eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics

Kūttāṇṭavar's Festivals: Tropicality, Transsexuality, Death & Rebirth in Tamil *Mahābhārata* Folk Cultures

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Abstract

In the tropical landscape of Tamil Nadu in southern India, the eighteen-day long festival of Kūttāṇṭavar offers insights into the interplay of transsexuality, death, and regeneration within Tamil *Mahābhārata* folk cultures. The complexities of queer identity and expression within the context of Tamil Nadu's cultural landscape, with its entailing myths and rituals, include an understanding of tropicality and the Tamil ecocultural notion of *tinai,* as conceptual frameworks that shape human-environment interactions and cultural practices. This festival, which is held annually during the months of April-May, has synchronised its rituals with the hot and humid summers. Most of the activities associated with the festival are scheduled primarily during night or dawn hours to avoid the intense midday heat, thus reflecting a practical adaptation to the tropical climate. Within this setting, queer identities find expression through the rituals and myths associated with the Kūttāṇṭavar's festivals. This paper illuminates the transformative potency of myths and rituals in shaping queer identities and traditions all within the intricate montage of folk cultures in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Tamil Nadu, Kūttāṇṭavar festivals, *Mahābhārata*, transsexuality, myths and rituals, queer landscapes, tropicality, tinai, tropical ecology

eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics publishes new research from arts, humanities, social sciences and allied fields on the variety and interrelatedness of nature, culture, and society in the tropics. Published by James Cook University, a leading research institution on critical issues facing the Tropics. Free open access, Scopus Scimago Q1. Indexed: Google Scholar, DOAJ, Crossref, Ulrich's, SHERPA/RoMEO, Pandora. ISSN 1448-2940. Cite: Author(s), Title of Paper, Editors (Eds.) Special Issue Title (Special Issue) *eTropic*, volume, issue, year, pages, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.25120/etropic.23.1.2024.4034

Introduction: Tropicality and Tamil *Tiṇai*

The vibrant cultural expressions observed in the Tamil *Mahābhārata* folk traditions, particularly through Kūttāṇṭavar's festivals, offer an insight into the interplay of transsexuality, death, and regeneration within a tropical context. To understand these phenomena comprehensively, one must consider both the concept of tropicality and the ancient Tamil ecological and cultural framework known as *tiṇai*[1]. Historian David Arnold describes tropicality not merely as a physical descriptor but as a "conceptual space"—a discursive framework through which European colonisers understood and differentiated the tropics from their temperate homeland, marking the tropics as lush yet pestilential, alien yet Edenic (Arnold, 2006, p. 35). Tropicality transcends mere geography through an imaginary of the tropics "as the exoticised environmental Other of the temperate Western world…the temperate is portrayed as civilised and the tropical as requiring cultivation" (Lundberg et al., 2022, p.2).

Alternatively, in ancient Tamil texts, the tropical region of the present-day Indian state of Tamil Nadu was internally differentiated into five distinct ecological zones, or *tiṇai*, each with its unique characteristics and cultural norms. These zones included the mountainous *Kurinchi*, pastoral *Mullai*, riverine *Marutam*, coastal *Neytal*, and arid *Palai*. This division underscores an early ecological consciousness that parallels modern ecosystem approaches in cultural studies. Each *tiṇai* was associated not only with specific physical attributes but also with particular social behaviours and cultural practices, influencing everything from poetry to mundane chores of life, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of how human interactions and cultural output were deeply embedded in and responsive to the local tropical environment.

This ancient system of ecological and cultural zonation reflects a nuanced understanding of diversity and tropical specificity that predates much of modern ecological thought and stands in contrast to essentialised or exoticized Western representations of the tropics. Western notions of tropicality often evoke images of lush, verdant landscapes that serve as backdrops for leisure and exoticism. This perspective tends to flatten the complex realities of tropical regions, reducing them to picturesque but passive settings devoid of the dynamic socio-economic and cultural practices that characterise them (Stepan, 2001).

In contrast to this colonial view of tropical nature, the *tiṇai* system articulates a vision of the tropics that is diverse and active, with human life deeply integrated into and responsive to varied ecological contexts. This Tamil *tiṇai* conception of the intertwining of nature and culture speaks to recent decolonial efforts to rethink tropicality with

[1] *Tiṇai* literally means land, genre or type. Interestingly, in Tamil poetics, *tiṇai* refers to a poetical mode that encompasses a specific landscape, including its time, place, season, natural elements, inhabitants, deities, and social structure, thereby creating a comprehensive thematic background for poetry.

materiality. Benitez and Lundberg, contend that "it is imperative to recognize the crucial role that nonhuman materials also perform in the tropicality of this ecology." This is to "take nonhuman materials into consideration not merely as passive objects of colonial fascination and fear, but as active agents in participation with various instances of encounter in this worldly zone." Such an understanding "places emphasis on the comparable agency embodied and rehearsed by the nonhuman materials" (2022, p. 2)—particularly climate and ecology.

As the authors summarize:

> In this paradigmatic shift from simply recognizing the primacy and responsibility of human cultures in shaping landscapes, to acknowledging that nonhuman materials, including landscapes themselves, likewise participate in these instances of creation, a word… – that of *entanglement* – is…instructive. (2022, p. 3).

Such 'entanglement' or complexity is explicit in Tamil Nadu, where the *tinai* zones intersect with the broader tropics' conceptual and physical realities, creating a rich mosaic of cultural and ecological diversity. This diversity is vividly reflected in Kūttāṇṭavar's festivals, where the themes of life, death, transsexuality, and renewal are celebrated and interpreted through the lens of both the ancient *tiṇai* system and the new materialist notion of decolonial tropicality. The festivals serve as a dynamic stage where the lushness and decay associated with the tropics and the idealised yet overlapping *tiṇai* zones play out the complex and entangled narratives of existence and transformation inherent in Tamil folklore.

