



Why do religious practices diverge despite shared origins and destinations? A comparative study of Pongal among two South Indian communities

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study compares Pongal among the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians in Melaka, who share origins in Hindu merchant groups of the South Indian Tamil cultural sphere, examining associations between religious practices and social relationships. **Methods:** Fieldwork in Melaka, Malaysia, from 2019 to 2025 combined participant observation in households and Hindu temples, interviews, and documentary research. Temple observations, participants' accounts, and documentary materials supplemented uneven household observations. **Findings:** Pongal differed in participants, languages, offerings, and rituals. Among the Nattukottai Chettiars, celebrations primarily involved same-caste relatives and community members; Tamil was used at temples, and offerings and rituals reflected South Indian practices. Among the *Peranakan* Indians, ethnically diverse participants communicated mainly in Malay during temple activities. Bhogi ancestral rites incorporated local foodways and elements participants associated with Chinese cultural influence; offerings were shared across ethnic and religious backgrounds. Rituals and offerings also varied among *Peranakan* Indian households in relation to differences in social relationships. **Conclusion:** These differences suggest associations with same-caste endogamy, caste-based temple governance, and continuing networks with South India among the Nattukottai Chettiars, and with interethnic marriage, more inclusive temple governance, and expanding relationships with local society among the *Peranakan* Indians. However, these associations are ethnographic interpretations limited by observational coverage. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this study compares two communities sharing cultural and religious origins and a destination but differing in social relationships. Its originality lies in relating differences in participants, languages, offerings, and rituals of the same festival to differences in marriage, temple governance, and ties with local society and South India.

KEYWORDS: diaspora; group boundaries; Hinduism; multi-ethnic state; transnational networks.

1. Introduction

Religion has historically crossed borders and cultural domains alongside human migration, undergoing adaptation and transformation as it becomes established in new locales. Diaspora studies have examined this process in relation to historical contexts, destination societies, and transnational relationships. Vertovec (2000) compares the reconfiguration of Hindu traditions in different historical and social settings, while Tweed (2006) conceptualizes religion through processes of crossing and dwelling. Imyarova

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(2019), comparing Dungan wedding rituals across settlements in Kazakhstan, relates ritual variation to interaction with non-Dungan populations. These studies provide a basis for examining how religious differences within a shared destination correspond to the relationships through which practices are organized. This study compares Pongal among the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians in Melaka, Malaysia, two Hindu communities with broad South Indian origins but different histories of settlement and community organization.

In this study, “shared origins” refers to several common foundations providing the premise for comparison. Geographically, both communities originated in South India and subsequently established communities in Melaka. Culturally, both developed within the South Indian Tamil cultural sphere; religiously, both have historically shared Hindu traditions, particularly Shaivism; and socially, both trace their origins to South Indian merchant communities associated with the terms Chettiar or Chitty. However, differences can be observed in the histories of settlement and present-day caste composition of the two communities, among other aspects. Whereas the Nattukottai Chettiars have constructed a group consisting of members of the same caste, the *Peranakan* Indians have established themselves in local society and constructed a group by incorporating people from diverse backgrounds.

Transnational approaches provide one basis for examining these relationships. Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004) conceptualize social fields as interconnected networks through which practices and resources circulate, and treat the relative importance of national and transnational relationships as an empirical question. Levitt (2007) applies a transnational perspective to migrant religious life. In Melaka, Nattukottai Chettiars maintain family relationships and religious connections with South India, while *Peranakan* Indians have developed extensive local relationships as their ties with India weakened. This comparison relates differing combinations of homeland and local ties to who conducts rituals, how participants communicate, and the offerings and activities observed in particular settings.

Boundary-making theory helps specify how these relationships are organized. Wimmer (2008) examines ethnic boundaries as outcomes of social processes shaped by institutions, power, and networks. Following this approach, the analysis treats community boundaries as historically organized relationships rather than fixed attributes of an ethnic label. Marriage patterns, rules governing temple management, and language use are examined together to understand who conducts religious activities and how participation is organized. The comparison relates these relationships to differences in ritual roles, offerings, and interaction, including variation within the *Peranakan* Indian community.

