

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY  
AND COUNSELLING  
(IJEPC)

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## A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF HERO-STONE (NADUKAL) WORSHIP AMONG MALAYALIS (TRIBLE) IN THE KALVARAYAN HILLY AREA OF HERO-STONE WORSHIP

Asaikkannu Sakthivel <sup>1\*</sup>, Franklin Thambi Jose Selistus Darling <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Language and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

 [asaikkannu@fbk.upsi.edu.my](mailto:asaikkannu@fbk.upsi.edu.my)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4929-0595>

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Language and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

 [thambi@fbk.upsi.edu.my](mailto:thambi@fbk.upsi.edu.my)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0907-8966>

\*Corresponding Author

### Article Info:

#### Article history:

Received date: 19.12.2025

Revised date: 29.12.2025

Accepted date: 16.02.2026

Published date: 11.03.2026

#### To cite this document:

Sakthivel, A., & Darling, F. T. J. S. (2026). A Cultural and Historical Study of Hero-Stone (Nadukal) Worship Among Malayalis (Tribal) In the Kalvarayan Hilly Area of Hero-Stone Worship. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling*, 11(62), 590-599.

### Abstract:

Background: This paper analyzes the hero-stone (Nadukal) traditions of the Malayali tribes in the Kalrayan Hills. From the Megalithic era through the Sangam age, erecting memorials for warriors who perished in battle was a cornerstone of Tamil culture, extensively documented in the Tolkappiyam, Sangam literature, and devotional hymns. The study employs a Qualitative Descriptive-Historical Design. It adopts a longitudinal perspective to track the evolution of worship from prehistoric archaeological evidence to contemporary ethnographic practices. By integrating archaeology and anthropology, the research maps the continuity of tribal belief systems across millennia. A multi-disciplinary approach was utilized, involving Direct observation of hero-stones (e.g., Vediappan and Karuppurayan deities) in the Kalrayan, Servarayan, and Kolli Hills. Correlating Neolithic tools, rock engravings, and Megalithic monuments with existing hero-stones. Comparing ritualistic descriptions in Sangam texts with physical ground-level evidence. The study highlights these stones as "open-air museums" requiring urgent protection from environmental decay and modern encroachment. It reveals how Nadukal serves as a focal point for tribal identity, reinforcing social cohesion and ancestral spiritual trust. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the Sangam-era heroic code is not extinct but survives through modern folk deity cults, providing a vital link between Tamil Nadu's martial past and the present. In these highlands, hero-stone worship is more than a ceremony; it is a profound symbol connecting religion, history, and the enduring cultural heritage of the Malayali tribes

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1162036 **Keyword:**

Ancestor Worship, Ethno-archaeology, Folk Deities (Vediappan/Karuppurayan), Kalrayan Hills, Nadukal (Hero-stones), Malayali Tribes, Megalithic Culture, Sangam Literature, Tribal Identity, Tolkappiyam



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## Introduction

The leaders who once guided clans and tribal communities eventually became the progenitors of royal lineages. During the Megalithic period, cattle were considered the primary form of wealth. Conflicts arising from the capture or recovery of herds paved the way for the emergence of ruling dynasties. Possession of more herds required wider grazing lands, leading to territorial disputes. Such conflicts gave rise to organized states and monarchies during the Sangam period. Warriors who fell in battle were commemorated with hero-stones (Nadukal), and alongside burials, memorial objects and rituals of veneration became a practice that continues among tribes to this day. This paper analyzes the practice of hero-stone worship among the Malayali tribes of the Kalvarayan Hills as a cultural, historical, and religious phenomenon.

### *Definition and Explanation of Tribes*

The Tamil word "Pazhankudigal" is used as the translation for the English word "Tribe." The etymological root of "Tribe" is in the Latin language, meaning "One-third" (Tres). It is explained that the term originated from the custom of three people uniting to establish the city of Rome, and the word 'tribe' came to denote one of these three groups (1909).