The Kūttāṇṭavar cults that are spread across the five tropical *tiṇai* zones of Tamil Nadu are especially significant because the primary deity of this cult, Kūttāṇṭavar, who is usually considered to be a warrior icon, is unexpectedly reclaimed by the marginalised transsexuals in Tamil society, known as Alis. Within the broader cultural milieu of India, as well as in Tamil renditions of the *Mahābhārata* epic, Kūttāṇṭavar is more widely recognised by the name Aravāṉ. Notably, the term 'Kūttāṇṭavar' is reserved for use exclusively within his own cult, i.e., the cult of Kūttāṇṭavar, though colloquially both the monickers Kūttāṇṭavar and Aravāṉ are used interchangeably. While both names are used to refer to the same deity, Aravāṉ finds prominence in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, whereas Kūttāṇṭavar emerges in the Tamil adaptation of the myth. This transformation of Aravāṉ into Kūttāṇṭavar is noteworthy, especially within the cultural nuances of Tamil Nadu's tropical environment, because it underscores the deity's evolving identity and the unique dynamics of the cult's followers, who are predominantly made up of Alis.

The Kūttāṇṭavar cult is not monolithic and homogenous; rather, it encompasses various forms of the cult that are spread across Tamil Nadu, each with its own

distinctive rituals. This paper's focus narrows to a specific tradition within South Arcot, which falls under the *tiṇai* classification of coastal *Neytal*, where these two sacred names Kūttāṇṭavar and Aravāṉ connote two successive lives of this multifaceted deity. This inquiry, therefore, navigates the cultural landscape of the Kūttāṇṭavar cult, primarily concentrated within the region of South Arcot in Tamil Nadu, in order to unravel its distinctive folkloric traditions within the natural and cultural milieu of the tropical landscape.

Exploring Aravāṉ's Tale and its Tropical Materialisms in the *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata* is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India[2]. This epic is a vast narrative poem that encompasses over 100,000 verses, and its sprawling storyline revolves around the legendary eighteen-day Kurukshetra War, a conflict between two factions of the same clan, the Pāndavas[3] and the Kauravas[4], for control of the throne of Hastinapur. The presence of several hundred regional variations of the *Mahābhārata* is perhaps the most striking testament to the epic's adaptability and enduring relevance. Each regional retelling integrates local traditions, religious beliefs, and societal norms, making the *Mahābhārata* not only a pan-Indian epic but also a deeply localised expression of cultural identity. The Tamil rendition of the *Mahābhārata*, for instance, is more than a mere translation; it is a recontextualization of the epic within Tamil literary and cultural sensibilities within the specificity of its tropical setting—including the transformation of the Sanskritic Aravāṉ into the localised non-binary deity of Kūttāṇṭavar.

The narrative concerning Aravāṉ, the son of Arjuna[5] and Ulūpī[6] in the *Mahābhārata*, unfolds in a way that invites a critical exploration of the complex interplay of themes and characters within this epic saga. While Aravāṉ's existence is first introduced in the *Ādi Parvan*[7] of the *Mahābhārata* (*Mahābhārata,* 2010, I.206), where it is mentioned that Arjuna had a brief liaison with Ulūpī, a Nāgī or serpent woman, this initial account remains silent on the circumstances of Aravāṉ's birth. It is only during the *Bhīṣma Parvan*, specifically on the eighth day of the Kurukshetra War, that the narrative unveils the intricate web of relationships and events that surround Aravāṉ's existence.

[2] The other ancient Sanskrit epic being the *Rāmāyana*.
[3] The Pāndavas are the five brothers, namely, Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, who are the central characters of the Mahābhārata. They emerge as the victorious side in the eighteen-day Kurukshetra War. Thereafter, the eldest among the five Pāndava brothers, Yudhishthira, ascends the throne to Hastinapur.
[4] The Kauravas are the one hundred sons of King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari. They are the primary antagonists who oppose their cousins, the Pāndavas, in the Kurukshetra War.
[5] Arjuna is one of the five Pāndava brothers, renowned as a skilled archer and warrior, he also plays a pivotal role in the Pāndavas' victory in the Kurukshetra War.
[6] Ulūpī, the Nāgā or serpent princess, dwells underwater, which is believed to be the realm of serpents. She is one of Arjuna's many wives and is known for her crucial role in restoring his life after a battle.
[7] The *Mahābhārata* is divided into multiple books or *parvans*, each of which contains numerous chapters known as *adhyayas*. *Ādi Parvan* is the first among all the *parvans*.

According to the *Mahābhārata*, Ulūpī was previously married to a Nāga husband who met his demise at the hands of the celestial bird, Garuḍa (*Mahābhārata*, 2010, VI.86.7). Left childless and in despair, Ulūpī was given in marriage to Arjuna by her father Airavat, who is often referred to as the 'serpent king' (*Nāgarāja*), but the epithet also alternatively implies 'elephant king', thereby foreshadowing the interchangeability of serpents and elephants in Aravāṉ's subsequent mythologies as well as also in the rituals associated with the festivals of Kūttāṇṭavar. Consequently, Aravāṉ was conceived under circumstances that carry a note of illegitimacy, being born 'upon the wife of another' (*parakṣetre*).