The lived religion approach complements this attention to community organization by examining how religious activities are carried out. Ammerman (2016) argues for examining religious institutions and traditions alongside everyday activities, with attention to embodiment, discourse, and materiality. In this study, the approach directs attention to who conducts rituals, which languages participants use, what is offered, and with whom offerings are shared. These activities are interpreted in relation to kinship, temple organization, and connections with South India and local residents. Variation among *Peranakan* Indian households is included to show how people within one community also enact the festival differently. The comparison thus connects differences in lived religious practice to the particular relationships through which rituals are performed.

Together, these perspectives guide a comparison of how marriage, language, temple organization, and homeland and local ties are involved in performing Pongal. The study connects the historical organization of community relationships to differences in ritual roles, offerings, and participation within one destination city. Differences in settlement history and historical occupations remain relevant. The analysis develops interpretations of these relationships grounded in ethnographic evidence, rather than isolating them as independently established causes.

Here, reference must be made to Melaka, where the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians migrated. The Straits of Malacca developed as an important crossroads for East–West trade, where merchants from different regions gathered while waiting for

favorable sailing conditions influenced by monsoon winds. Consequently, diverse ethnicities, cultures, and religions interacted in the region. The Malacca Sultanate, established in the late fourteenth century, developed as a major center of the spice trade and adopted Islam as its political and cultural foundation. In 1511, Malacca was occupied by the Portuguese, followed by Dutch rule after 1641. In the late eighteenth century, British influence expanded in the Malay Peninsula, and Malacca came under British control. Under British colonial rule, the development of tin and rubber industries encouraged migration from various regions, including Chinese migrants involved in mining and South Indian Tamils who worked mainly in plantation labor. Following independence in 1957 and the establishment of Malaysia in 1963, Melaka remained a multicultural city. Its historical and cultural significance gained greater international recognition after its inscription as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in 2008, which also contributed to subsequent urban development.

Malaysia, established through the acceptance of migrants from diverse regions including India, constitutes a multi-ethnic state. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2025), Malaysia's population consists of Bumiputera, Chinese, Indian, and other communities. The ethnic composition includes Bumiputera (70.5%), Chinese (22.2%), Indians (6.5%), and others (0.8%) (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2025). Within the constitutional framework, Malays are defined as those who practice Islam, regularly speak Malay, and adhere to Malay customs (Torii, 2010). The category of "Indian" includes diverse communities, although approximately 80% are descendants of Tamil migrants from South India. Other groups include Telugu, Malayalee, Sri Lankan Tamil, Sikh, and Punjabi communities. Hinduism is the predominant religion among Malaysian Indians, although Muslim, Sikh, and Christian communities also exist.

In Malaysia, where such diverse populations reside together, conflicts have also emerged. Following the ethnic conflict of May 13, 1969, the National Operations Council attributed the incident primarily to economic disparities between Malays and non-Malays. Consequently, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in 1971 to address inequality and promote national unity. Under this policy, Bumiputera communities have received preferential treatment in areas including land ownership, employment, university admissions, and scholarships. The two communities examined in this study are not classified as Bumiputera.

Religious minority communities in Malaysia face challenges in practicing their religion. Koga (2019) highlights difficulties experienced by Hindu communities in maintaining temples within Malaysia, where Muslims constitute the majority. In addition, religious issues have become an important source of tension in inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia (Fadzli & Siti Khatijah, 2017).

Debates concerning the recognition and practice of religious festivals occur periodically. For example, controversy emerged in 2020 after the Ministry of Education approved the celebration of Pongal in schools, a decision questioned by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Mustafar & Badhrulhisham, 2021).