In Tamil, this word has other translations such as Inakkuzhu Makkal (Ethnic group people), Malaivaazh Makkal (Hill-dwelling people), and Aathivasi Makkal (Aboriginal people). Scholars like Verrier Elwin and Lewis generally use the term "Tribe" to mean people who are backward in civilization.

Tribal people are also referred to as Poorveega Kudigal (Indigenous people), Moothakudigal (Elder communities), and Pazhankudi Makkal (Ancient community people). This community may have been called 'Pazhankudi' (ancient tribe) because they possess an ancient lifestyle and community structure (1962).

The word Aathivasi (Athi-Kudigal, Malaivasigal - Original Inhabitants, Hill-dwellers) refers to people who live in the mountains. Tribal people generally live dependent on forests, without contact with other populations. They are not dependent on other societies. Living on self-reliance, they sustain their livelihood by selling the forest resources and commodities they collect. They possess traditional technology (1962).

A tribe is defined as a human ethnic group that is different from others due to its isolated living environment, social status, economic status, and political context. Rājendiran (2008) states that the unique features that continue to exist among tribal people, such as culture, customs, nomadic nature (moving from place to place), lack of civilizational development, social control, living far away from civilized settlements, and their distinct appearance, dress code, and food cultures compared to civilized humans, all contribute to the concept of Pazhankudigal (Tribes).

Food gatherers are considered the oldest human group because they have no introduction or experience in agriculture. Instead, their food items include tubers, vegetables, fruits, honey, bamboo rice, and wild rice collected from the forests. They also collect aromatic substances from the forests and acquire money or engage in barter trade. They do not settle in one place but relocate towards water-rich areas in the hills.

In Tamil, the people referred to as 'Tribes' are called by various names. Politicians and the general public refer to them as Aathivasigal (Aboriginals) and Kaattuvassigal (Forest-dwellers). Literary scholars call them Malaiyina Makkal (Mountain people), Malaivaazh Makkal (Hill-dwelling people), Tholkudi, Muthukudi, Aathikudi, Poorkudi (Ancient/Original/Indigenous people). Gandhians follow Gandhi and refer to them as 'Harijan.' (Saami, 2019).

In academic circles, the terminology regarding tribes varies. Professor K. Rathnam, who translated Edgar Thurston's 'Caste and Tribes of Southern India' series, titled it 'Kulankalum Kudikalum' (Castes and Communities). Marxists refer to them as 'Inakkuzhu' (Ethnic Group), and Anthropologists use the term 'Pazhankudi' Tribe (1909).

Furthermore, Bhakthavatsala Bharathi (2018) explains that tribal people are a homogenous social group. They share a common location and dialect. They possess a common-looking social organization and maintain an egalitarian social system. They have a uniform cultural system and follow common ancestors, a Panchayat system, and religious beliefs.

### ***Types of Tribes***

Sociologists classify tribes based on linguistic structure and culture. If a tribal community has been found in the same habitat since very early times, they are called Muthupazhankudi or Tholpazhankudi (Elder or Proto-Tribe).

Those whose primary occupation was committing crimes were called Criminal Tribes (Kutravaali Pazhankudi). Today, those who have abandoned this profession and engaged in other occupations are referred to as Ex-Criminal Tribes (Munaal Kutravaali Pazhankudigal). (2008).

Tribal people constitute 7% of India's population, with approximately twenty million tribal people living in India. Geographically, they are divided into three tribal bloc (2004).

Northeast Bloc  
Central Bloc  
South Bloc

The Northeast Bloc extends from the Shimla and Elavar regions in the west to the Lushai Hills and Mishmi territory in the east. It includes Kashmir, Eastern Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Assam, and Sikkim. The tribes living here speak languages belonging to the Sino-Tibetan and Burmese families.

