

Thaipusam and Murugan - Its Cultural Continuum in Malaysia

Karthees Ponniah¹, Kingston Pal Thamburaj², Illankumaran Sivanathan³, Logeswary Arumugum⁴ and Kalaimuthu⁵

Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive examination of the Thaipusam festival and the worship of Murugan in Malaysia. It delves into the cultural continuity of this festival in two dimensions: firstly, tracing its origins from India to Malaysia, and secondly, exploring its evolution from the past to the present. Before delving into the main study, the paper begins by investigating the significance of temples within the Malaysian Hindu community. This foundational exploration provides essential context for understanding the societal backdrop against which Thaipusam is observed. Furthermore, the paper meticulously analyzes the Kavadi culture associated with Thaipusam, the mythology surrounding Murugan, and the process of Sanskritization in Murugan worship. The study employs concepts of subculture and religious discourse to address its objectives. It underscores the pivotal role of Thaipusam in the broader ethnic synthesis that characterizes Murugan worship in Malaysia. Notably, it acknowledges the elusive historical certainty surrounding Lord Murugan as a "conflate personage of legend." In sum, this research enhances our comprehension of Thaipusam by situating it within the rich tapestry of Tamil history, philosophies, and belief systems, particularly those intertwined with the worship of Lord Murugan.

Keywords: Thaipusam, Murugan, Cultural Continuum, Kavadi, Sanskritization, Malaysian Hindu Community

INTRODUCTION

Thaipusam to an outsider is a colourful religious carnival of *kavadi*, pilgrimage, and offering that progresses from homes to temples. But to a devotee or a scholar all that goes on in Thaipusam is multi-dimensional. I wish to describe Thaipusam a sub-culture in itself in the larger context of Tamil identity before I broach the role it plays in the identity-politics of the South Indians. In trying to understand the festival as the cultural continuum from India to Malaysia, I am also looking at as a continuum of a past to the present. Here I have divided the chapter into two initial parts (a) The place of temples in the Malaysian Hindu community; This will give the social background on which the Thaipusam can be painted. In (b) The *kavadi* Culture of Thaipusam, I will describe how the tradition *kavadi* presents itself as a cultural force that integrates the personal, the social, and the cultural. In (c) Mythology of Murugan, I will postulate the syncretic power of the devotion that ties up Tamil regionalism into a unified phenomenon on the basis of vestigial evidences of the tribal diversity of the people in the past. In (d) Sanskritization of Murugan Worship, I wish to present how modern Hindutva ideologues are approaching the boundary markers of the practice. Finally in conclusion I will expound the role of Thaipusam in the Grand Ethnic Synthesis called Murugan worship that is also called *kaumaram*.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study applied empirical research method and used qualitative method to find meanings, opinions and underlying reasons associated with each objective. Tamils as the focused groups and text analysis related to Thaipusam, Murugan, temples and Hindu community were used to collect and interpret the data. Religious discourse was used to explain the findings as it helps to distinguish the dimensions of the individual believers (Murugan deities), their identification with the religion or the religious institution (Thaipusam festival), and the societal context in which religious institutions operate.

¹ Tamil Program Coordinator, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

² Senior Lecturer, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. E-mail: fkingston@gmail.com

³ Senior Lecturer, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

⁴ Teacher, SMK Pokok sena, Malaysia.

⁵ Researcher and Reverent Luthran church, Malaysia

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section branches out the previous studies conducted in relation to Thaipusam, Murugan and further clarifies how the current research varies from them. Thaipusam a great festival, is celebrated by Tamil community in India and Tamil diaspora worldwide.

Kartheiges and Kingston (2017) has notified that Thaipusam is a festival not only celebrated by Tamil but also Chinese community. Their first-hand experience and field work revealed that Chinese have also shown particular interest in this celebration. Nevertheless, Malaysian Chinese who largely belong to the Buddhist faith take pride in participating and carrying out the usual rituals like carrying kavadi that is normally done by the Hindu devotees during this auspicious day. The Chinese in Sungai Petani grew up within the Indian settlement and are largely exposed to the Indian culture and practices. This had been one of the main reasons behind the Chinese people's participation in Thaipusam. Ann (2020) also corroborates by arguing that Thaipusam is not only a Hindu festival but also increasingly a Chinese Religion festival in Malaysia. Ethnographic data for this study was derived from field observation and informal exchanges with Chinese practitioners during the Thaipusam festival held in Penang in 2020. The two articles clearly picturise the convergence of Thaipusam as an inter-religious festival.

Coolins and Marie (1991) had a different perspective in the celebration of Thaipusam. The study was based on fieldwork among the Hindu Tamils of Penang State. According to them the ritual traditions of Thaipusam worship have been used by different groups to legitimize claims to status or authority or to protest their lack of power. The increasing popularity of the Thaipusam festival is show to be a response to the increasing marginalization of the Tamil minority in the Islamic state of Malaysia. Unlike other whom view the festive with religious scope these two, concluded the power and limitation of the social science concepts employed in interpreting Thaipusam.

As viewed above it was found that studies on Thaipusam largely focused on its traditions, beliefs, political, social, biological and psychological. To further enhance these studies in multi-dimensional this study is focusing on history and ideology of Thaipusam among Tamil community.