The Nattukottai Chettiars are a community that accumulated wealth primarily through moneylending and related enterprises in various regions, including Melaka, particularly during the British colonial period (Naiker, 1976). The *Peranakan* Indians are considered descendants of Indian Hindu merchants who arrived after the establishment of the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century and became indigenized through cohabitation and intermarriage with local women. The Nattukottai Chettiars constructed a community based on endogamous marriage within the same caste, temple governance by caste members, Tamil language use, and continuing connections with South India. In contrast, the *Peranakan* Indians developed a localized community through interethnic marriage, broader social relationships, Malay language use, and inclusive institutional management.

Vertovec (2000) examines transformations of diasporic Hindu traditions, while Tweed (2006) theorizes religion through crossing and dwelling. Imyarova (2019) relates ritual variation to intercultural interaction. However, the links between differing social relationships and practices of the same festival among communities with broad shared

origins in one destination require closer comparative examination. This study addresses this question by comparing Pongal among the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians in Melaka, examining participants, language, offerings, and rituals in relation to marriage, temple governance, and local and transnational ties. Historical differences, within-community variation, and uneven household observations delimit the interpretation.

2. Methods

The research for this study was conducted in Melaka, Malaysia, in August 2019, January 2020, July to October 2022, January 2023, July to September 2023, May to August 2024, and December 2024 to January 2025. During these periods, research was conducted on the Nattukottai Chettiar and *Peranakan* Indian communities, focusing on their relationships with India, kinship relations, interactions with local residents, language use, associations, temple governance, and religious practices.

For the *Peranakan* Indian community, research participants were recruited through long-term relationships established through repeated visits to all Hindu temples managed by the community. Interviews were conducted with 12 association committee members, including the current president of the association that jointly owns and manages Area A, one temple priest, and approximately 100 worshippers. 86 households in Area A were also visited, consisting of 34 *Peranakan* Indian households, 30 Chinese households, 17 Indian households, and five Malay households. In addition, approximately 50 former residents who had moved away from Area A and their relatives, introduced by research participants, were included. Participant observation was also conducted while staying with a total of 11 households in Area A, its surrounding areas, and urban areas.

In contrast, the Nattukottai Chettiar community in Melaka was relatively small, consisting of approximately ten households as of 2024. Repeated visits were made to Arulmigu Sannasimalai Andavar Temple and Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple, and interviews and participant observation were conducted with members of the community after relationships had been established through these visits. Interviews were conducted with an Indian-born priest and other temple staff members responsible for rituals at these temples, two temple committee members, and approximately 40 worshippers.

In both communities, interviews were primarily semi-structured and were conducted in addition to informal conversations during participant observation. Videos and photographs were taken as needed. Observations and interview accounts were documented in handwritten notes, which were subsequently typed up on a computer. Translations into English were prepared by the author, who consulted the speakers as needed to clarify the meaning of their statements.

Pongal was observed at both temples and private households. Temple observations were conducted at Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple in 2020, Sri Kailasanathar Temple in 2023, and Arulmigu Sannasimalai Andavar Temple and Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple in 2025. Household Pongal practices were observed in one Nattukottai Chettiar household in 2025. This household was selected because, within the small Nattukottai Chettiar community in Melaka, it was one of the few households playing a prominent role in the community's commercial and religious life. Broader community-level interpretations draw on temple observations, participant accounts, and documentary materials. Among the *Peranakan* Indians, household practices showed some variation; therefore, observations were conducted in two households in 2023 and five households in 2025.

Documentary materials collected included the association's bylaws, activity and financial reports, leadership records, and the Trust Deed of the Malacca Chitty Community (1962). Unless otherwise specified, the data used in this article were obtained from interviews and participant observation conducted in Melaka between 2019 and 2025. Interviews and conversations were conducted primarily in Malay and English, with some Tamil and Mandarin vocabulary used by participants. Field notes, interview records, and documentary materials were organized by theme, including marriage, language use, temple

governance, homeland ties, and Pongal practices. Comparisons were then made between the communities, with attention to household variation and evidence that did not fit the principal contrast. Participants' accounts were compared with observed language use and participation to interpret links between social relationships and ritual practices.