The Central Bloc includes Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, North Bombay, Odisha, and the Central Plateau. The tribes living in these central regions speak languages belonging to the Austric family. These languages differ between animate and inanimate objects but do not show distinctions based on gender or age. In the central region, tribes like Oraon, Kolam, Gond, and Kand use words belonging to the Dravidian language family.

The South Bloc includes Hyderabad, Mysore, Coorg, Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, Chennai, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

In addition to these three geographical divisions, for extensive research, the tribes are further categorized and viewed based on two additional divisions: tribes living in the foothills of the Himalayas and tribes living in the South. (Sathyaseela, 2004).

Tribes in Tamil Nadu

Various types of tribal people live in Tamil Nadu:

- Theni District: Paliyar and Irular.
- Dindigul District (Kodaikanal regions): Paliyar.
- Coimbatore District: Toda, Kota, and Kurumba.
- Nilgiri District: Toda, Baduga, Kota, and Paliyar.
- Tamil Nadu and Kerala Border Regions: Baduga, Malayalis, Thoduvar, Muthuvan, and Mudugar.

### **Background of the Study**

The Kalvarayan Hills have evidence of people living in it as early as the Neolithic period. The tools of the Neolithic epoch have been discovered in village locations, and the megalithic monuments are numerous on the hilltops. The same results are also found in the Servarayan hills and the Kolli hills. Their antiqueness is proved by archeological surveys.

To the Malayali tribes, Nadukals (hero-stones) are not a monument; it is a divine power, ancestral traditions, and social solidarity. The name and actions of the warrior being honored were frequently inscribed on the inscriptions, which guaranteed the memory and worship of the gods.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To trace the historical origins of hero-stone worship from the Sangam period.
2. To examine literary references to hero-stones in Sangam works, the *Tolkappiyam*, and later texts.
3. To analyze archaeological evidence related to Nadukals in the Kalvarayan and surrounding regions.
4. To explore the cultural and religious significance of hero-stone worship among the Malayali tribes.

5. To see how these practices have been passed on, changed and altered in the present-day tribal tradition.

### **Methodology: *The research utilizes a Multi-disciplinary Approach consisting of***

- Field Investigation - Direct observation and documentation of hero-stones (e.g., Vediappan and Karuppurayan sites) in the Kalvarayan, Servarayan, and Kolli Hills.
- Archaeological Correlation - Comparative analysis of Neolithic tools, rock engravings, and megalithic monuments found in the region.
- Literary Analysis - Hermeneutic study of Sangam texts and devotional hymns to validate the ritualistic descriptions against physical findings.
- Ethno-History - Interviews with tribal elders to understand the contemporary spiritual significance and communal oral traditions associated with these stones.

### **Review of Literature**

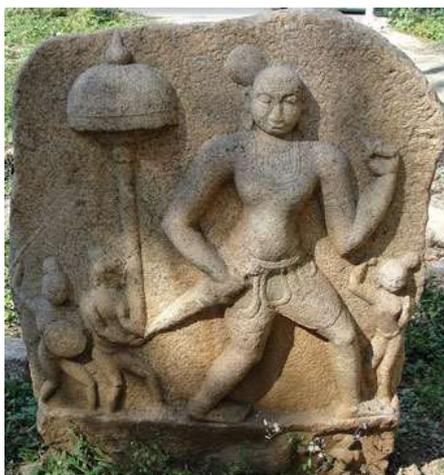
The hero-stone (Nadukal) is a common theme of the Tamil literature and archeology. The Kalvarayan Hills have found numerous hero-stones, which are important historical markers. Their numerous references in Tamil canonical literature and Sangam poetry can offer much information about the socio-religious images of that period and encourage the study of the history of the Malayali tribes in the past.

The *Tiruvarur Mummanik Kovai*, a Saiva canonical work, explicitly records the commemoration of warriors through the erection of memorial stones:

***“Pattor Peyarum Aatralum Ezhuthi Natta Kallum”***

- *Tiruvarur Mummanik Kovai* (verse. 16),

(The name and valor of the warrior were inscribed on the stone that was erected.)