RESULTS

The Place of Temples in the Malaysian Hindu Community

One of the most prominent features of any Hindu community, however they define themselves, is the centrality of temples in their social life. It is the focal point of their religious life that has evolved into an embodiment of the particular social structure of the Hindu community that worships therein. In Malaysia, great importance is placed upon temples and public shrines which often bewilders municipal authorities who tend to be predominantly Muslims. So let, me begin this chapter by outlining the place of temples in the Hindu community in Malaysia.

Talking of Hinduism in Malaysia to the average Hindu very often quickly devolves into the question of its antiquity on Malay soil. There seems to be a diffused idea of self-validation arising from showing historical priority. There is a sense of pride among Indians and especially the Hindu in pointing out the ancientness of Hinduism in this part of the world. The presence of Hindu artefacts and temples found at the Bujang Valley, and in the surrounding areas in Kedah indicates that there was a thriving continuous South Indian Saivite/Buddhist kingdom in the first century AD right up to the eleventh. It is known by Indian scholars as "the Kingdom of Kadaram" (*kadaram* means coconut palm) and probably represents a high point in the history of South India; and is considered part of their heritage in Malaysia. However, among local historians and curators, that history is generally interpreted along modern racial terms, and so Bujang Valley is deemed to be part of the Malay heritage and has nothing to do with the recently arrived Indians of modern Malaysia. What many non-Malays do not realize is the complex idea of a pre-Islamic Malay heritage. It was a very hotly debated subject just a generation ago. Though many modern Indians would like to interpret this archeological site as an exclusive Indian/Hindu heritage, they really are missing the point that this place has a larger historical context. It is true that the arrival of the present Indian population is part of the British colonial enterprise but it is

historically speaking not anomalous as asserted in some political quarters. It forms a continuum of people moving across the Bay of Bengal for nearly five millennia. It is a vital bridge in the great Monsoon Market Place that represents the movement of people, goods, plants and animals between Southeast Asia and all the littoral lands of the Indian Ocean (Lincoln 2013). Just as the Tamils are found settled along the shores of this trade routes, so are Malays. One finds Malay folks in Madagascar, Comoros, the Hadramawt, Ceylon, and Burma. Likewise, archaeological evidences of sea-faring Indians are found all over Southeast Asia and their religious influence is noticeable (Ganaprakasam et al. 2020). The animistic practices of the pre-Islamic Malays; the diffusion of Sanskrit/Tamil language among the Malays; the secluded religion of Bali Hinduism; the spread of Ramayana as a folk art; the splendour of Angkor Wat (12th century AD or earlier) and the Borobodur (9th century AD); and even some royal rites and customs all attest to this very large context.

However, the presence of Indian traders, artisans and professionals since the 15th century represents a starting point of another era of contiguous history with the modern people. A fully developed Hindu temple existed in the outskirts of the trading emporium of Malacca. This temple was unfortunately blown up by the Portuguese when they conquered the sultanate. Pieces of the masonry went into the building of the A'fomosa fort, and two makara of this temple are all that survived and is documented (Durai 1958). The Hindu party in the Malacca sultanate was part of the royal polity and it is possible that it is their descendents who form the Malacca Chitty people. And indeed, the Hindu temple Poyatha Vinayaga Murthi Alayam (*poiyaḍha viṇayaga mūrthi alayam*) was built in 1781 by this business community.

With the founding of Penang in 1786 by the British there was a concerted effort to encourage migration as well as to import labour from the Madras Presidency of India. These were small in number and constituted workmen, clerks, traders, artisans and money-lenders. An unestimated number of convict labourers were also imported at this time, which ceased in 1820. However, over a sixty-five-year period between 1875 and 1940, as the Malay States were opening up for development, a systematic labour import was also put into place that allowed south Indians to arrive here as labourers to work in public works, the railways and the rubber plantations. They eventually became the ancestors of the bulk of the Indian population today. And this group just like the earlier migrants loved to build temples.

Other noteworthy temples in this region are the Mariamman Koil in South Bridge Road, Singapore built in 1828. The Sri Mariamman Temple in Georgetown, Penang predates that but the present structure was built in 1883. In the Malay States the first temple to be built is the Gunung Cheroh Kallumalai Subramaniam Koil in Ipoh. It was probably founded in 1888 when the first Tamil community settled around that vicinity. More importantly, the Subramaniam Temple at Batu Caves was established by the famous Thambusamy Pillai in 1891. This temple though contested in the courts by the District Officer then, the devotees won the right of access to the hills to build a temple and Thaipusam has been celebrated there since 1892.

It is a hugely popular observance and a public holiday in the states of Penang, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor. Devotees visit the temples to offer votive prayers both individually and in families. The peculiar feature of this festival is offering of the sacred palanquin (*kaṇṇaḍi*) that comes in degrees of ornate adornments, and types. Acts of feat like walking on machetes, and piercing of the skin on the back with hooks are part of the fulfilment vows. Ecstatic trance and music are intrinsic to this practice, and it is quite a sight to behold. Hindus in certain quarters condemn these practices but to think that these rituals have been recorded in the Tamil epics in Mideaval India nearly a thousand years ago should make one wonder why Thaipusam has a staying power. Before I analyse the significance of Thaipusam, it is important to understand the role of the temples in society, and in particular in Malaysia; and how the Indians perceive themselves as Indians. This will throw light upon the political thread that runs through Thaipusam.