The researcher is Japanese and an outsider to both communities; however, long-term fieldwork enabled the development of continuing relationships with members of both communities. This position made it possible to observe everyday interactions and practices within the communities, while attention was paid to the possibility that relationships between the researcher and research participants could influence both the accounts obtained and their interpretation. To enhance the reliability of the interpretation, information obtained through interviews was cross-checked, wherever possible, against participant observation, accounts provided by different research participants, and documentary materials. Cases and observations that did not fully conform to the predominant patterns identified for each community were not excluded but were incorporated into the analysis.

The term "caste" used in this article refers specifically to *jati*, meaning hereditary social groups, rather than the broader concept of *varna* (the fourfold order) (Yanagisawa, 2008). The term "Chitty" refers to members of South Indian merchant castes. In different languages, the term appears in various forms, including *Chetti* in Malayalam, *Shetti* in Tamil, *Setti* in Telugu, and *Seddi* in Sri Lanka. These terms are generally considered to derive from the Sanskrit word *śreṣṭhi*, meaning an eminent person or merchant. Historical spellings have varied considerably, including *Chetins*, *Chettis*, *Chatis*, *Chatar*, *Chettijns*, *Chetils*, *Chettie*, *Sittis*, *Chetti*, *Chitties*, and other forms (Yule & Burnell, 1886). The term "*Peranakan* Indian" is used consistently throughout this article. In Melaka, "*Chitty Malacca*" is commonly used as both a self-designation and an external designation. However, the term "*Peranakan* Indian" is adopted here because it encompasses a broader analytical category. The term *Peranakan* derives from the local word *anak*, meaning "child" (Yamamoto, 2008). Although definitions of *Peranakan* vary according to region, period, and context, this study follows Yamamoto's definition of *Peranakans* as "descendants of intermarriages between foreign settlers and local inhabitants" (Yamamoto, 2008).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Community organization and religious foundations

Among the Nattukottai Chettiars, arranged marriages continue to occur predominantly within the caste in order to preserve lineage, culture, family background, traditions, and religion. Similarly, Nattukottai Chettiars in Malaysia continue to maintain a preference for arranged marriages within their own community (Somasundaram, 2017).

In Melaka, the Nattukottai Chettiars were invited by the British during the colonial period and settled in Kampung Keling around 1800, where they engaged in financial activities (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association, 2022). Before the wider use of modern banking, they became the most influential moneylenders in Melaka and frequently held public auctions in salesrooms for freehold properties scattered throughout Melaka (Lim & Jorge, 2006). Their economic prosperity further increased in the early twentieth century as the expansion of the global automobile industry generated growing demand for rubber (Lim & Jorge, 2006). They also owned several rubber plantations, while maintaining clear social boundaries between themselves and the workers employed on these plantations (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association, 2022). In January 1933, the Chettiars Chamber of Commerce was established for the benefit of their business community (Lim & Jorge, 2006).

Alongside these economic activities, the Nattukottai Chettiars developed their religious institutions in Melaka. Initially, they worshipped at the Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple. At that time, because a Hindu temple already existed in central Melaka, their attempt to construct another temple nearby was not approved by the colonial government.

Consequently, in 1868, they established the Arulmigu Sannasimalai Andavar Temple in Cheng as a Hindu place of worship. Since the early 1900s, a major festival, Masimagam, has been held at this temple on the full-moon day of Masi in the Tamil calendar (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association, 2022).

Historically, this festival marked the one occasion each year when the Chettiars suspended their business activities and gathered for religious celebration (Lim & Jorge, 2006). The festival includes a procession of a silver chariot from the Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple to Cheng and has provided an occasion for rest, celebration, and sharing within the Chettiar community (Lim & Jorge, 2006). Today, the festival attracts more than 100,000 worshippers from various regions (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association, 2022). Temples established by the Nattukottai Chettiars developed as their religious centers without being subject to the control or supervision of other groups. Today, the Arulmigu Sannasimalai Andavar Temple is managed by the Nattukottai Chettiar Trust, whose members consist of a limited number of Nattukottai Chettiar families residing in urban Melaka, and decision-making authority concerning temple management is restricted to members of the Trust (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association, 2022). Later, wishing to establish a Hindu temple in central Melaka, the Nattukottai Chettiars acquired management rights to the Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple in 1901 (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association, 2022). This temple had previously been owned and managed by the *Peranakan* Indians. Following this transfer, the *Peranakan* Indians retained ownership, while management was undertaken by the Nattukottai Chettiars (Narinasamy, 1983).

