

**‘KAVADI ATTAM’ A DANCE RITUAL PRACTICED
AS A COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE**

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Introduction

The festival of *Thai Pusamⁱ* is celebrated with great splendor in *Palani*, a small town situated in the Dindugal district of Tamil Nadu. According to historical texts this place obtained its name from the myth of *Pazham-nee*, which means ‘You’ (Lord *Muruganⁱⁱ*), who is the “Fruit”. The festival thus, is centered on the Hindu god, Lord *Murugan*. Myth suggests that *Murugan* and his brother *Ganeshaⁱⁱⁱ* were asked to circumambulate the world in a contest held by their parents *Siva* and *Parvati*, *Ganesha* won the contest as he chose to simply circumambulate his parents, for he considered his parents to be the mighty world, while his younger brother actually went around the world (Ward, Winter, 1984, 307-334). Faced with the logical explanation that *Ganesha* gave, *Murugan* had to concede defeat and *Ganesha* won the prized fruit (the *Gnana-pazham*). Enraged, *Murugan* left his home and family in the mountain of Kailash and came down to the foot hills of *Sivagiri^{iv}*. *Siva* as an act of pacification implied that *Murugan* himself was the fruit (*Pazham*) of all wisdom and knowledge. Hence the place came to be known as *Pazham-nee* (“you are the fruit”) or *Palani*, which is a hilly terrain.

Alongside the popular myth, there was a demon named *Idumban* who carried the hills, one on each side, slung across his shoulders in the form of a *Kavadi^v*. When he

reached a particular place through his journey he felt fatigued; he placed the *Kavadi*^{vi} down on the ground to rest. When he wanted to resume his journey, he found that he could not lift the hill as *Murugan* had made it impossible for *Idumban* to carry it. Curious to know the cause *Idumban* spotted a little boy wearing only a piece of cloth around his waist, standing on the top of the hill. He demanded that the boy left at once so that *Idumban* could proceed with his task. The boy was in a mood for a battle and refused to comply. In the fierce battle that ensued, *Idumban* was killed but was later restored to life by little boy himself. *Idumban* later recognized the boy as none other than Lord *Murugan* and prayed for his blessings, to which Lord *Murugan* offered that:

- Whoever carried the *Kavadi* on his shoulders, signifying the two hills and visited the temple should be blessed; and
- *Idumban* should be given the privilege of standing as a sentinel at the entrance to the *Palani* hill.

Hence, one can see the *Idumban* shrine half-way up the hill where every pilgrim is expected to offer prayers to him before entering the temple of Lord *Murugan*.

Since then, pilgrims to *Palani* bring their offerings on their shoulders in a *Kavadi*. At one point the pilgrims introduced dancing with the *Kavadi* and hence the name *Kavadiattam* emerged (here “attam” refers to dance). Frasca describes “attam” in the following terms:

Attu (or Attam) is a nominal form derived from the Tamil verb meaning ‘perform’ or ‘dance’. The derivatives of this verb have a general sense of ‘performance’ that must be qualified by a descriptive or taxonomic item preceding it. (Frasca 1990, p. 15)

As a part of the ritual the pilgrims also pierce their cheeks and tongue with sharp spears significant of performing penance^{vii} to show respect and offer prayers to the deity. Besides the act of penance, carrying the *Kavadi* signifies a range of purposes like sacrifice, thanks-giving for fulfillment of vows, proclamation of devotion, self-mortification etc. The miniscule piercing spears are representatives of the spear which the Lord *Murugan* holds in his hands. This custom has spread from Palani to *Murugan* shrines all over the world.

The act of trance and the trance-like movements during the process of penance by the devotees have also been a focus of enquiry where the study of this ritualistic dance form has been instrumental in analyzing the nature of trance and the movements that this stage of being generates in the body of the devotee. Trance is considered as a psycho-somatic state of being that the devotee appears to be in, because of being possessed by a deity or a spirit. Some Cultural Anthropologists (Ward, 1984, 307-334) have explained that the trance is an outcome of psychological outburst of unbearable pain caused by the piercing of the face and body during the penance. The movements performed during the trance or the trance-like state are not learnt but are performed with the help of the previously imbibed and embodied memory of having watched or experienced the ritual - by having been a part of it in early age. This helps the devotee to bring back the similar kind of movements from his/her memory.