Hindu temples and Tamil schools are two of the most important social institutions of the Indian population in Malaysia (Kottaparamban 2019). Yet the two remain completely separate. No Hindu temple maintains a policy of supporting a school, either as a matter of principle or policy. A rare few temple, especially those that are financially well established, support extra-religious cultural activities like classes for the classical dance (*barathanatīyam*) or religious instruction for children (*samaya-vaguppu*), but these are projects often driven by individual proxy-patrons to such social activism who have influence in the particular temple. Temples may

provide a premise for weddings if space and facilities are available but that would be revenue driven. Rites of passage that are domestic such as ear-piercing, coming-of-age (after menarche), and funerals remains strictly domestic. Some well-run temples do manage the Hindu burial grounds in its locality but that is often an exception. It is not typical for temples to run or works of mercy such as orphanages, homes for the aged, medical centres, or kindergartens. This leads me to believe that temples in Malaysia were built primarily to fulfil the religious needs of the Hindu community. However, temples do play a role apart from its primary religious purpose, a meta-purpose, namely in the following four areas:

Economics – Temples provide a focal point for all the economic activities that allows the temple to operate, including the revenue of the temple itself. This economic role is vital to certain trading communities who depend upon temple needs for their wares. This includes the suppliers of temple idols, paraphernalia of worship, builders, and the priests and other service providers. No one has estimated the value of this market safe to say that it is important.

Rites –Temples provide a premise for families to fulfil acts of devotion, certain rites of passage such as thanksgiving after a funeral (prayers for the repose of the soul before the interment of the ashes of the cremated body); prayers for anniversaries of birth and death; weddings; and so forth. Where available, it is also a place to go to in order to sort out one’s astrological horoscope; name a child; or work out the auspicious timing for important events in one’s life.

Identity – From a sociological point of view it provides a sense of identity. Temples by its very atypical architecture and observances vis-à-vis other co-religionists, impart to the people a certain symbolic parameter that is identifiable as “Hindu”. Many proverbs are said that links temples to auspiciousness of residence. Temples are indeed an intrinsic part of the village domesticity in India and in the plantations of Malaysia. Religious dramas and communal festivals are often enacted in the temple vicinity.

Politics – There are much discussions of political expressions of Hinduism characterized as Indian aspirations in the nation. It was even thought that temples are a hotbed of anti-establishment citizenry after the Hindraf Rally. However, the reality turned out to be a lot more complex. The more pertinent issue is not so much about national politics but of intra-communal political issues for which temples provide the platform. That should explain the religious function/communal welfare dichotomy mentioned in my introduction.

The economic and domestic functions of the temple are obvious to even casual observers. What is not so obvious is the role it plays in the intra-communal relations it plays and the politics thereof. In the predominantly Tamil population of Malaysia, Thaipusam and the devotion to Murugan is the very theatre a particular political drama is played out. This is intra-communal politics and its foundation is religious in nature. Since it was inherited from India, it forms a cultural continuum that plays itself out here in Malaysia.

The *kavadi* Culture of Thaipusam

It is possible to see that Thaipusam, the festival of *kavadi* started out as an annual pilgrimage to a temple of the Tamil deity Murugan the child-god, which is often located on a hill top. A casual observation will tell us that Thaipusam is traditionally a time for devotees to make votive offerings of temple necessities in exchange for asking this benevolent deity what they desired or for giving thanks for what they have already received. These traditionally included oil, milk, sugar cane, sandal paste, and fruits. Indeed, this quite procession of familial beneficiaries is seen in the early hours of Thaipusam. The most elaborate forms noticed here is a primitive *kavadi* that consists of a bunch of sugar canes strapped together and the prayer items tied at each end, and individuals and couples would carry the necessities uphill shouting “*vel vel!*” to encourage themselves on. *vel* is the name given to the spear of Muruga. Sometimes, parents blessed with children bring the infants or toddlers to pay gratitude. The child’s hair is cropped symbolically, and the parents may leave behind a cockerel, money or a piece of gold at the temple shrine. A secondary feature of *kavadi* is the *kudam* (the pot) – it is a class of offering that entails the carrying of a pot of milk (*pal-kudam*), or a pot with scented water (*panir-kudam*), or a pot with burning embers (*agni-kudam*); or even as is found in India, a pot with a live fish in it (*macha-kudam*).

However, the mythologies explain another dimension to the *kavadi* culture – the symbolic assertion of Murugan supremacy - the celebration of the kingship of Murugan who had saved the people from evil forces, and knit them into a people with a common language and geography.

After a decisive victory in the war against his enemy *pathmasuran* Murugan picked up his royal yellow parasol (*kodai*) and did a victory dance (*kodavu*). The *kavadi-kuthu* (generic name meaning dance of *kavadi*) is still called *kodavu*. Though there are other alternative accounts it affirms that Murugan himself is the first *kavadi* bearer. Indeed, the yellow parasol on top of a *kavadi* proper is a symbolic assent to the kingship of Murugan of all Tamils.

An important feature of *kavadi* are the spikes that extends from the outer structural frame of the *kavadi* and pierces to the bearer's torso. It is called *sedil* and represents a version of another ancient Tamil custom of hanging men by hooks pierced into the skin of their back. It is a symbolic affirmation of heroism and ones' unwillingness to flinch from pain. Hence the *kavadi*-bearer is a soldier of Murugan willing to enter into the battlefield fearlessly for his liege.