The Nattukottai Chettiars established an association composed of officials selected from within the same caste. Through this association, they manage Hindu temples while limiting external intervention. The committee convenes annually, and the two temples under its management employ priests appointed by the Nattukottai Chettiar community to conduct rituals and festivals. As of 2024, the priest serving the temple was born in India and arrived in Malaysia in 2017. After serving at temples in Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur, he assumed responsibility for rituals at the Melaka temple. The continued employment of priests from India reflects the importance of connections with South India in Nattukottai Chettiar religious practice. Tamil is used in both everyday communication and temple activities among the Nattukottai Chettiars.

At its peak, the Nattukottai Chettiar community in Melaka consisted of approximately 100 residents. Wealthier members employed private cooks, reflecting their relatively affluent economic position at that time. However, many Nattukottai Chettiars have since left Melaka, either returning to India, relocating to Australia, or moving within Malaysia to major cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, and Penang. As of 2024, approximately ten families remain in Melaka. Regarding occupation, while Nattukottai Chettiars historically accumulated wealth through moneylending and related enterprises, contemporary members engage in diverse occupations, and their economic circumstances have diversified.

Despite such changes, community members continue to travel between Malaysia and India for festivals, weddings, and work, maintaining familial connections with South India. For example, a Nattukottai Chettiar man in his 50s, who was born in Malaysia and married within the same caste, continues to reside in Malaysia while visiting family members living in India. He was educated in India, primarily uses Tamil and English in daily life, and stated that he was not confident in speaking Malay. Furthermore, the Nattukottai Chettiars maintain networks with Nattukottai Chettiar communities in other locations, including Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Singapore, and Australia. In this way, the Nattukottai Chettiars of Melaka construct their group while building ties with the same caste across various regions.

In contrast to the Nattukottai Chettiars, the *Peranakan* Indians formed their community while incorporating residents of Melaka. Historically, three Chitty lineages were recognized: the merchant Komti Chitty caste, the Vaishiar Chitty caste, and the oil merchant Vanniar Chitty caste (Naiker, 1976). Other castes and individuals of mixed heritage, particularly Chinese ancestry, also became part of the community. Because descendants of interethnic unions were not fully accepted within caste-conscious Indian society, *Peranakan* Indians

gradually weakened their connections with India and constructed their identity by rooting themselves in Melaka (Dhoraisingam, 2006). The *Peranakan* Indians subsequently established multiple Hindu temples in Melaka. However, financial constraints led to the loss of portions of land and the transfer of ownership or management rights to certain temples essential for festivals (Narinasamy, 1983; Kandasamy & Rajantheran, 2019; Raghavan, 1977). Migration to cities for employment and increasing marriages with non-*Peranakan* Indians have been noted to make community maintenance difficult (Narinasamy, 1983), raising concerns about assimilation into dominant ethnic categories (Wong & Neo, 2023). Nevertheless, as of 2025, a group identifying itself and recognized by others as *Peranakan* Indian continues to exist, jointly owning and managing Area A and several temples (Table 1).

Table 1. Temples historically associated with the *Peranakan* Indian community

No.	Temple	Year established
1	Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple	1781
2	Sri Maha Mariamman Temple	1822
3	Sri Kalliamman Temple	1804
4	Sri Kailasanathar Temple (Sivan Temple)	1887
5	Sri Anggalamman Parameswari Temple	1888
6	Sri Ganggadhariamman Temple	Unknown
7	Sri Amman Temple	1770
8	Sri Dharma Raja Temple	1770
9	Sri Kattai Amman Temple	Unknown
10	Sri Ayyenar Temple	1754

Note. Compiled by the author based on the Trust Deed of the Malacca Chitty Community (1962). Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple is owned by the *Peranakan* Indian community but has been managed by the Nattukottai Chettiars since 1901 (Narinasamy, 1983; Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association, 2022).