During the festival of *Thai Pusam*, the act of penance is performed through the piercing of the cheeks and tongue of the devotee, with sharp needle-like metal sticks. The process of piercing involves a stage of preparation of the devotee mentally and the act of the community (family and kin) in the process of extending their support to the

devotee with the beating of drums and chanting in unison. Extension of the psychological self of the individual devotee, through his/her inclusion in the group-act of performance creates a bonding by which the devotee's sense of pain is shared by the community.

Today *Kavadiattam* exists beyond the borders of Tamil Nadu, sometimes recreating the whole ritualistic event of *Thai Pusam* in another geographical locale which is necessary for the Tamil settlers in abroad. This act, if I may say is merely a performed marker of identity of the Tamil community in diaspora spaces. The fieldwork from 17.01.2011 to 20.01.2011 on the area in and around the temples of Palani hills, the temple is located in the town Palani, 100 km south east of Coimbatore and a similar distance north west of Madurai; it is in the foot hills of the eponymous *Palani* hills in Tamil Nadu provided opportunity for me to acquire a considerable level of knowledge, thus helping me to analyze the performance of the form as a tool for reaffirmation of ethnic-cultural identity of the Tamil people, and in enhancing a sense of social solidarity by evoking cultural memory and nostalgia in *Palani*, Tamil Nadu.

In the case of this research, the trance/ trance-like movement is a parallel /inter-twining occurrence alongside the act of penance, where the devotee in trance enacts the bodily movements from his memory – of the experiences of having seen similar acts of penance and pain-infliction on his/her own family and kin in early age. The memory comes from being a part of the ritual by watching it or being involved as a family member. Hence, once the devotee is in the same situation the cultural memory makes the performer move exactly during trance as his/her previous experiences.

Here the devotee's experience is shared as well by people who accompany him/her, not by actually sharing the pain, but by sharing the idea of the pain and the shared social nature of the sense of ritual penance. Thus the lived experience of one performer become the shared experience of others, as the group consisting of the devotee and the community, acts together in the performance of *Kavadiattam*.

Kavadi Attam is a part of the community life of the state of Tamil Nadu; most of us growing up in the state have been exposed to it either as devotees, or as participant/non-participant observers. The important keywords guiding and controlling my "viewing" in the process of the research were "devotee", "ritual process", "performances", "prop", "trance", "penance", "community participation"-some of the words that have also kept cropping up in the available literature.

The Devotee

Any member of the community who decides to take part in the ritual has to undergo certain signifying rituals. The first step is to wear a garland (*mala*) and to take on an ascetic way of life for the whole month of *Kartigai* (mid December – mid January). There are devotees who just come on a *yatra* [group of people walking towards a holy place or temple] from a particular place to *Palani*, whereas there are other devotees who carry the *Kavadi* and walk on foot (*yatra*). There are also huge numbers of female devotees who take up the *yatra* but do not go through the ascetic life for a long time. This is because of the biological restrictions (menstrual cycle) that are considered as impure in Hindu traditions and hence a taboo. Other menopausal women undergo total ascetic life, take on the *yatra* and observe the rituals.

The devotee gets into trance with the help of music and the community's encouragement. The community helps the devotee in dealing with the *Kavadi* by supporting the carrying of the *Kavadi* during the *yatra* and at the time of trance. The acknowledgment of the trance and the deity's presence inside the devotee comes as a result of certain rhythmic movements of the body of the devotee. Thereafter, the process of handling the *Kavadi* is helped by the local priest and the fellow members of the community.

The mutual interdependence of both the devotee and the community during the ritual are important aspects of the festival and the rituals as well as the performative elements therein. The sharing and transference of the sacred state is between the actual body of the devotee and the mass of bodies around him/her belonging to the members of the community. As the devotee's act becomes the part of the community act, the members of the community who help in this process, can access this ritual body. The *Kavadi* or the ritual prop remains of central importance as a representation of devotional offering as well as the devotee's material connection to the ritual space.