Ulūpī, the mother of Aravāṉ, is a figure intertwined with both serpent and elephant symbolism. She epitomises the non-binary fluidity of identities within the tropical setting—a rich, biodiverse environment characterised by interconnections and transitions between various forms of life. Serpents and elephants, central to Ulūpī's story, are not only vital elements of the tropical landscape but also carry significant cultural and mythical connotations across many traditions. Serpents, often associated with transformation, regeneration, and rebirth, embody a dynamic element of change and adaptability, akin to the fluid and often evolving identities found within queer narratives. Elephants, revered for their memory and wisdom across India including Tamil Nadu, evoke a deeper connection to the locale and community, resonating with themes of memory and history that prevail in queer communities, especially regarding the preservation and transmission of marginalised histories and knowledges.

Aravāṉ, although a son of the Pāṇḍava clan, was abandoned by his paternal family and thus subsequently raised by his mother in *Nāgaloka*, the underwater realm of the serpents. As the narrative unfolds, Aravāṉ joins the Pāṇḍava's army and takes part in the Kurukshetra War on the eighth day, engaging in a fierce cavalry battle. When faced with overwhelming odds, Aravāṉ displays remarkable resilience, even when bathed in his own blood. He is therefore compared to an elephant, symbolising his steadfastness. The battle continues with dramatic encounters, including the intervention of Alambusa, a formidable Rāksasa[8]. Aravāṉ and Alambusa engage in a fierce fight, where Alambusa repeatedly regrows his severed limbs. This conflict escalates until Alambusa eventually assumes the form of Garuḍa[9] and ultimately beheads Aravāṉ.

This narrative, while contained within just a few pages of the *Mahābhārata*, carries layers of complexity. It introduces several recurring motifs, such as the surprising relationship between elephants and snakes and the conflict between birds and snakes—creatures that are an integral part of the rich biodiversity of the Indian tropics.

[8] Rākṣasa in Hindu mythology refers to a group of demonic entities, often depicted as powerful, fierce, and capable of shape-shifting, typically opposed to the gods (*devas*) and humans in various stories and epics.
[9] Interestingly, Garuḍa (a celestial bird) is the same character that killed Ulūpī's first husband.

Themes of dismemberment and regeneration also echo the cyclical and robust patterns of growth and decay inherent in tropical ecosystems, where flora and fauna experience rapid and continual renewal. These elements come to define Aravāṉ's role in the epic and serve as the foundation for his transformation into Kūttāṇṭavar in Tamil folklore. This transformation of Aravāṉ into Kūttāṇṭavar is embodied in the tropical richness of the rituals of Kūttāṇṭavar's festivals and also in the relationship dynamics between the deity of Kūttāṇṭavar and the predominantly transsexual adherents of his cult. Hence, the evolution of Sankritic Aravāṉ into tropical Kūttāṇṭavar represents a remarkable shift in narrative focus and cultural interpretation.

Tamil Folkloric Renditions of the Aravāṉ Mythology

The transformation of Aravāṉ from a minor Sanskrit figure to a major Tamil folkloric deity can be traced back to the ninth century during the Pallava period[10]. This period witnessed the composition of the oldest surviving Tamil rendition of the *Mahābhārata* by Peruntēvaṉār, which marked Aravāṉ's debut in Tamil literature. This era also saw the emergence of temple recitations of the *Mahābhārata*, possibly aimed at instilling a martial spirit within the Tamil populace (Hiltebeitel, 1991, p.14). Additionally, the concept of Kālī (a deity of time, destruction, and transformation) as the Tamil goddess of the battlefield gained prominence, particularly in the works of tenth- to twelfth-century Paraṇi poets (Nagaswamy, 1982, p. 28). Aravāṉ's rise to significance in Tamil traditions can be attributed to these developments, as he became associated with a new martial spirit linked with devotion to the goddess Kālī. These primary themes provided a foundation for the unique unfolding of Aravāṉ's mythology within the tropical milieu of Tamil culture, with various regional, village, caste, familial, and gender tensions finding expression through popular forms of devotion, known in the pan-Indian context as *bhakti*.

Aravāṉ's myth in Tamil traditions revolves around the accumulation of three significant boons, which entail the opportunity to die on the battlefield as a celebrated hero, the ability to witness the entirety of the Mahābhārata war, and a pre-war matrimonial union with Mohinī[11], with this last boon stemming from tropical folk traditions. While Aravāṉ's first and second boons primarily serve as a narrative necessity, allowing him to fulfil his role as the provider of *kaḷappali*[12] (battlefield sacrifice) in the Tamil epic and retain

[10] The Pallava dynasty ruled the Deccan region of India, also known as Tondaimandalam, from 275 AD-897 AD. The Pallava period was a crucial juncture in the political and socio-cultural history of southern India.
[11] Mohinī is an enchanting female avatar (incarnation) of the Hindu god Vishnu, who appears in various mythological tales, primarily to seduce or trick the rākṣasas and asuras (anti gods) as part of divine interventions. Most famously, Mohinī is known for distributing the elixir of immortality (*amrita*) to the gods by deceiving the asuras after the churning of the ocean, an important event in the Hindu mythology.
[12] Kaḷappali, in the context of the tropical Tamil traditions, refers to a ritual or practice of human sacrifice made to propitiate deities, primarily during ancient and medieval periods. It was believed that offering such a sacrifice, especially during the initiation of war or other significant endeavours, would ensure victory or divine favour.

his pre-designated death on the eighth day of the Kurukshetra war. It is imperative to recognise that the Kūttāṇṭavar folk cult lays special emphasis on Aravāṉ's third boon.