A factor sustaining these temples is that the *Peranakan* Indians deepened relationships with and received support from people of different castes and ethnicities. First, parts of jointly owned Area A have been leased to residents of various ethnic backgrounds, with rental income contributing to the maintenance of community institutions and temples. Furthermore, by utilizing the language of their migration destination, they deepened relationships with local residents. Malay is the primary everyday language of the *Peranakan* Indians; between 1967 and 1976, only 38% of residents in Area A understood Tamil (Narinasamy, 1983). Fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2025 similarly revealed that Malay predominated in everyday communication across generations, with limited use of Mandarin and Tamil. Malay was primarily used in the *Peranakan* Indian temple activities observed, except at Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple, managed by the Nattukottai Chettiars, where Tamil was used. The priests serving both communities could speak Tamil. A *Peranakan* Indian woman in her 60s remarked, “When I pray, I use Malay—God can understand any language.” Additionally, a Chinese woman who had attended an Area A temple since childhood explained that she did not attend other Hindu temples because she could not understand Tamil, but she was able to participate in the Area A temple. Thus, the use of Malay lowers linguistic barriers for people of diverse backgrounds to participate in temple activities.

The association committee also established a flexible definition to draw diverse people into the group. The latest regulations define a *Peranakan* Indian as a descendant, through either the paternal or maternal line, of early Tamil immigrants who settled in Melaka, who practices *Peranakan* Indian customs and traditions, including language, dress, and rituals, and who is a Shaivite Hindu (Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple, 2022). In practice, however, this definition does not fully coincide with actual community boundaries. “Early” may include more recent migrants, and religious practices incorporate elements of other non-Hindu traditions (Kashiwa, 2025a). Additionally, non-Hindus may be recognized as *Peranakan* Indians depending on the context.

Except for Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple, rituals and festivals at all temples have traditionally been conducted by a priest from India who married *Peranakan* Indian women. The priests' son and association officers also assist in temple activities. Moreover, the composition of community organization supporting the temples has gradually diversified (Kashiwa, 2025b). While leadership positions were mainly occupied by high-caste Pillay men in 1993 (Sri Mutthu Mariamman Temple, 1997), by 2017, five of the ten board members had Chinese mothers, at least four were married to non-*Peranakan* Indians, and the board included women and residents of Kuala Lumpur (Melaka Chetti Community, 2019). Leadership positions have been open regardless of caste since 1954 and gender since 2017. Furthermore, the association established an education fund to support members regardless of caste or gender, and individuals who achieved social and economic mobility through education and employment tend to be selected as officers regardless of caste. The association also introduced an "Associate Member" system for converts to other religions and spouses of regular members from different ethnic backgrounds, thereby incorporating individuals with professional expertise or financial resources into the organization. Furthermore, non-kin support has become indispensable for temple maintenance and management. For instance, during temple restoration in 2019, donations were received from non-*Peranakan* Indian Hindu temples, Chinese *Peranakan* confectioneries, a nearby Buddhist temple, and Chinese devotees (Melaka Chetti Community, 2022). Such practices of marriage, language use, and organizational and temple governance demonstrate that while *Peranakan* Indians weakened ties with South India, they formed their community by deepening relationships with residents in Melaka.

In summary, the contrast between the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians presents two distinct forms of community organization. The Nattukottai Chettiars construct community boundaries centered on the same caste through endogamous marriage within the caste, caste-based temple management, Tamil language use, and connections with South India and other regions. In contrast, *Peranakan* Indians frequently intermarried with other ethnicities, attenuated ties with South India to become indigenous to Melaka, and constructed community boundaries by incorporating different castes and ethnicities into kinship and temple management. These differences provide the foundation for understanding why the same Hindu festival, Pongal, developed into different forms between the two communities.