Another essential feature of bearing *kavadi* is the piercing of the tongue and cheeks by two miniature *vel* called the *alagu* – one is pierced across the two cheeks horizontally and another pierced vertically into the tongue that is extended out of the mouth. *alagu* literally means beauty and it is a potent reminder that the very language – Tamil - granted unto his tongue belongs to Murugan. Hence the *kavadi* bearer is muted in deference to the sacred language. The musicology of the *kavadi* procession has its own features that is part of the Murugan-symbolism – firstly, all the *kavadi* songs recounts the battle victories of Murugan found in the mythologies – a communal remembrance of ancient (mythic) history. Secondly, the anklet bells (*salangai*) of the *kavadi* bearers dancing to the loud rhythms of the folk drums is a quintessential feature because the *salangai* is a left over custom of ancient martial tradition of foot soldiers.

The musicians and the songs that accompany *kavadi* is an interesting part of the culture. The instruments almost always include the *urumi*, and a self-made rolled drum. These are called folk drums, and may be accompanied by the more “classical” *thavil* and *nadhasvaram*. Sometimes, a miscellany of other instruments are used to supplement these. The beat they create is also called *kavadi kuthu*. The intention of the music is to induce a state of trance (*aruli*) and sustain the bearer in it. The music is in no way thought of as magically imbued but is a continuation of the preparatory rituals of the *kavadi* bearer. The chant-like songs that accompany the dance, is called *kavadi-pattu*, and it recounts all the mythological feats of Murugan in his domain of Tamilnadu. In effect, it recalls the sacred geography of Murugan; and gives effect to the unity of the various regional strains of the mythological corpus.

The procession of *kavadi* is marked by going towards the principal Murugan temple in a district; and the following day the idol of Murugan himself is seated on a carriage (*ther*) and taken on a communal procession (*urvalam*) to the temple of Aman where he symbolically pays homage to his parents – Amman is the consort of Siva – and returns to his temple.

On the personal front, the individual bearer who offers the *kavadi* for Thaipusam makes his vow to do so for a purpose at any time; and he makes personal preparation since then. The ritual observance of the preparation begins thirty days before Thaipusam when the devotee usually becomes vegetarian and chooses to refrain from certain acts such as certain other food, besides meat, such as alcohol and onions; from sex; from smoking; from going to certain places; or speaking any vulgarity; or wearing certain colour/clothes. He visits his own temple regularly, and spends time with his friends who are making his *kavadi*.

In this era of commercialization, of course, one can rent a *kavadi* for a fee but that defeats a dynamic purpose of the *kavadi*. The making of the *kavadi* is an important traditional art form of the Tamil people, though very often it escapes the attention of many champions of Indian art and culture. Its significance lies in the fact that though *kavadi* can be a matter of private devotion, it can also be a group event that brings the neighbourhood together. The generic simple palanquins described above has evolved into very special forms with the use of light weight material such as aluminium and plastics, the proportions of *kavadi* sometimes reaches a diameter of twenty feet. Everything depends on the budget and the imagination of the devotee and the ingenuity of his

friends. I must say that the introduction of LEDs has introduced a new dimension to that creativity. I would not be surprised if robotics were introduced to the art of *kavadi* in the near future. One *kavadi* proper that draws much attention is the *mayil-kavadi*. It is made with hundreds of peacock feathers, and in recent years this has been discouraged to prevent the commercial demand for the feather and to prevent cruelty to peacocks - the vehicle (*vaganam*) of Murugan. The other type of *kavadi* that is considered great is the *pal-kavadi* – the devotee bears upon his body tiny brass pots of milk fastened with de-barbed fishing hooks. What is found rarely in Malaysia is the *palava-kavadi* made using the sacred *rudraksha* seeds. The seeds are not native to Malaysia and the imports are expensive. Another form that is not seen hereabouts is the *macha-kavadi* or *macha-kudam* (note that the two words are used interchangeably here) where a fisherman puts a live fish into a pot and carries it on his head dancing to the shrine of Murugan. The variation to the custom and the performance is not wide but it is always interesting to note regional innovations. I digress a little further to make a note of the fact that in Malaysia, *kavadi* is not confined to Thaipusam nor is it strictly an offering to Murugan. Many temples devoted to other than Murugan, who celebrate their annual feast have *kavadi* being carried from a river nearby to the temple. During these events sometimes, another form of sacred-bearing called the *kiragam* (a pot or a deity carried on one's head) could be seen but it is danced to a different beat than from the usual *kavadi* beat; and *kiragam* is not featured during Thaipusam.

At the communal level the culture of *kavadi*, remains a group event representing a particular clan, a temple, a caste group, and very importantly simply a group of close friends irrespective of ethnicity. These companions have specific roles to play and there is usually a hierarchy that determines their role in their project. They had accompanied the bearer through his preparatory rituals and participated in the construction of the *kavadi*, and it is they who show their joy in exuberant street dance that leads the *kavadi* in the procession to the Murugan temple. The rationale is spoken in parts by the devotees but they always relate to the mythology of Murugan.