This passage by Cheraman Perumal Nayanar highlights the cultural significance of hero-stones as both historical markers and religious symbols.

Stone tools and artifacts found in prehistoric times from these hills are preserved in the local temples. Although it is not known what the purpose of these artifacts was to the ancient societies, these artifacts have been reinterpreted as religious objects of worship among

contemporary societies. In folk customs, they are still used, for instance, in taking an oath during a dispute, and thus they continue to be a socially and ritually meaningful concept.

Hero-stones also figure prominently in the *Akananuru* anthology. Several verses describe their erection, decoration, and ritual worship:

***“Naanudai Maravar Peyarum Peedum Ezhuthi  
Athar Thorum Peeli Soottiya Pirangu Nilai Nadukal...”***

- *Akananuru*. 67

***“Nadukal Peeli Sootti Thudippathu  
Thobi Kallodu Thuruu Pali Kodukkum  
Pookku Arum Kavalaiyai Pulavu Naarum Arum Suram.”***

- *Akananuru*. 35

***“Kadai Mani Uku Neer Thudaitthi Aadavar  
Peyarum Pedum Ezhuthi Athar Thorum  
Peeli Soottiya Pirangu Nilai Nadukal...”***

- *Akananuru*. 131

***“Nal Isai Niruttha Naan Udai Maravar  
Nirai Nilai Nadukal Porunthi Imaiyaathu...”***

- *Akananuru*. 387

The *Tolkappiyam* also outlines six stages in the erection of a hero stone:

***“Kaatchi, Kaal Kol, Neer Padai, Naduthal  
Seerttha Sirappin Perumpadai Vaazhththal Enru  
Irumoonru Vakaiyir Kallodu Punara...”***

- *Thol. Porul. Purattinai, verse. 5*

These verses collectively affirm the ritual and cultural importance of hero-stones in early Tamil society.



The *Tolkappiyam* further codifies the practice by outlining six stages of hero-stone erection within the *Vetchi Thinai* (battlefield theme): *Kaatchi* (vision or omen), *Kal Kol* (selection of the stone), *Neer Padai* (ritual ablution), *Naduthal* (installation), *Perumpadai* (grand offering), and *Vaazhiththal* (glorification) (Tolkappiyam, *Porul Adhikaram*, Puraththinai, v. 5). These stages later evolved into narrative forms in works such as *Silappatikaram*, where sections like the *Kaatchi Kathai* preserve the ritual logic of stone installation.

The *Purapporul Venba Malai* further categorizes the process into distinct phases: *Kal Kaandal* (selection), *Kal Kol Nilai* (preparation), *Kal Neer Padu* (ritual purification), *Kal Naduthal* (installation), and *Murai Pazhichchal* (remembrance rites). Such codifications demonstrate how memorialization was systematically integrated into Tamil ritual life.

Importantly, the erection of hero-stones was not confined to any single community. Memorial stones were raised for individuals from diverse social groups, a practice that continues in rural Tamil Nadu. Even today, villagers worship hero-stones under names such as Vediappan, Mosaveediappan, Nendi Vediappan, Krishnarappan, Saanarappan, and Karuppurayan. Similarly, popular folk deities like Ayyanar, Madurai Veeran, Sangili Karuppan, and Paavadai Raayan remain closely associated with the hero-stone tradition.