Religion in various places serves a similar necessity and needs, in order to achieve the community cohesion. In a larger context, rituals help the individual or the group to attain a certain level of community affiliation and identity in performing them. Ritual acts as a vehicle for the individual devotees or the group to experience a level of oneness of the community, in the name of festivals, community performances and parades etc. According to the Dictionary of the Anthropology,

Durkheim (1915) saw in ritual the very fount of society: it was by coming together with others in ritual that primitive man experienced his membership in society and

felt the “collective effervescence” that sustained community solidarity (Barfield, 1997, 410).

It is universally believed that community rituals bring good fortune to the community and the family. Most of the people from the community get involved in the ritual for the well-being of the self and the family. When asked, the most commonly stated purposes for being involved in *Kavadiattam* are as follows:

- To secure blessings for the family and friends as a whole
- To ensure the smooth and successful family life, rites and duties – described also as ‘necessities’ by many - like the marriage of the daughter, job for the son etc.
- To ensure the well-being and good health of the family members.

The Prop and the Costume

The name “Kavadiattam” is associative to its prop *Kavadi*. The *Kavadi* has its own ritualistic value and comprises of different parts. There are two side plates of different sizes, where they are etched and carved, attached together with a cylindrical wood the length of which is about two feet or more in length. There is a semi circular bow made of bamboo strips which attaches to the side plates forming an arch. This arch is covered with a small piece of cloth which is mostly saffron or green; it might also be made of shining material embedded with flowers as well. The *Kavadi* is made up of the wood from the Neem tree, which is called *Vembu* in Tamil. It is believed to have a special effect upon the devotee^{viii}, as when carried it absorbs the heat during the Yatra. The *Kavadi* is decorated finally with peacock feathers along with other decorations depending on the devotee’s creative choice. There is a vessel which is tied to the base

wood, which is sealed with a yellow cloth usually containing jaggery but can also be filled with honey, milk, coconut water, rose water, dates etc. The name of the *Kavadi* is decided in accordance with the item which is carried in this sealed vessel such as “Milk *Kavadi*”, “Rose water *Kavadi*”, “Coconut water *Kavadi*” The *Kavadi* without the vessels are decorated with flowers which are consequently known as “Flower *Kavadi*”.



The devotee and his Holy Prop; the Kavadi

ThiruAvinankudi Temple,
Palani Foot hills, Tamil
Nadu.

(18.1.2011).

[Photograph by *Debanjali
Dey*]

The devotee or the dancer has his or her own costume, which includes the saffron-colored cotton *dhoti* (or lower garment for males) tied with a saffron-colored cotton towel to his waist. The male devotee may or may not wear a shirt, and is mostly bare-bodied as he carries the *Kavadi*. The female devotee wears a yellow, red or saffron colored *sari* as these colors are associated with sacredness by the localities and the religion. The *Kavadi* dancers may or may not wear the special kind of anklets which is also considered as sacred and are offered prayers before the occasion.

The Dance, the Idea of Trance Performance and Identity

Kavadiattam literally means 'the dance with *Kavadi*'. In the name itself, there is a reference to the binary of the functionality of the form. On the one hand, for the devotees, *Kavadiattam* is a ritual act where the bodily movements are required only in order to activate the *Kavadi*, as an extension of the body. At the same time, the references to the skilful or expert performances bring the importance of structured movements of a community dance to the foreground.

Kavadiattam (or the dance with *Kavadi*) is an integral part of the yearly religious festival of *Thai Pusum*. The devotees walk and dance towards the *Palani* hill and go around it, to the accompaniment of a specific music. The dance acts as one of the essential parts of the ritual. People from different parts of Tamil Nadu reach *Palani* to perform this ritual dance. The movements may be differentiated into two groups by the categorization that the local people have for the forms which are danced. One form, a community dance known as *Oyilattam*, danced in smaller community rituals, during every full moon night, gets mixed with *Kavadi Attam*, which can be distinguished by its specific movements with and around the prop of *Kavadi*.

In *Oyilattam*, the dancers usually dance in a circle. A number of movement cycles are repeated in unison by the group, and the performers follow an unspoken sign system whereby they follow one person who leads the dance, and directs the changing of movements. The drums remain the central instruments, and the rhythmic pattern is also controlled by the performers to generate the necessary vigor. The movements usually follow a four beat pattern, with different combinations of steps, jumps and turns,

with the hands following the natural flow of the body, without any specific hand gestures, usually common in many Indian dances.



