates in the *Kavadi* festivities. However, what prompted me to contemplate the Tamil origin of *Kavadi* was noticing the steps at Kunnathrikovil temple in Kodakara where the *Shasti* festival takes place. These steps bear a striking resemblance to those of the Palani temple in Tamil Nadu. This observation sparked my interest in the cultural similarities between Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

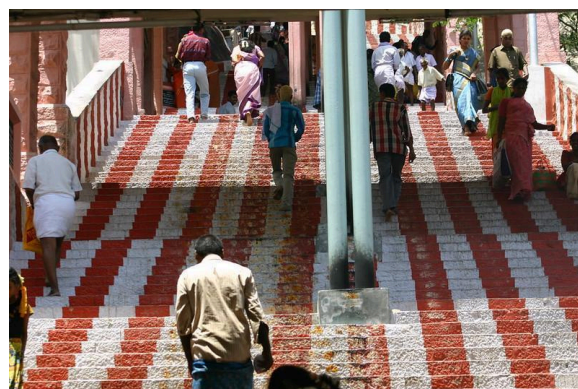


Figure 1. Steps of Palani Temple, Tamil Nadu. Image: Renju George, 2006

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*



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

In a small town called Palani, nestled in the Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu, there's a tale that explains its name. It's said to have stemmed from a myth about Lord Murugan, also known as *Pazham-nee*, meaning 'You are the Fruit'. 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 the whole world, and won a prized fruit. Murugan, who had travelled around the world, lost. Enraged, Murugan left his home and family in the mountain of 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 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 the hills impossible to lift again. Angry, he challenged a little boy atop the

hill, who turned out to be Lord Murugan. In their fierce battle, Idumban was defeated but 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 standing as a sentinel at Palani Hill's entrance.

Since then, devotees visiting the Murugan's shrine have paid their respects to Idumban by visiting Idumban Lake to rest and cleanse themselves. Pilgrims to Palani bring their offerings on their shoulders in a *Kavadi*; at one 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 Tamil Nadu**

What exactly is *Kavadi*? '*Kavadi*' comes from the words '*kaavu*' and '*thadi*', which mean slung to carry things across the shoulder. *Kavadis* come in various shapes, sizes, details, and colours, and so are 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 Tamil Nadu is not just the structure but also an act or load that a devotee carries as an offering to Lord Murugan. It can be 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); *Panneer 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).<sup>5</sup> 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 and 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 house a Tamil population, such as Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.<sup>6</sup>

*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*

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

<sup>6</sup>*The Times of India*. Thaipusam 2022

containing offerings for prayers, fulfilling their vows. Devotees also celebrate the marriage between Devasena and Lord Muruga on this very day.

### ***Kavadi* in Kerala**

*Kavadi* is usually related to Murugan worship. But in Kerala, *Kavadiyattam* is also performed as part of festivals of deities like Ayyappan, Devi, and others. In Kerala, *Kavadiyattam* is performed at all kinds of celebrations, including weddings, political rallies, and festivals in churches. *Shashti* is a festival generally connected to Murugan 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 of the place where *Kavadi* is the most important element. *Thaipusam* is *Thaipooyam* in Kerala. *Thaipooyam Mahotsavam* in Koorkancherry, Thrissur, is one of the main festivals associated with *Kavadi*.



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

In Kerala, the *Shoolam Kuthal* ritual involves piercing the cheeks and skin with a spear similar to the *Alagu Kavadi* in Tamil Nadu. Even though it is not widely seen Parambanthally *Shashti* is one of the major festivals where this extreme ritual is practised. While devotees, similar to

Kavadi, primarily carry out this ritual, some individuals are hired for it in Kerala.<sup>7</sup>

## 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 for the *Kavadi*. The smallest *Kavadi* weighs anywhere between 15 to 20 kilograms, 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 performer trains themselves to coordinate their shoulder muscles to balance the *Kavadi* and, with certain movements, 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 and 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*.



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

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 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.<sup>9</sup>

Devotees or not, this trance is visible in the *Kavadiyattam* performers in both states. In Tamil Nadu, devotees are experiencing this state of disconnection from their surroundings because of sudden movements and religious ecstasy. However, in Kerala, despite many *Kavadi* performers being hired individuals, this trance-like experience is discernible from the expressions on their faces.

When enquired 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."

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<sup>7</sup> Interview (telephonic) with Vishnu A V of Thrissur , 26th March 2024

<sup>8</sup>Rajaram, A. "‘Kavadi Aattam’ a Dance Ritual Practiced as a Community Performance," 2013.

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<sup>9</sup>ibid

## 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*.<sup>10</sup>

*Abhisheka Kavadi* is the traditional *Kavadi* that is commonly carried by devotees as an offering. It is one of the smallest ones 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 with 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 rupees. 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.

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."

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with A K Saju at Kodakara on 24th March 2024

The process of making a *Kavadi* begins with crafting the wooden base. A metal structure is then constructed atop 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 utilised to create intricate designs. Unlike Tamil Nadu *Kavadis*, which utilise entirely organic materials, Kerala *Kavadis* are performed at all kinds of celebrations, including weddings, political rallies, and festivals in churches. "Therefore, materials such as glass and LED lights have been incorporated into *Kavadis* to highlight the visual appeal, and so it uses a variety of contemporary materials.



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

*Kavadi* makers and devotees who take *Kavadi* in Tamil Nadu follow strictly a *vratam* (practice of austerity). They abstain from the consumption of alcohol, follow a vegetarian diet, and do regular prayers. Whereas in Kerala, *Kavadi* makers don't need to follow such *vratams*. "Alcohol consumption is visible among *Kavadiyattam* performers. Some cannot even properly perform without it," says A. K. Saju. *Kavadiyattam* performers need not be devotees.

One significant distinction between *Kavadiyattam* in Kerala and Tamil Nadu lies in the spiritual aspect. In Tamil Nadu,

*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 is also commented upon by A K Saju, who remembers 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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