Syncretizing Elements of Murugan

It was indicated above the *kavadi* culture gives non-Tamils, either individuals or entire communities, an entry point to the religious devotion to Murugan. However, the context of Murugan is an entire culture of its own, where the *kavadi* is the key to open the gates of Tamil religion. Let me illustrate how this symbolism operates and animates the practice and the culture of the people. Thaipusam is a celebration devoted to Murugan (*murugan*), and the patronage of Murugan to a devotee is one of intense emotions that encompasses ethnic pride, a tribal sense of belonging, and a sense of a place in the world. The last aspect is a purely symbolic one but that symbolism is not static but has evolved to something that unifies the diverse Tamil people and the sojourners among them into a unified spiritual nation. The capacity to absorb other practices to make it a vital part of itself – the syncretizing capacity of Murugan devotion which is located at the religious level actually operates socio-politically at the communal level. The evidences of this innate capacity of Tamils to absorb diverse culture into its main body are found in vestiges as well as seen operating even today, even in Malaysia.

If one interprets the *thiravidan*, the Tamilized Telugus or Malayalees as sub-cultures in the fringe of a larger ethnocentric Tamil culture, one can see the role of Thaipusam as an instrument of assimilating such groups. As a matter of fact, the anthropology of Murugan devotion indicates that such a phenomenon may not be new to the Tamils. For example, we may not know how the devotees of Agni may have formed an ethnic sub-culture within the Tamil land. However, what we find today is the complete absence of Agni temples which in Sangam literature are often depicted synonymously with Murugan temples. That sub-culture is now completely gone. Another example, of a similar assimilation survives in a handful of devotees who still consider Valli as their principal deity and maintain fasts and feasts peculiar to her. Valli, the deity of a woodland tribe however is in Murugan devotion the beloved second consort – and the tribe of Valli is completely assimilated into the main Tamil culture. We can also see how the people-group called *saurashthra-makal* had become politically and culturally completely assimilated. The remnants of this migrants to Tamilnadu in Medieval India however only maintain a faint memory of their past with no symbolism or cultural distinctiveness. They are in the main Saivites or Murugan devotees, and a minority of Vaishnavites.

Sacred Iconography of Murugan

One good example of vestigial evidence of the syncretic nature of Murugan worship is the traditional iconographic aspect of Murugan himself where he is depicted holding twelve objects in his twelve hands. Modern scholars apply various interpretive techniques to the iconographic variations. The anthropological reason most acceptable as to why Hindu gods and goddesses have multiple arms and faces is that the incorporation of several deities into one super-deity. This is done by taking all the iconographically significant depictions of one deity and foisting it upon another. In the Murugan tradition, this shows an early capitulation of eleven other tribal/clan deities to Murugan by granting him the arms to carry the weapons (*ayudham*) of the other gods. They are namely, *thomaram* (a musical instrument, probably used in battlefield); the *kodi* (flag); the *van* (sky or thunderbolt); the *kulisam* (mace made out of knotted wood embedded with amber or diamond); *ambu* (arrow); *angusam* (leash of an elephant); *mani* (bell); *thamarai* (lotus); *thandam* (staff); *vil* (bow); *maḷu* (axe); and *vel* (spear). It may not be possible to identify who these deities were whose iconography was centred around any of these *ayudham* but identifying them with the people of the twelve regions (*thisai*) of ancient Tamilnadu is enticing but remains conjectural. Traditionally all these are called weapons except for the *vel* which is a representation of knowledge. However, in the Sitha tradition of the south, it represents three Principles *nadham* (creation); *vithu* (seed); and *mayil-vaganam* (the peacock vehicle), (The cyclopaedia of Tamil Literature, 1988). Although the significance of the *mayil* is uncertain except that the peacock and the spear may have the same origin as the ur-icons of Murugan as the original singular deity, we find that collectively the *vel* represents a gnostic knowledge of the universe, and outwardly a sign of virility. However, ever since A.P. Nagarajan in his 1967 movie *Kandhan Karunai* depicted the *vel* as an instrumentized form of the deity Parvathi (*parvathi*) that was purposed for war against a vengeful king, the popular imagination shifted accordingly and today the *vel* is depicted commonly as a symbol of war and protection, rather than that of creation and knowledge. Another significant aspect of the mythology and the changing iconography is the nature of the weapons itself. With the exception of the coincidental axe which is also the representative iconography of Parasuraman (*parasuraman*) of the ten avatars of Vishnu (a completely different Hindu religious tradition), none of the *ayudham* mentioned above are used for the Sanskrit Vedic deities. Therefore, these traditional set of weapons of Murugan indicates a pre-Sanskritic and a more primitive form of native syncretism of several religious regional traditions in Tamilnadu itself which in later years came to be called *kaumaram*. This historical precedence is important to many Tamil devotees who see Sanskritization as a form of Brahmin cultural imposition. Later in development, however a second order of iconography arose in the worship of Murugan and this is typified by the types of *ayudham* and the rationale given by the *puranam*. Such iconic depictions number sixteen, are known to traditional artists in Sanskrit names: (i) *chathisvami*; (ii) *skandhasvami*; (iii) *senababhisvami*; (iv) *supramanyasvami*; (v) *gajavabhasvami*; (vi) *saravanabhasvami*; (vii) *karthikeyasvami*; (viii) *kumarasvami*; (ix) *sharngasvami*; (x) *tharagarisvami*; (xi) *senadhi chuvami*; (xii) *pirama-chasthruḷurthi*; (xiii) *valikalyana-suntharasvami*; (xiv) *balasvami*; (xv) *keiraṅja bedhasvami*; and (xvi) *mayuravaganasvami* (Chintamani 1988). Some of these forms are rarely depicted in actual usage.