The Pambai drummers

ThiruAvinankudi Temple,
Palani Foot hills, Tamil
Nadu.

(18.1.2011).

[Photograph by *Debanjali
Biswas*]

The movements with the *Kavadi* are of specific types. Although never taught as a specific grammar, the basic movements are learnt by younger members as they participate in the yearly festivities, and see their elders, family members and other members of the community perform year after year. The performer faces the center and moves along the side in a circle, or moves in front or back in a rhythm with the help of the drums. All movements are constructed with a conscious thought of the body being in alignment with or the base for the *Kavadi*. The *Kavadi*, weighing anything between 15 to 20 kilograms, is balanced on the shoulders and the devotee dances with the accompaniment of vigorous drumming. The upper body and the arms have the responsibility of supporting the heavy prop. Thus, the freedom of the movements in upper body is restricted to a certain level.

The upper body of the performer has the responsibility of balancing the *Kavadi* with the help of the trapezius^{ix} muscles. These muscles help to control and co-ordinate

while regulating the movements of the *Kavadi* on the shoulders. The performer trains him/her-self to coordinate his/her shoulder muscles to balance the *Kavadi*, and with certain movements tries to rotate the *Kavadi* horizontally while the body is perpendicular to the prop. The *Kavadi* is balanced on the shoulders by its wooden base while the trapezius muscles help them to balance on the shoulders, and thus have a huge role in balancing, coordinating and controlling of the prop. On moving the particular trapezius muscle, the *Kavadi* can be rotated in sync with the rhythmic patterns. Some of the movements are structured to balance the *Kavadi* on shoulders while its wooden base is held with both hands. Sometimes the expert performers may not even hold the *Kavadi*, but balance it entirely on their shoulders or on the top of their heads, and regulate its undulating movements backward, forward, and rotate them clockwise and anticlockwise.

Thus the acts of balancing and controlling become the main part of the movements of *Kavadiattam*. The body always needs to maintain extreme control to synchronize and control the *Kavadi* while negotiating the centre of gravity, which results in small steps and regulated jumps, where the upper body maintains a more or less static balance. The *Kavadiattam* performer almost always moves his or her body backward and forward from the waist during his/ her movements.

As the dance form is analyzed in detail it becomes clear that there are some common steps and movement formations from other folk dance forms which gets intermixed with the dance form of *Kavadiattam*. These movement patterns are followed and performed by different devotees all over Tamil Nadu and in other diasporic situations.

As in most other rituals, the *Kavadiattam* rituals are performed with a prescribed level of auspiciousness and sanctity as the concept of 'dedication' is a socially determined one and is also imposed and associated with every ritual in certain specific ways. Every ritual has its own set of 'ideal' sanctifying methods, and also the concept of 'optimum rituality'^x which is taken as the proper state for attempting to partake in a particular ritual or 'trance'.

A trance is understood to be so, by certain behavioral practices, which signify the altered state of consciousness, to the people who see it. Hence the trance as a state of becoming and being is as important to the person who is in it as it is for the people who experience it as audience or the devotee's companion. The movements in trance are also specific to the community and can be understood by the way the performers start to move during the ritual in an erratic fashion and with high energy, which the community accepts and understands as trance.

The nature of trance shows a great level of involvement of memory in general. The past memories of each of the devotees stimulate his actions in the present. The devotees are culturally conditioned as all of them see different devotees from their childhood, entering into trance. The question then takes us back to the fact that there are certain behavioral patterns and movements that are always seen as associated with states of trance. Hence, it is probably correct to conclude that the images of movements stored in the minds (because of seeing them being performed over and over again since childhood) work as the reference points or the memory store, for the body to fall back on, when in similar occasions. Gradually, when the individual reaches the situation where he/she has to undergo the ritual of the *Kavadiattam* and the piercing, the imbibed

memory of the individual from the childhood emerges to make them perform the similar act of trance with the similar movements. This is how the transference of the movement idea of the trance from one person to another and from one place to another and also from one generation to another generation takes place.

The trance is a common phenomenon happening to the individual, participating in the ritual of *Thai Pusam*. A person entering a state of trance is almost always identified through a range of bodily movements, often denoted as “dance” or “dance-like”. The movements of the individuals during the trance are observed by the whole community during the *Kavadi* ritual on *Thai Pusam* festival. Analysis of these movements leads the scholars to believe that they are handed down as community memory from one generation to another during these festivals, where members of the community from all age groups gather together, year after year. The moments and movements are inscribed in their memory and once they are placed in the similar situation they move accordingly.