3.2 Pongal practices: divergence of religious practices despite shared origins and destinations

Pongal is one of the most important festivals among Tamil communities and is widely celebrated among Hindu communities in Malaysia. The festival is associated with agricultural prosperity and thanksgiving to Surya, the sun deity (Pejabat Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, 2019). Thai Pongal falls on the first day of the Tamil month of Thai (Loh & Velupillay, 2017). The festival consists of four days: Bhogi Pongal, Thai Pongal, Mattu Pongal, and Kaanum Pongal. Both the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians celebrate Pongal, but their practices differ.

The comparison begins with Bhogi, the first day of Pongal. The term "Bhogi" derives from the root *bhuj*, meaning to please the god Indra. Generally, on Bhogi, which falls on the last day of the Tamil month of Margazhi, people clean their houses and discard old and unnecessary items. They also draw rangoli (or *kolam*) in front of their houses using edible rice flour (Kanagaraj et al., 2023). This practice is believed to attract ants and birds and provide nourishment to many living beings, referred to as "a thousand souls" (Nagarajan, 2018).

Among the Nattukottai Chettiars in Melaka, Bhogi Pongal is practiced primarily among relatives composed of the same caste while using Tamil. Like many other Tamil Hindus, they clean their houses, discard old and unnecessary items, and draw rangoli in front of their homes. In contrast, among the *Peranakan* Indians, Bhogi Pongal has developed into a form of ancestral ritual known as Parchu. Parchu is conducted in households in Area A and surrounding areas, except when close relatives have passed away less than one year prior.

Some *Peranakan* Indians who maintain stronger connections with Tamil traditions conduct ancestral rites on the eve of Deepavali rather than Bhogi Pongal.

During Parchu, relatives gather to prepare offerings consisting of at least 15 varieties of non-vegetarian dishes. These include mutton and chicken curries, fried mutton, chicken, shrimp, and fish, as well as food items associated with local foodways, such as dishes prepared with fermented shrimp paste (*belacan*). Nasi lemak, a local rice dish cooked with coconut milk and pandan leaves, is also prepared as an offering. Although commonly associated with Malay cuisine, nasi lemak is widely consumed across ethnic groups in Malaysia. For Parchu, nasi lemak is decorated with cut turnip and pineapple and served with salted eggs. Coconut and *bunga rampai* are also offered. *Bunga rampai* is made by mixing finely shredded pandan leaves with flower petals and sometimes perfume. These reflect local influences. Red candles are lit during the ritual, and if one coin lands heads and the other tails when tossed, it is interpreted as a sign that the deceased has accepted the offerings. *Peranakan* Indians interpret these as reflecting Chinese cultural influence (Kashiwa, 2025a). These practices demonstrate that *Peranakan* Indian Parchu is influenced by various people with whom they interact in their destination society. After being offered to ancestors, the food is shared among relatives, neighbors, and participants from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Thai Pongal is considered the central day of the Pongal festival. The word "Pongal" means "boiling over" and refers to the moment when milk or rice overflows from the pot. Traditionally, Pongal rice is prepared in an earthenware pot (*manpaanai*) placed over a fire. Before cooking, the pot is decorated and tied with a turmeric plant with roots. When preparing Pongal, participants collectively shout "Pongal, Pongal, Pongal, Pongal!" as the contents overflow from the pot (Kanagaraj et al., 2023). Fresh sugarcane is placed beside the pot as a symbol of prosperity. The cooked Pongal is then offered to Surya, the sun deity (Hymavathi, 1993).

Among the Nattukottai Chettiars in Melaka, Thai Pongal is initially celebrated at Arulmigu Sannasimalai Andavar Temple. Before noon, when the Pongal reaches a boil and overflows, participants collectively shout: "Pongal, Pongal, Pongal, Pongal!" The cooked Pongal is then offered. In the Nattukottai Chettiar household observed in 2025, family members returned home around 12:30 p.m. and arranged seven banana leaves before the altar. In addition to prepared sweet Pongal (Chakkara Pongal or Sakkarai Pongal), unsweetened, savory Ven Pongal containing black pepper, ghee, nuts, salt, and other ingredients is offered on the leaves.