According to the Tamil folk traditions, which differ significantly from the Sanskrit narrative, Aravāṉ expresses a desire not to depart this world as a bachelor, as an unmarried death would hinder him from receiving the ancestral rites of a 'Father' or Pitṛ. Krishna[13], addressing this dilemma, assumes the form of Mohinī, the Enchantress, and arranges a last-minute wedding with Aravāṉ. This version of Aravāṉ's marriage, documented in scholarly literature on folk versions of Hinduism in Tamil Nadu, finds resonance primarily in the tropical *tiṇai* of South Arcot, where his festivals are particularly grandiose (Shulman, 1980, p. 307). It is this myth that appears to hold special significance in relation to the widely increasing involvement of transsexual communities, commonly known in Tamil as Alis.

Kūttāṇṭavar and the Transsexual Communities of Alis

The Alis actively participate in the Kūttāṇṭavar festivals across the tropical region of South Arcot, which encompasses several villages such as Kottaṭṭai near Chidambaram, Pilḷaiyārkuppam near Pondicherry, and Dēvaṉampaṭṭaṇam near Cuddalore among others (Hiltebeitel, 1991, p. 217). The festivals garner their enthusiastic attendance, with their numbers potentially reaching up to hundreds of thousands. It is a diverse gathering, comprising Alis not only from various regions of Tamil Nadu but also myriad transsexual communities from across India as well as from abroad, notably from the tropical regions of Southeast Asia such as Myanmar, Singapore, and the Malay Peninsula, which have sizeable Tamil populations.

The participation of Tamil transsexual communities from the tropical regions of Southeast Asia has historical significance dating back to the colonial period. The migration of Tamil populations to Southeast Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries was significantly driven by colonial labour demands. The British colonial empire facilitated the movement of millions of Tamils as indentured labourers to work in the rubber plantations of Malaya (including Singapore) and on other agricultural projects spread across Southeast Asia, such as Myanmar (Burma). This migration was part of a broader colonial labour exploitation that also affected other parts of the British empire, including Sri Lanka, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands. Labourers, often from marginalised and lower socio-economic backgrounds, were recruited (sometimes under deceptive terms) to work in harsh conditions characterised by heavy labour in extremely humid and hot climates, under poor living standards, where diseases were prevalent. The notion of colonial tropicality contributed to the justifications used for the

[13] Krishna is a pivotal divine figure in the *Mahābhārata*, serving as a wise counsellor, charioteer to Arjuna in the Kurukshetra war, and the expounder of the Bhāgavad Gitā. In later texts, he is also identified with the Hindu god Vishnu.

exploitation of both land and labour. The tropical regions were seen as lands of immense economic potential requiring the 'civilising' presence of European intervention, which rationalised the use of cheap migrant labour to extract resources efficiently. The presence of transexuals from the diaspora returning to Tamil Nadu for the Kūttāṇṭavar festivals is thus also part a colonial legacy which ties regions of the tropics in a shared, yet varied, history.

In his *Manual* of South Arcot (1906), W. Francis describes the Kūttāṇṭavar festivals of the early years of 1900s as:

> It occurs in May and for 18 days the *Mahabharata* is recited by a [Vaṉṉiyar]. On the eighteenth night a wooden image of Kuttandar is taken to a tope and seated there. This is the signal for the sacrifice of an enormous number of fowls. Everyone who comes brings one or two, and the number killed runs literally into thousands.... While this is going on, all the men who have taken vows to be married to the deity appear before his image dressed like women, offer to the [Vaṉṉiyar] priest a few annas, and give into his hands the talis [tāli: marriage pendant] which they have brought with them. These the priest, as representative of the god, ties round their necks. The god is brought back to his shrine that night and when in front of the building he is hidden by a cloth being held before him. This symbolizes the sacrifice of Aravan and the men who have just 'married' to him set up loud lamentations for the death of their 'husband.' (Francis, 1906, p. 376).

As evinced by Francis' 1906 account, it is worth noting that the Kūttāṇṭavar festival has evolved significantly over time. The absence of Alis in Francis's account, who have now become the central participants of the festival, is conspicuous. According to Hiltebeitel, the substantial presence of transsexual communities, numbering in the thousands, developed over the last three decades of the twentieth century, spanning from the 1970s to the 1990s. This surge in participation can be attributed to an Ali named Tēvi (Devī), who fervently professed devotion to Kūttāṇṭavar in Kūvākkam[14] (forest district) and subsequently encouraged fellow Alis to partake in the festivities (Narulla, 1990, p. 41). There are several Kūttāṇṭavar festivals celebrated in other regions of South Arcot, each with its own distinctive traditions and specific rituals and ceremonies, which, in turn, attract specific queer communities to participate.

[14] Kūvākkam is located in Ulundurpettai, Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu. It is situated near the reserved forest area of the Western Ghat ranges.