The interesting feature of trance is that though there is no learning involved, the body movements, often completely structured, coordinated, repeated and rhythmic, never differ from one generation to another as they travel with the help of the memory from one generation to another. Trance-induced body movements are all similar not only within one community but also for a group of people from a village/ city/ district. The movements of trance from different parts of Tamil Nadu are very similar in nature as well such universalism of movements which are not formally taught but seen in *Kavadi* rituals, makes it evident that the range of bodily acts that signify trance are products of auto-suggestive movement generations aided by community memory.



The women in Trance

ThiruAvinankudi Temple,
Palani Foot hills, Tamil Nadu.

(18.1.2011).

[Photograph by *Debanjali Biswas*]

The above explanation clarifies the idea that the notion of trance is nothing but the psychological upheaval of the human emotions at a particular period of time, where the community and the music encourages and makes him accept the feeling that the deity will possess the individual. When the individual starts experiencing the upheaval of emotions encouraged by the music and the expectations and encouragements of the people of the community, he/ she loses control and starts moving in an erratic manner, which is actually imbibed in their memory and comes out in the nature of trance.

The trance involved in the ritual of *Kavadiattam* is associated with the notion of the deity possessing the devotee for a particular period of time. During this time the devotee (as claimed by all the devotees questioned) does not remember anything. There are huge groups of *Kavadi* performers who get into trance during the period of *Thai Pusam* festival in *Palani*. The performers in trance may or may not hold the *Kavadi* during the festival. There are certain *Kavadi* performers who get into trance while they

dance with the *Kavadi*, to the accompaniment of the *Pambai* drums. During the ritual of *Kavadiattam*, the trance signifies an altered state of mind of the devotee, as it is believed that the deity controls the mind. It does not mean – like in many other rituals – that he or she would be offered prayers by the rest of the community as the abodes (and therefore the representatives) of the god at that particular period of time. Instead he or she is left alone to experience the trance. Only in some cases, very rarely, some elderly devotees deliver oracles, believed to be the words of the deity, coming from the mouths of these carriers. Once the trance performers are in a totally uncontrolled situation where they go into a state of frenzy and cannot control themselves or their actions, the friends, family and people of the community take control of them. The chief or the veteran old devotee who is considered as Guru or the leader of the community reaches to the devotee and holds the individual's head and applies some *Thiruneeru* (holy ash). After the holy ash is applied the trance performer comes out of the state of trance. The performers who come out of trance act very tired and possessed.

The body involved in the ritual helps the individual to attain the spiritual divinity. The viewer or the audience of the rituals helps in completion of the ritual by being the receptors of it. The audience is most of the time from the community – usually made up of relatives or the immediate or distant family of the performing individual.

The audience has a huge role in understanding the ritual and the state of being of the devotee. The support of the audience is essential in the process of successful continuation of the ritual because the cultural codes of the particular ritual are already known to them. Thus the audience acts accordingly as they encourage the devotee or the ritual performer to perform the ritual and lends full support while the devotee goes

through the different stages of pain and performance. The audiences help the devotee in the trance by controlling them and also by controlling they accept the belief of the devotee and act accordingly with them. The audiences are the people who help the devotee during the penance; the piercing is done to the devotee while the audience yells the word *Aro-hara*, helping the devotee in believing and anticipating the act of possession by the deity. They also lend support in psychologically sharing the pain and also strengthening the devotee's resolve in going through the act of penance and pain. It is a member of the audience, who helps by holding the devotee's head. This particular act also signifies a physical connection between the body of the devotee and that of the member of the audience, whereby the pain travels beyond the individual body of the devotee him/herself. It is also the responsibility of the audience to try and support any devotee bodily, while he/she is in trance and is moving without any apparent control over his/her own body till the guru reaches to that particular devotee and applies the *Thiruneeru* on the devotee undergoing trance.

The audience reception, in this case, actually expresses the fact that the reception or reading of the performance is already culturally and historically structured-based on the community's memory and knowledge. Hence it is through the understanding of the audience that the meaning of the performance and the ritual becomes complete.