Sacred Geography and Temples

Despite the mythology of Murugan there are in the main six major temples dedicated to this deity in Tamilnadu. They are collectively called the *padainidu*, which can also mean six garrisons, or *arupadainidu* that is six *padainidu*. The first of these temples is *thiruparankundram* located near Madurai. This is often held to be the most important seat of Murugan and may as well be the place of origin of Murugan. It is followed by not in any order of importance by *thiruchiralaivai* (Thuthukudi, Rameshwaram); *thiruvavinankudi* (Pazhani, Dindugal); *thiruveragam* (Kumbakonam); *paḷamudhircholai* (Madurai); and *keṅruthoradal* (Thiruthani). The peripatetic 15th century sage Arunagirinathar - the composer of *thirupugal* and *keṅdar alangaram* among other texts - mentions his pilgrimage to 208 Murugan temples and the hymnals he composed thereat (Anvananda 1975). These centres of devotion mark out in effect roughly the modern territory of Tamilnadu.

As a general observation, there are three aspects of the mythology of Murugan: First, the colourful myths of Murugan intertwine the fantastic with the plausible which suggests that these are perhaps a form of collective memories of ancient polity, social issues and territorial wars. Though none of the battles and wars could be dated or subject to archaeological scrutiny, the geography is very specific. The temples, forests, rivers, mountains and battlefields found in the mythology are still extant, and identifiable. It indicates a god of nation

with a clear border demarcated by his temples that are still extant. Within this sacred political boundary Murugan rules as the national god of the Tamil people.

The Sacred Language of Murugan – Tamil

Second, the mythology illustrates its own pantheon of lesser gods and their great feats of war fought on behalf of their kingly Murugan; and how these lands were tamed and the people therein brought under his benevolent suzerainty. The Thaipusam *kavadi* ritual of preparation and execution is closely patterned upon this aspect almost as if it is an enactment of the ancient events in the mythology. There is believed to be twelve corners of the land where the various Tamil tribes lived; and whose ancient divisions and persistent quarrels forms the substratum of Tamil castes even today (Chevillard 2008) . Therefore, during Thaipusam bringing one's *kavadi* from one's village, caste-based temple, or clan-centred temple to pay obeisance to Murugan in his own *major domus*, is a sign of political fealty to god and king. Today it is still a vital sign of this nation, albeit sublimated into a spiritual nation. In illustrating his role as a conqueror of people, and vanquisher of demons, Murugan is depicted as an intrepid king of great vigour. Thaipusam is therefore an anamnesis of sacred geography; and a sacred history that affirms the sacred kinship with Murugan.

Third, the Tamil myth (and myth-making) is undergirded by another aspect of Murugan – the child god, albeit a little spoilt one who is the preceptor of the sacred language of Tamil. The idea of the Tamil language as one that evolved from different sources, or has need to borrow from other languages is somewhat alien and offensive to an average Tamil person. It is believed that it arrived from the child's tender mouth (*thiruvaimoli*) of Murugan completely formed, and therefore perfect and not perfected. Murugan as such is also depicted as the child-teacher who through the structures of the language unravels the structures of reality. This aspect is conceded even in the later Sanskritization process – see below. This has engendered a form of chauvinism that has led the northern Indians to label the Tamil as “language fanatics” but it is a vital nerve that runs across history and culture of the people. Even the most ancient text extant of Tamil is none other than the Tholkapiyam (*thol-kapiyam*), believed to be two millennia old book of grammar and rhetoric.

The theory of Thaipusam thereof is that Murugan is the archetypal Tamil himself who rules within a open boundary and essentially receiving the offerings from those who enters his kingdom to pay fealty and would receive his patrimony and blessings in return. In modern Thaipusam, we can discern mythology and revered ancient customs operating as an integrating force bringing people in the fringes of the Tamil world such as the Chinese; or Indians whose castes are not of Tamil origin, and even those who choose to call themselves *thiruvdian*, into the Tamil mainstream culture, polity, and to a peculiar feature of the worship of Murugan – a devotion to Tamil language.

Sanskritization in Murugan Mythology

The abovementioned analysis of Murugan worship and myths are what I deem the most primitive layer . There is a second layer of Murugan myths that sits uncomfortably over it. It is today acknowledged as Sanskritization although it is an aspect that was evident even in *silapadbigaram* – a literature that dates back to the 3rd century.

Sanskritization exists because Murugan is the one national god, and there is no aetiological need to elaborate his genealogy any further. However, the genealogy of Murugan in the *puranam* tells that his real parents were Siva and Parvathi; and that his name was Skanda; and that he was born into this world under supernatural conditions to the six Karthigai women (*karthigai pengal*) who were really the epiphany of Parvathi; and that he took his abode in the extreme north at Kailash where he lives in the ice and snow; and that his elder brother was Ganesha; and that he defeated the demons (*asuran*) to protect the lesser gods (*devar*) and the Brahmins. This myth-making creates three things. One, it removes the more powerful and primitive idea that Murugan walked this earth; and two, it ties him up with a pan-Indian pantheon that included in parts the Vedic gods in which he plays a collaborative or subordinate role. This is Sanskritization, and it serves only one group of people who came to live among the Tamils – the Brahmins. Much importance is given to these myths for the perpetuation of Murugan devotion but the people still maintain their customs that sits contrary to the myths almost defying it. Though the Brahmins have a locus in the Tamil Hindu world serving priestly purposes, they had not supplanted the native priests nor teachers. This generational inter-caste feud is still well and alive. And it is

made most dramatic in the fact that no Brahmin whose native tongue is Tamil or otherwise would bear a *keṇḍi* for Murugan.