Dēvaṉampaṭṭaṇam[15], for instance, is associated with a unique narrative that is an exclusive component of the village's distinctive folkloric tradition, as this story is not widely known even in that region, which attests to its localised character. According to this story, Indra, burdened by the sin of Brahmanicide[16], assumed the incarnation of Kūttāṇṭavar as a divine punishment, leading to a curse that caused his body to decay, leaving only his head intact. This peculiar predicament deterred potential brides from marrying him, as it necessitated the removal of their *tāli* (sacred marital thread) in the evening. However, the compassionate Krishna intervened by taking on the female form of Mohinī and agreed to marry him in the morning. As Indra disappeared, leaving only his head behind, the *tāli* was subsequently severed in the evening as prescribed (Whitehead, 1921, p. 27). Intriguingly, while Krishna as Mohinī played a pivotal role in resolving this mythic dilemma, there was no suggestion in this account that he/she was associated with the Alis, and hence the Ali community traditionally has limited participation in the festival at Dēvaṉampaṭṭaṇam. Not only the Alis but also the transvestites celebrate this mythic marriage by performing sacrificial rituals on the sea shore. This alternative version of the Aravāṉ myth, which could either strip Kūttāṇṭavar of his *Mahābhārata* associations or depict a version of his cult that predates or exists independently from the *Mahābhārata*, is noteworthy because the queer communities reclaim and modify the Sanskrit narrative to suit the tropical landscape, incorporating elements like sacrificial rituals on the sea shore, thereby embedding the myth within the natural and cultural fabric of their region. This localised tropical reinterpretation allows the queer communities to express and affirm their identity through a distinct version of the myth that resonates more profoundly with their experiences and environment.

While the Alis in the festival at Dēvaṉampaṭṭaṇam have limited participation, contrastingly in Kūvākkam, they play a significant role in the festival's adaptations, especially concerning Aravāṉ's third boon, that is, his marriage to Mohinī. According to the Kūvākkam region's variation of the Aravāṉ myth, Mohinī is regarded as Krishna's 'Ali *avatāra*,' a manifestation of Krishna with fluid gender attributes, like transexuals, while in Dēvaṉampaṭṭaṇam's coastal region version, Mohinī was categorically not associated with the Alis. Thus, the forest district of Kūvākkam's regional variation highlights and celebrates Krishna's transformation from a male deity to a female figure. The transsexual communities' affiliation with Kūttāṇṭavar festival and this specific marital aspect of Kūttāṇṭavar's mythology is a crucial element in the festival's evolution

[15] Dēvaṉampaṭṭaṇam is a suburb located in the coastal town of Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu. It is a popular tourist destination, known for its Silver Beach.
[16] Brahmanicide refers to the act of killing a Brahmin (the highest among the four castes in Hinduism), which is considered one of the gravest sins in Hindu scripture and tradition. The concept underscores the deep-rooted caste hierarchy and the sanctity assigned to Brahmins in Hindu culture.

as it deepens the symbolic and experiential resonances surrounding the Alis' participation.

Tamil folk religions based on Kūttāṇṭavar specify that the full moon night in the month of *Cittirai* (April-May) is the pre-designated night for the Alis' symbolic marital union with Aravāṉ. This selection is based on the belief that "the *Mahābhārata* states that on this specific night, Krishna assumed the Ali *avatāra* and wedded the hero (*vīraṉ*) Aravāṉ" (Narulla, 1990, p. 61). According to the myth, Krishna, like the Alis, has also undergone a transformation from male to female. In the context of the setting of Tamil Nadu, the month of *Cittirai* falls during the transition from the hot and humid summer season to the early onset of the Southwest monsoon. This period is marked by significant climatic features that are quintessentially tropical and deeply influence local cultural practices, including those surrounding the worship of Kūttāṇṭavar during the full moon. During *Cittirai* occasional pre-monsoon showers can also be witnessed, which bring brief, intense, rainfall. These showers are crucial for cooling the land and preparing the soil for the upcoming agricultural season. The climatic harshness of the dry season, coupled with the lush imagery of the impending rains, plays into the rituals and celebrations. The full moon in *Cittirai* provides a luminous backdrop to the nighttime festivities, illuminating the rituals of sacrifice and dance. The harsh climate conditions of the summer months and the promise of renewal with the approaching monsoon also reflect the themes of death and rebirth inherent in the Kūttāṇṭavar myth, resonating deeply with the cyclical understanding of life and nature embraced in many Tamil folk traditions.

The Festival of Kūttāṇṭavar in Kūvākkam

At Kūvākkam, Kūttāṇṭavar's procession takes place in three distinct ways. Firstly, Kūttāṇṭavar's head is danced through the village streets in an elaborate procession, which commences after nightfall on the first day and repeats for the first six days of the festival. Accompanied by music and firecrackers, this procession involves bringing the head outside the temple and parading it through the inner streets of the village. Every household participates by performing various rituals for the touring deity, including lamp-waving and offering coconuts. Since the festival is celebrated annually during the month of *Cittirai*, the timing of the procession, with activities extending into the night, is a cultural adaptation to the region's tropical summer. Conducting festivities after sundown provides relief from the oppressive daytime heat and taps into the cooler, more pleasant nocturnal temperatures. Additionally, the possibility of a sudden tropical downpour is ever-present. These brief showers bring a momentary respite from the heat, cooling the air and settling the dust stirred up by the procession. This adaptation to the heat and humidity, which is typical of this tropical region, encourages a vibrant communal atmosphere as villagers and visitors alike participate.

As the procession moves from the northward area of Kūvākkam towards the east, there is a brief dance in a lane extending northward, which is then demarcated as the site of the 'weeping ground' or *aḻukaḷam*, where rituals commemorating Kūttāṇṭavar's multiple deaths occur on the sixteenth day. Subsequently, the deity's head is returned to the temple each night. This procession is carried out exclusively by the members of Vaṉṉiyar[17] community, with nine of them participating in relay fashion. Although the dancers claim not to be in a state of possession or *āvēcam*, they fulfil a conventional ritualistic role of 'god-dancer' or *cāmiyāṭi*, asserting that Kūttāṇṭavar, a celebrated dancer in his own right, inspires their spectacular performance. The dancers enter into an enclosure formed by rows of young palmyra and coconut palms. These trees, emblematic of the lush tropical landscapes of Tamil Nadu, create a natural platform for their performance. The enclosure formed by these palms provides a symbolic barrier, marking this space as a sacred transitional zone between the mundane and the sacred. The dance, which is not just a physical performance but also a spiritual exertion, is heightened by the tropical humidity that envelops the space, making each movement seem more laborious and each breath more laden with devotion.