When the Dance becomes a Motif of Tamil identity

Apart from its connection to the ritual of *Thai Pusam*, the whole context and performance of *Kavadiattam* becomes inevitably linked to the question of community solidarity and identity, within the purview of my paper. Hence it becomes necessary for

me to investigate the performance of *Kavadiattam* as a form of ritualistic dance, away from its original geographical context, in de-contextualized diasporic spaces, where the form itself becomes a link to the 'original' culture for the Tamil diaspora. When the ritual is performed in Tamil Nadu it has several religio-social significations. Overarching presence of a deep faith in Lord *Murugan* and his powers for the community makes this submission not only easy but also automatic. The community knowledge and memory also aids the perpetuation of the ritual, without questioning or changing age-old expectations and structures (that is, a trance is recognized instantly by the members of the community when certain behaviors are noticed in a devotee).

Ann R. David writes

Tamil diasporic communities in Germany, Switzerland, and Norway for example, are establishing new temples and revealing increasing confidence in festival practices. As in London, a new self-assurance that reveals specific Tamil identity is articulated and performed in these embodied customs. (David, 2009, 151-153)

One must acknowledge here that the *Kavadiattam* in diasporic situation, hence, is the replica of the real, which becomes the real for the people experiencing the event. Thus, the attributes work in the recreation of place / space and time left behind, for the community, and also helps them to create and perpetuate their new identity in their new place of living. This new identity is always a sum total of the old as well as the new identity regardless of the amount of conformation to or estrangement with the original identity that continue to affect their lives.

An ideal example is the “Singapore Youth Festival Central Judging”, where a centralized competition at school and junior college levels, judged by national and international judges, and subsequent inclusion of the best from those competitions in the showcase performances during the annual Singapore Youth Festival (SYF), promotes arts education in Singapore.

A Press release for the SINGAPORE YOUTH FESTIVAL (2010), by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, says,

The SYF is organized annually to showcase the myriad of talents of our students in the performing arts, sports and uniformed groups. Since its inception in 1966, the SYF has played an important role in providing a platform for students to hone their different skills. Through participation in the various SYF activities, students are offered the opportunity to develop social skills and build bonds with teammates of different social and ethnic backgrounds.^{xi}

These competitions have become the major source of excitement for students, right from the level of junior school and continuing up to the junior college level. Several categories of performances are judged. Among them are: Malay Dance, Indian Classical, Indian Folk, Indian Contemporary, Western Ballet, and Western Contemporary dances. Huge numbers of schools with groups, sometimes going up to 50 students per performance, take part in these competitions. Among the Indian folk dances the most popular ones are *Karagattam*, *Oyilattam*, and *Kavadiattam* from the southern part of India, *Garba* from Gujarat, and *Bhangra* from Punjab. Many of the schools choose to perform *Kavadiattam* in the completion in the “folk dance” category of SYF.

As it is noted in the case of Singapore, *Kavadiattam* is performed in many stages by various age groups, but mostly by young children, where the *Kavadi* becomes the wonderfully decorated prop and the performer is a young school student where he/ she is dressed in different colors. All of them still perform only to the *Kavadi* music available in the compact discs marketed by music companies or from the movies, where it is a religious song for Lord *Murugan* or *Kavadi*. The secondary material collected from the websites and YouTube, gives a clear scenario as to how *Kavadiattam* is performed in the diasporic stage by Indian people.^{xii}

For the Tamil diaspora in countries around the world, especially in South-east Asia, the ritual remains an important event in the calendar, so much so that there are huge public celebrations by the community on these occasions, where the act of faith reinforces the familiarity of the world and life left behind, along with the belief that the same god continues to ensure the safety of the people who may not be in the same geographical space but are in the same psycho-social space in the imagined context of the ritual. The community remembers and re-enacts the ritual to reclaim the past by activating the community memory and also creates a new memory in a new place – the place and space which they make theirs by doing their own rituals from some other land. Jose Esteban Munoz explains the necessity of expressing one's own culture and identity in a foreign land and also how if it is a minority then it is a case of the "disidentifications":

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that

continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship (Munoz, 1999, 5).