Throughout India, there are domestic observances that extends into temple practices and that eventually culminates into a grand communal observance. And indeed, some festivals that are commonly observed throughout India acquire special communal significance in some parts of India. Such are those observances of Ganesha Chaturthi in Maharashtra where giant statues of Ganesha (also known in Tamil as *pilaiyar* or *ganapathi*) are taken to the river for an immersion. It is a huge communal observance that is meant to gain spiritual merit and worldly blessings. Similarly, Krishna Jayanthi (also called Krishna Janmashtami, etc.) is observed all over India, but in Uttar Pradesh it has nascent political significance since Krishna was believed to be born there. Likewise, Sivarathri or the many Khumb Mela of various regional importance are celebrated. These festivals certainly have modern political significance due to the sheer size of the turnout of people. And I am sure there would be some of sort of rationalistic or ethnocentric subaltern significance attached to these festivals but they are all minor events in Malaysia whereas Thaipusam is not a minor event among the diaspora South Indians here.

The idea of a national deity of a chosen people living within a sacred geography, supplemented by a sacred language, sacred scriptures, sacred hymns, and an annual pilgrimage to the deity's temple as a mark of fealty is not new to the old-world religions. I imagine a similar process must be evolving all over India but no where do we find a religious practise that is politically ethno-centric but it is certainly found in OT Judaism and in Islam. In Murugan devotion, it is embedded within the larger phenomenon of Hinduism. For the Tamil people, their national god is Murugan; who in ancient times marked out his borders and the faithful had built temples there. The Tamil language is believed to have emerged from the very mouth of Murugan. The *puranam* recalling his victories are recited every year; and is taught to children. And the annual Thaipusam is commemorated as a truly communal event that reinforces the attention of the devotees to himself so as to achieve a racial unity. The Tamil land has often been occupied and ruled by non-Tamil kings especially over the last millennium but none could legitimize their conquest until obeisance is made to Murugan.

Murugan in the Anti-Tamil neo-Sanskritized Hindu Taxonomy

In an effort to harmonize the various religious traditions of India into a Sanskritic paradigm, native scholars have specifically excluded *kaumaram*. Again, it indicates the native origin of the Murugan worship. The most commonly understood paradigm is Sankarachariyar's *sadgurshana* (or *sanmargam*) the six orthodox ways that do not reject the Vedas is Sanskritized as follows:

nyaya (school of logical realism);

mimamsam or *jaiminiyam* (It rejects the metaphysics of all the other schools and leans towards the *purana*),

vaiseshika (school of empiricism that has many commonalities with the school *nyaya* but had developed separately);

sangkhya (school of dualism, also called *dvaita*)

yoga (school of contemplation and is also referred to as *pathanjaliyam*); and

vedanta (school of Vedic finality whose preceptors were savants who dealt with non-dualism (*advaita*) dualism (*dvaita*) and those in between, namely Adi Sankaracharyar; and his pupils Ramanujam, Madhvacharyar.)

Each of these various schools have their preceptors, champions, sacred texts, epistemology and religious centres. The proponents of the various schools tend to pick quarells with one another, but consider themselves *astika* – foundation, i.e. of Vedic religion; and all others who pale from their shade as *anastika*, and therefore not Hindu. It includes Buddhism, Jainism; and the materialists who reject metaphysics, of which there are two – *charvaka* and *ajivika*. These schools of *anastika* are considered destroyers of the Vedas. This classification was first popularised and later further popularised and later modified by others (Muller 1919).

However, modern native Oriental scholars have created a new paradigm for all religious streams of India and therefore have included traditions other than the *astika* and the *anastika*. As a modern avatar of Sanskritization,

it is interesting to note that the new taxonomy excludes Sikhism as a legitimate representative of Indian religious tradition. However, it has included Shaivism, a pervasive presence throughout India. This inevitably overlaps into and challenges the religious traditions commonly found in the Tamil south, where *kaumaram* - the worship of Murugan stands within its own boundary markers set against Sanskritization.

The novelty lies in the casting the Sanskrit grammarian tradition into religious mould and calling it *paniniyam* after Panini the author of the ancient grammar book *ashtadhyayi*. This new-fangled hagiography calls him a *maharishi* and calls for personal devotion to him. As a matter of fact, in 2004 a five-rupee stamp was issued by the Indian Government in honour of Panini that incidentally gave him a suitable iconic image. In 2007 a temple was planned for him in Kasi called the Panini Smarak Mandir(<http://www.oneindia.com/2007/01/05/pakistani-soil-for-dream-kashi-temple-1167988598.html>) [Accessed: 26 Sept 2016]. And the principal subject for the first Swadeshi Indology Conference that was held in Chennai in July 2016 was to assess the status of Sanskrit in India and to set the stage to mount a political challenge to Dr Sheldon Pollock's project. Dr. Pollock is an ardent Orientalist critique of the Hindutva narrative and holds the chair of general editor for the Murty Classical Library of India of the Harvard University – a project to publish all the Hindu classics anew (<http://indiafacts.org/twenty-statements-sheldon-pollock-india-hinduism-sanskrit/>) [Accessed: 26 Sept 2016]; and for its coverage in *Hinduism Today* see <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/blogs-news/hindu-press-international/first-swadeshi-indology-conference/15373.html> [Accessed: 26 Sept 2016]. Sanskritization here indicates an aggressive power play of the modern ruling class of India that wants a Hindutva that desires a linguistic dimension to their hegemonic aspirations. Inevitably, this has set up a boundary marker for the one other ancient sacred language of India, Tamil. The patron god of Tamil is Murugan.