Starting on the thirteenth day of the festival, preparations begin for the deity's fully embodied procession. These preparations entail various ritualised death and resurrection ceremonies. On the thirteenth day, a key rite involves transferring the deity's life from his head temporarily into a pot (*kalacam*), while his head undergoes repainting in a shed behind the temple. The fourteenth day includes the evening rite called kampam niruttal, or 'the standing of the post,' where the village headman of Kūvākkam (Nāṭṭāṉmai) sets a post in the chariot (*tēr*), with the Tamil Nadu State Government Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HRCE) board-appointed Tarumakarttā, who is the chief temple trustee, in attendance. This marks the commencement of men purchasing turmeric-dyed *tāli* strings at a token amount each to marry Aravāṉ.

Turmeric is a member of the ginger family and is native to the tropical regions of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. It is not only a spice staple in Indian cooking but also a widely-used element in rituals and indigenous medicine across India. Turmeric is known for its potent anti-inflammatory and healing properties. During the kampam niruttal, the turmeric-dyed *tāli* strings become symbols of marital fidelity and protection. Each string, carrying a piece of turmeric root fashioned as a pendant, is sold and tied around the necks of men who symbolically marry Aravāṉ. This act of tying the turmeric-laden *tāli* is emblematic of invoking the protective and purifying powers of turmeric, which is believed to ward off evil and foster longevity and vitality.

[17] Vaṉṉiyar, historically referred to as Palli, is a significant Dravidian community predominantly located in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu. They are also classified under the Most Backward Classes (MBC) category in Tamil Nadu.

Likewise during this time, the head of Aravāṉ is stripped and repainted, with the carpentry work on the chariot or *tēr* is performed by the Ācāris, an artisan caste who often serve as priests in low-caste village rituals.

The fifteenth day is marked by a festive atmosphere, and the Alis, who progressively arrive from the fourteenth to the sixteenth day from various districts of Tamil Nadu and congregate at Kūvākkam, play a central role in the celebrations. They rent houses in the southern street of Kūvākkam, construct temporary shelters in nearby paddy fields, or fill the hotels in neighbouring towns. The lush and extensive paddy fields remain not just agricultural spaces but transform into venues for nocturnal festivities. Unlike colder regions where snow-covered fields lie dormant, these vibrant, green expanses invite nighttime activity, transforming into lively spaces where various forms of entertainment unfold, including comedy shows, dancing, and open-air film screenings. Engaging in stick-dance and *karakam*-dancing and even offering services as prostitutes in the secluded expanses of the paddy fields, the Alis take advantage of the cover of darkness provided by the night, a time when the temperature becomes more bearable compared to the oppressive heat of the day. The climactic moment of the festival highlights the adaptation to the tropical climate even further. It occurs around 5:30 a.m. on the sixteenth day, just as the cool of the night begins to give way to the dawn. At this early hour, the deity's head is brought out for a grand procession, strategically timed to precede the day's peak temperatures. This timing is quintessentially suited to the humid summer of Tamil Nadu, where activities are planned to avoid the midday heat. The procession is accompanied by a large crowd and includes various rituals, such as offering coconuts on top of the Kūttāṇṭavar temple.

As the procession proceeds, Aravāṉ's appearance gradually changes from a joyous head to a sombre embodied form. Tears and sweat are depicted on the deity, signifying his readiness for sacrificial suffering and death. When the procession reaches the southern street where the Alis stay, it takes on the form of a ceremonial funeral procession and the Alis engage themselves in rituals of widowhood, such as donning the white saree, the traditional attire of a widow. From the southern street, Aravāṉ's procession moves towards the 'weeping ground', and his arrival at the site symbolises his entry into the Kurukshetra battlefield on the eighth day of the war, where he was to confront Alambusa. According to some scholars, there isn't any specific ritual enactment of Aravāṉ's first death (*kalappali*). Instead, it is commemorated as Aravāṉ's 'ultimate sacrifice' (*kaṭaipali*), referring to the disassembly of his body that would occur at the Kūvākkam's Kālī temple after nightfall. In this way, Aravāṉ's multiple mythical deaths and regenerations become intertwined with one another.

Subsequently, after these mourning rituals are enacted, a cloth is used to conceal Kūttāṇṭavar's lifeless eyes. The chariot, now serving as a symbol of death, is transported from the palm grove into the sugarcane fields located behind it, both

typical elements of the landscape in Kūvākkam. The verdant path, well-suited to the region's warm, humid climate, leads directly to an open-air Kālī temple located beside a lake. Kūttāṇṭavar's body is disassembled, his head is reanimated, and the head and body parts are thencarried back in a frenzied procession to their respective places of origin, serving as the focal point of the seventeenth day's festivities, with the head being returned to the Kūttāṇṭavar temple in Kūvākkam. Finally, on the morning of the eighteenth day, the *Cāmi*'s (deity) head is adorned and paraded solely within Kūvākkam, this time without any dancing involved. In the evening, it is further embellished as Dharmarāja (Yudhisṭḥira) and ceremoniously enthroned within the sanctum of the Kūttāṇṭavar temple.