Performing the ritual and the dance means a regeneration of the faith as well as identity for the older generation of Tamil diaspora. For the younger generation who have never lived in Tamil Nadu but are identified as 'Tamil' in foreign nations, the performances become the motifs and icons which signify their "Tamil-ness" for them. Hence *Kavadiattam* is seen to be a popular form learnt in schools with a large number of Tamil students in Singapore and Malaysia, where students learn the form as one of the items of the dance classes, or for performances in competitions.

In both the spaces discussed above, the togetherness generated by the dancing bodies along with the shared space and time of the ritual generates a tangible and shared experience of culture and belonging together. As Yvonne Daniels writes

They are expressive dancing bodies in the same space at the same time performing the same movements to the same rhythms. The dancing bodies accumulate spirit, display power, and enact as well as disseminate knowledge. Worshipping performers reenact what they have learned, what they have been told, what they feel, and what they imagine. They re-present feelings, ideas, understanding, and knowledge (Daniel, 2005, 65).

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Notes

ⁱ It is a festival of the Hindus, celebrated mostly by the Tamil community on the full moon day in the Tamil month of *Thai* (mid January/ mid February).

ⁱⁱ *Murugan* is the second son of lord *Siva*, worshiped all over India and known by this name primarily among the Tamil people of southern India and other countries.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ganesha* is the first son of lord *Siva*, worshiped primarily among the Tamil people of southern India and other countries.

^{iv} The *Sivagiri* hill is a mythical hill which is believed to be around *Kailayam*, the hill where Lord *Siva* is believed to reside.

^v The prop consists of two semicircular pieces of wood or steel, which are bent and attached to a cross-like structure and this can be balanced on the shoulders.

^{vi} The size and structure of *Kavadi* vary in contemporary practice but are all linked to the offering of a pot of holy milk. Originally *Kavadi* refers to wooden bars with semicircular attachments supported on the shoulder and decorated with flowers and feathers. Large *Kavadi* are decorated metal structures carried with support from a waist band and shoulder rests, usually with metal spikes extending upward and outward from the supports. The large *Kavadi*, carried by men may weigh up to 40 lbs. Carrying of the *Kavadi* is most often accompanied by piercing of the flesh with hooks and skewers.

^{vii} 1. In order to ask for blessings the devotees go through a process of inflicting pain on their physical self in an act of penance.

2. An act of self-mortification or devotion performed voluntarily to show sorrow for a sin or other wrongdoing as per the online free dictionary. Retrieved from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/penance> 08-09-2010.

^{viii} During the field work one of the devotees explained about the importance and use of the *Vengai* tree's wood in *Kavadi*. He said, "This wood is from *Vengai* tree. This wood has a special quality because this absorbs the heat from the sun. Thus this wood is used for making *Kavadi*. Even in *Gopura kalasas* we can find it as the *kalasas* are made of *Vengai* wood."

^{ix} The trapezius muscle is divided into 3 areas: i. upper fibers; ii. middle fibers; iii. lower fibers. The significance of this division lies in the variety of functions performed by this muscle.

The trapezius muscle has several functions such as to move the shoulder blade in towards the spine, to rotate the shoulder blade so that the topmost part of the upper arm faces up, to move the shoulder blade up and down, to bring the head and neck in a backward direction, to rotate and bend the neck on sides, to assist in breathing. Retrieved from <http://backandneck.about.com/od/muscles/p/trapezius.htm>.

^x The point of readiness is of great importance in the context of the start of a ritual, and even in the context of a trance. The trance in itself becomes communicated through the initial awareness of the body – of the alterations the mind is going through. The registering of this awareness starts a series of

behavioral particularities, and that leads, in its turn, to a series of movements which are associated with the notion of trance. That moment of registration of the alteration of the mind may in itself and in its entire setting be identified as the 'optimum rituality'.

^{xi} The Press release was dated 28.04.2011. On the official website of the Ministry of Education, Singapore – Singapore Youth Festival is portrayed as the festival for promoting inter-ethnic understanding, community cohesion and the multi-cultural image of Singapore. Retrieved from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2010/06/singapore-youth-festival-2010.php>

^{xii} Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PxSL7-bU2M
Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvY5vLRCzPs&feature=related>
Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPJufPRVEJw&feature=related>
Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDWcLfKHw9k&feature=related>
Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dxGyGeHm3E&feature=related>