CONCLUSION

It is possible here to conclude that Lord Murugan as a “conflate personage of legend” could not be fixed in history with any certainty. It is crucial to note that the conflation that fixes him in real places though not in real time is itself an indigenous effort. This sacralisation of the land, the people, the language and the polity in the wings of a national god, is not unique to the Tamils. Like the Judaism of the time, we also see that Murugan-tradition (*kaumaram*) has all the features of a complete religion: Outward symbols; inner rituals; shared memory; sacred texts and language; a universalizing dogma; a mode of evangelism; and each of these features becoming a cultural identity marker essential for the whole to subsist. Murugan devotion is a religion in itself albeit one that shares a certain degree of commonalities with another religious tradition - Siva-tradition (*saiyam*). I consider this important to the survival of *kaumaram* because this gives the devotees and thinkers purchase of a foreign religion of Sanskritic/Brahministic Hinduism by contra-indicating itself without having to be subsumed by it.

REFERENCES

- Ann, T.S.2020. The Thaipusam Festival in Malaysia: On Ritual Polytypy. Routledge Handbook of Asian Transnationalism: Routledge.
- Anvananda. 1975. Saint Arunagirinatha. Pongi Publications: Madras.
- Chevillard,J.L.2008. “The concept of ticaiccol in Tamil grammatical literature and the regional diversity of Tamil classical literature.” in Streams of Language: Dialects in Tamil edited by Kannan, M. 21-50. Pondicherry: French Institute of Pondicherry.
- Chintamani,A.1988. The Cyclopaedia of Tamil Literature. Asian Educational Services:Chennai.
- Coolins and Marie.1991. Murugan's Lance: Power and Ritual. The Hindu Tamil Festival of Thaipusam in Penang, Malaysia. University of California:Berkeley.
- Durai.1958. The Makara at Malacca, Malaya in History, Vol.IV(1) .
- Ganaprakasam , C., Selvaraja, T., Michael , J., & Nithlavarnan, A. 2020. “Reason to believe: religiosity, resilience, and self-efficacy among Malaysian Indian adolescent”. Muallim Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 4(4): 17-31.
- Karthees and Kingston. 2017. "Chinese Community's Involvement in Thaipusam celebration at Sungai Petani Sri Subramaniya Swami Devasthanam." Man in India 97(24) : 17-27.
- Kottaparamban, M. 2019. “Sea, Community and Language: A Study on the Origin and Development of Arabi- Malayalam Language of Mappila Muslims of Malabar.” Muallim Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities 3(4) : 406-411. doi:10.33306/mjssh/31.
- Lincoln,P.2013. “The Sea & Civilization - The Maritime History of the World. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- Muller, M. 1919. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. London: Longmans Green & Co.
- K.R.Kamala Murugan. (2022). *Worship of Lord Murugan in Thirumurugatrupadai [Tirumurukāṟruppaṭai kūrūm Muruka valipāṭu]*. *Muallim Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(2), 45-51. <https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/192>
- K.Balamurugan. (2021). *Pattuppāṭṭil aḷapeṭai vaṭivaṅkaḷ [Alapedai format in pattupaddu poem]*. *Muallim Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 5(3), 134-141. <https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/145>
- Thamburaj, Kingston Pal, and Logeswary Arumugam. "Historical background of Malaysian Tamil folk songs." *Time and Mind* 15.1 (2022): 41-66.
- Ahmed, I, Farooq, W., & Khan, T. I. (2021). *Customers' Perceptions and their Responses to Objectives of Islamic Banks—A Three-Wave Investigation*. *Asian Economic and Financial Review*, 11(1), 43.
- Thamburaj, Kingston Paul, and K. Sillalee. "**முருகப்பெருமானும் ஓடினும்: ஓர் ஒப்பாய்வு**.(Lord Murugan and Odin: A Comparative Study)." *Journal of Tamil Peraivu (தமிழ்ப் பேராய்வு ஆய்விதழ்)* 4.1 (2016): 11-21.
- Movies:
Thiruvilayadal; Kandhan karunai 1967; Patinathar 1962; Thiruvartuchelvar
- Websites:
Discourse Analysis in Religious Studies. The Case of Interreligious Worship in Friesland. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241879733_Discourse_Analysis_in_Religious_Studies_The_Case_of_Interreligious_Worship_in_Friesland [accessed Sep 09 2022].
For the news of a decision for this temple under the <http://www.oneindia.com/2007/01/05/pakistani-soil-for-dream-kashi-temple-1167988598.html> [Accessed: 26 Sept 2016]
For the offensive academic stand of Dr Sheldon Pollock see Written by the Staff of indiafacts.org "Twenty statements from Sheldon Pollock on India, Hinduism and Sanskrit" 26 January 2015 at <http://indiafacts.org/twenty-statements-sheldon-pollock-india-hinduism-sanskrit/> [Accessed: 26 Sept 2016]; and for its coverage in Hinduism Today see <http://www.hinduism-today.com/blogs-news/hindu-press-international/first-swadeshi-indology-conference/15373.html> [Accessed: 26 Sept 2016]