The Dialectics of Caste, Gender and Devotion

Aravāṉ is conspicuously presented as an alternative or surrogate figure for his father Arjuna as well as Krishna. These two are typically the only ones mentioned as possessing the thirty-two sacred bodily marks required to render them acceptable as sacrificial offerings to Kālī on the battlefield. However, Aravāṉ's matrilineal associations with the Nāgas underscore his inferior status compared to these two alternative yet unattainable sacrificial victims. At the same time, his matrilineal associations evoke his connections with the Nāga elements linked to underworld resources and powers. In serving as a substitute for Krishna and Arjuna, he acts as a dual surrogate for both the deity and the ideal king. In his role as a surrogate for the deity, i.e., Krishna, he bears resemblance to the 'sacrificial victim of the site' (*vāstupuruṣa*) within a temple, albeit with a significant caveat—this 'site' is not an ordinary temple but rather the ritualised battlefield, transformed into a Kālī temple (Hiltebeitel, 1991, p. 310).

On the other hand, as a stand-in for the king (i.e., Arjuna), Aravāṉ brings to mind the condemned regicide, whose dismemberment and removal of flesh, as Foucault observes, embody the "symmetrical, inverted figure of the king." In this context, Aravāṉ represents a victim whose disarticulation, through ritual negation, defines the 'surplus' articulation of "the king's two bodies," a concept meticulously analysed by Ernst Kantorowicz (1957). However, the Kūttāṇṭavar cult, and the Kūvākkam festival in particular, situate the pervasive symbol of the severed head within a 'political anatomy' that refrains from demanding complete 'corporation.' It appears that Kūttāṇṭavar's detached head possesses the advantage of traversing opposing realms of significance more freely when it remains non-corporate.

Firstly, a gendered dichotomy emerges between the Vaṉṉiyars and the Alis in their engagement with the severed head symbol of Aravāṉ. On one hand, the severed head bears a profound connection to the hyper-masculine persona of Aravāṉ, the renowned warrior embodying the thirty-two physical markings that render him essentially a

Mahāpuruṣa. He offers his head to the goddess Kālī as the zenith of his thirty-two acts of self-mutilation, serving as a manifestation of the Kṣatriya ideal deeply ingrained in the heritage and identity of his devoted Vaṉṉiyar followers. This practice harks back to the head offerings made to the goddess, akin to the Aravāṉ myth, signifying a warrior ideal rooted in the Pallava era. Conversely, this symbol also relates to the participation of the uninitiated Alis, who unite in matrimony with a male possessing some semblance of their tribulations while preserving his masculinity. For them, their lamentations solely encompass Aravāṉ's initial demise. Their focus centres on the semi-vital and semi-mortem existence of his dancing head, from which an entire heroic body is reconstituted in their presence, only to be forsaken as they adopt the role of widows while the body remains intact. This particular facet seems to evoke potent memories of the half-lived experiences of that which they have dissected.

Secondly, akin to the contrasting dynamics inherent in the exchange of heads between a princess and an Untouchable in the Tamil folk narratives of the village goddess, Reṇukā-Māriyammaṉ, a reflection of the social structure within village communities becomes apparent in the interaction between the Vaṉṉiyars and the Paṟaiyars. While Reṇukā-Māriyammaṉ possesses a high-caste head atop a low-caste body, the situation with Kūttāṇṭavar is reversed. In the context of the festival in Kūvākkam, it is recounted that his head was discovered in an *irāki* (a cereal) field by Paṟaiyars beneath a thorny bush. In a sense, the Paṟaiyars take on the role of providing for and tending to the head, while the Vaṉṉiyars assume dual roles: they serve as the bodies that engage in the ritualistic dance alongside the head and act as the sponsors of the annual procession involving the disassembly and reconstitution of Aravāṉ's body.

Here again, the idea of complete 'corporation' is deliberately avoided. The head, as a symbol of life's essential elements, serves as a potent emblem for various forms of contestation, while the accompanying bodies remain inherently transient. Nonetheless, they perpetuate the social disparities inherent in village life and the momentary but precarious mingling of castes that transpires during festivals. In other villages, these tensions manifest differently. At Pilḷaiyārkuppam, conflicts arise between affluent Cetṭiyārs, whose ancesstors uncovered the head, and Vaṉṉiyars, who figuratively provide the body. In Kalaṅkiyam, eighteen villages organise into two factions to engage in a tug of war to disassemble Aravāṉ's body. The Alis, however, remain detached from these inter-village rivalries.

Third, it is imperative to analyse the differential relationship between Alis and Vaṉṉiyars, in order to comprehend the increasing participation of transsexual communities in the Kūttāṇṭavar festivals, particularly those held in Kūvākkam. For both groups, the act of impersonating Krishna-Mohinī holds significant importance and appeal, albeit with different nuances. Their engagement can be characterised as a form of *bhakti*, but it differs from the type of devotion described by Shulman in the

context of Kūttāṇṭavar's myths and festivals. Shulman suggests that in these rites, the worshipers direct their rituals toward the sacrificial victim (Aravāṉ) rather than the Bride (Krishna-Mohinī) who claims his life (Shulman, 1980, p. 336).

Consequently, the question arises as to how the 'transvestite worshipper' can be equated with the goddess who seeks union with this deity. The identification with Krishna-Mohinī does not revolve around a love experienced in separation or an identification with the feminine to worship a male divinity. To provide a tentative formulation, this form of *bhakti* appears to flow in two directions: a love directed not only towards Aravāṉ through Krishna as the bride (and Kālī as the mother) but also towards Krishna (and Kālī) through Aravāṉ. In this sense, it constitutes a *bhakti* in which both the villagers and the Alis identify themselves, albeit in different ways, with the god (Krishna) as well as with the devotee (Aravāṉ). This dual identification enables them to bring forth the devotee's unique but multifaceted experience of the god.