In the prehistoric stone tools, used within the religious practices of the Malayali tribes of the Kalvarayan Hills, they have been absorbed. These are interpreted as deities of the ancestors, and they are worshipped without knowing their nature of use. Hero-stones, which were first set to mark the achievements of warriors in extraordinary acts, became the places where they were commemorated every year. As the descendants carried these rituals on, over time, these memorials were reconstituted as ancestral or clan deities, which demonstrated how the practice of memorials evolved into the long-lasting practice of folk religion.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

In tribal society, Nadukal worship is a primary religious and cultural practice connected with a distinct vision of life, death, and continuation. This tradition mirrors global practices where memorial stones bind human life, nature, and deities. Anthropologists observe that such rituals act as symbolic acts that mediate transitions, construct meaning, and sustain collective identity (Vitebsky, 2008). Similar patterns of using stones as material substitutes for the deceased to solidify their presence in the community are documented across India, Africa, and East Asia (Fortes, 1961, as cited in Vitebsky, 2008; Sayers, 2008).

### ***Foundations of the Practice***

For the Malayali tribes, Nadukals represent divine and ancestral powers acting as custodians of the community's prosperity. This aligns with broader indigenous worldviews where megalithic monuments serve as conduits between the living and the dead, ensuring that ancestral protection over the land continues (Shekhar, 2021). These stones are imbued with life and play essential roles in social organization and territorial demarcation (Standing, 1976, as cited in Saha, 2024).

## ***Rituals and Practices***

Hero-stones are central to festivals, oath-taking, and dispute settlements. They serve as "sites of memory" where narratives of ancestry and local belonging are articulated and reaffirmed (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Li & Champadaeng, 2025). By linking these stones to agricultural cycles and social rituals, the community reinforces social bonds and reaffirms its collective history (Turner, 1969, as cited in Li & Champadaeng, 2025).

## ***Transformation Over Time***

The transition from battlefield memorials to folk deities reflects a process of "Sanskritisation" or localization, where local heroes are integrated into broader religious pantheons (Flood, 1996, as cited in Taylor & Francis, 2015). For instance, ancient warrior spirits often evolve into guardian deities like Bhairava or Muneesvarar, becoming central figures in village worship (Haak, 2022). Tools and artifacts unearthed by tribes are frequently placed in these shrines, representing the physical transformation of memory into divinity (Saha, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

The veneration of hero-stones (Nadukal) among the Malayali tribes of the Kalrayan Hills serves as a living bridge between the prehistoric past and contemporary cultural identity. This study demonstrates that what began as a Megalithic custom of honoring fallen warriors has evolved into a sophisticated socio-religious system that remains central to tribal life.

## ***Key Findings:***

**Historical Continuity:** The research confirms that the ritual stages outlined in ancient texts like the Tolkappiyam are mirrored in the physical evidence found across the Kalrayan, Servarayan, and Kolli Hills.

**Evolution of Divinity:** The transition of these stones from battlefield markers to folk deities—such as Vediappan and Karuppurayan—illustrates a unique process of ancestor deification, where the spirit of the warrior is transformed into a guardian of the community's prosperity.

**Social Function:** Beyond religious worship, these stones function as legal and social anchors, utilized for oath-taking, dispute resolution, and reinforcing tribal solidarity.

**Preservation Needs:** As "open-air museums," these sites face threats from environmental degradation and modern encroachment. The study emphasizes that protecting these monuments is vital for preserving the martial and spiritual history of Tamil Nadu.

In summary, the hero-stone is not merely a relic of the Sangam age but a profound symbol of the Malayali tribes' endurance. It connects religion, history, and geography, ensuring that the valor of the past continues to protect and guide the community into the future.

Era	Primary Function	Ritual Significance
Megalithic	Burial & Memorial	Marking the site of fallen warriors/clan leaders.
Sangam Age	Heroic Commemoration	Inscribed stones with peacock feathers; state-recognized valor.
Early Medieval	Folk Deification	Transition into guardian spirits ( <i>Bhairava, Ayyanar</i> ).
Modern Tribal	Community Deity	Used for festivals, dispute settlements, and agricultural rituals.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Sultan Idris Education University for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.

**Funding Statement:** No Funding

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling (IJEPC).

**Ethics Statement:** This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

**Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Author Dr. Asaikkannu Sakthivel was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Dr. Franklin Thambi Jose Selistus Darling handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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