For the local villagers of Kūvākkam, whose vow to marry Kūttāṇṭavar for a day encompasses all three of his deaths, their temporary transvestism retains some of its martial epic context. The Krishna they personify retains elements of his extensive and intricate character of the *Mahābhārata*. They identify with a god who assumes a 'woman's guise' to entice Kūttāṇṭavar into a day-long matrimony, thereby ensuring his self-mutilating death. This identification allows them to witness, through Kūttāṇṭavar's eyes, the culmination of their one-day marriage, marked by rituals of widowhood, on the ceremonial battlefield.

This act of *darśan*, or divine vision, involves viewing Kūttāṇṭavar's dying head and provides insight into his unblemished folk *bhakti* vision of Kurukshetra, a form of *vīraṉ bhakti* bestowed by Krishna himself. What Aravāṉ perceives, in reality, is these village-devotees who, by fulfilling their commitment to marry him in their 'women's guise,' have, in their identification with Krishna, enabled the war that Aravāṉ witnesses and the vision it imparts. Aravāṉ becomes their beloved and dedicated sacrificial victim. The devotees' prayers for health, prosperity in crops, and fertility resonate particularly with the challenges and opportunities presented by the tropical climate. The lush, yet sometimes unpredictable, agricultural conditions define their daily lives and aspirations. Prosperity in crops such as rice, sugarcane, and coconuts—staples that thrive in the region's hot and humid conditions—reflects a direct dependence on the rhythm of tropical seasons, marked by monsoon rains that can both nourish and devastate. In this deeply religious setting, the fertility sought by devotees also metaphorically parallels the fecundity of the land, which is heavily nurtured by climate. Subsequently, in the death rites that ensue, their mythic husband transitions into an ancestor figure, and through the regeneration rituals, he returns to safeguard their villages.

In contrast, the Alis' *bhakti* towards Aravāṉ is characterised by their indescribable fearful reverence. Unlike the local villagers, Alis do not enter into temporary vows to marry Aravāṉ; their union with him is a permanent state. Their identification with Krishna does not take the form of temporary feminine guise (*vēṭam*). Instead, it is grounded in a condition they have chosen to make enduring—their connection with his Ali *avatāra*. Consequently, they undergo an extended period of widowhood lasting thirty days. By concentrating exclusively on Aravāṉ's initial demise, his *kaḷappali*, they reinforce their transformation by aligning themselves with this particular manifestation of Kṛishna, which is unique to this episode. Moreover, their reverence for an unsung hero whose act of self-sacrifice resonates deeply with their own experiences adds to the complexity of their devotion. Their worship of Kūttāṇṭavar permits them to ritually reenact a form of marriage between their present selves and their former selves. In doing so, they engage in an initiatory rite that collectively affirms this union.

Conclusion

The study of Kūttāṇṭavar's festivals presents a fascinating exploration of the interplay between transsexuality, death, and regeneration within the rich cultural and tropical milieu of Tamil *Mahābhārata* folk traditions. Through a nuanced analysis of the rituals, beliefs, and practices shaped by the tropical landscape, this research has unveiled the multifaceted layers of devotion, identity, and tropical dynamics that underpin this unique cultural phenomenon. One of the central themes that emerged from this investigation is the duality of devotion and identity among the festival participants. The rituals are a vivid tableau of how tropicality influences and is reflected in local cultural expressions. They underscore how the natural fecundity of the tropics fosters and is mirrored in the community's spiritual practices, where the fertility of the land is seen as a divine blessing essential for the community's prosperity. The interwoven nature of these elements highlights the unique cultural adaptation to the tropical climate, showcasing a lifestyle that harmonises spiritual, social, and tropical dimensions.

The festivals' cultural significance also becomes apparent through the lens of identity and social hierarchy. The interplay between different castes, as exemplified by the collaboration of Vaṉṉiyars and Paṟaiyars, underscores the complexities of village life and the temporary cooperation and mixing of castes during these festivities. Such tensions and collaborations serve as a microcosm of broader societal dynamics, echoing the caste-based struggles and negotiations in Tamil culture. Furthermore, the festivals' association with Aravāṉ, Krishna-Mohinī, and Kālī reveals an interplay between divinity and devotee, wherein both the god and the devotee are interconnected in a symbiotic relationship. The identification with these deities and their various avatars reflects a unique form of *bhakti* that transcends conventional boundaries, enabling the participants to embody the divine even as they worship it.

The Kūttāṇṭavar festivals encapsulate a living cultural narrative where the themes of transsexuality, death, and rebirth converge in a complex web of devotion, identity, and social dynamics within a tropical context. This study has offered a comprehensive glimpse into the heart of these festivals, shedding light on how the tropical landscape influences and is intrinsically linked to the rituals, contributing to their enduring cultural significance and the intricate web of beliefs that continue to shape Tamil *Mahābhārata* folk cultures. Further research in this area promises to unravel even more layers of meaning and shed light on the dynamic interplay between tradition and transformation within these vibrant and enigmatic celebrations that are rooted in folk cultures of Tamil Nadu.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the anonymous reviewers whose insightful feedback and constructive comments were invaluable in enhancing the depth and quality of this article. My sincere thanks to Dr. Anita Lundberg, the editor-in-chief, for her expert guidance throughout the publication process. Dr. Lundberg's constant assistance made the entire process remarkably smooth. I am also thankful to the copyeditor for their meticulous attention to detail, which significantly improved the clarity and coherence of this paper.

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