Both the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians who maintain stronger connections with Tamil traditions prepare these two types of Pongal. Additional offerings include cooked pumpkin, sweet potato, banana, yam, and peanuts. The altar in this household is dedicated exclusively to Lord Murugan and other Hindu deities. Around 1:00 p.m., the head of the household lights a fire at the altar, rings a bell, and performs prayers. A camphor flame is waved before the deity as an act of devotion. A conch shell is blown, holy water is sprinkled, and participants receive holy ash (*vibhuti*) on their foreheads. After prayers, the banana leaves containing offerings are moved slightly. One is left for dogs, while another is offered to crows so that ancestors may receive the offerings. Afterwards, participants consume the offerings. Although contemporary meals are taken at tables, participants sit on the floor during this ritual. Following traditional practice, men eat first. Subsequently, participants move to Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple around 1:30 p.m., where Pongal is prepared and distributed to worshippers. Pongal is also prepared and prayers are offered at business establishments. Participants gathering at the temple are primarily Nattukottai Chettiars. Tamil was used in temple activities. These practices demonstrate that Thai Pongal among the Nattukottai Chettiars functions as a religious practice embedded within caste-based kinship relationships and transnational connections with South India.

Many *Peranakan* Indians celebrate Thai Pongal at Sri Kailasanathar Temple, located at the entrance of Area A. The following description is based on observations of Thai Pongal at this temple in 2023. Relatives, neighbors, and devotees from diverse ethnic and religious

backgrounds visit the temple. Around 10:00 a.m., the priest rings a bell and blows a conch shell. Rice mixed with lentils is placed into a pot decorated with holy ash and turmeric stems and cooked over a fire. The priest first pours milk into the pot. Following the priest, participants from diverse backgrounds also pour milk into the pot. Brown sugar, raisins, and cashew nuts are added and mixed. When the contents boil over, participants shout: "Pongal, Pongal, Pongal, Pongal!" The priest then presents the Pongal offering before Lord Shiva. After the noon prayer, the prepared Pongal is distributed to devotees, and participants eat together regardless of gender. At the Thai Pongal celebration observed at Sri Kailasanathar Temple in 2023, only sweet Chakkara Pongal was prepared. While some *Peranakan* Indian families celebrate Pongal at home, many participate in the ceremony at Sri Kailasanathar Temple. The religious environment of *Peranakan* Indian households also reflects historical interaction with diverse cultural traditions. For example, a number of households include on their altars not only Hindu deities but also Buddhist statues, Sai Baba, statues of the Virgin Mary, and crosses. Malay was primarily used in temple activities.

3.3 Why do religious practices diverge despite shared origins and destinations

Studies of diaspora religion have demonstrated the importance of historical backgrounds, destination contexts, and social interaction in understanding religious transformation. Comparing Pongal among the two communities examined here also requires attention to their different historical circumstances. The *Peranakan* Indians' longer history of local settlement may be relevant to their sustained engagement with local languages and foodways. The economic resources historically accumulated by the Nattukottai Chettiars through moneylending and related enterprises may also have supported temple maintenance. These historical conditions are intertwined with present social relationships, and this comparison cannot isolate their respective influences on Pongal practices. With these historical backgrounds in mind, the following discussion examines the relationship between social relationships and religious practices, drawing on observations and participants' accounts.

In the case of the Nattukottai Chettiars, close relationships have been maintained with Nattukottai Chettiar communities in South India and other regions. These continuing ties are reflected in marriage within the same caste, temple governance by caste members, and Tamil language use. These social relationships are also reflected in Pongal practices. Household Pongal is primarily practiced among same-caste relatives and community members, while priests from India conduct rituals at temples. Continued mobility between Melaka and South India provides not only a means for human movement but also a channel through which ritual knowledge and practices are transmitted. For example, both sweet Pongal and savory Ven Pongal were prepared as offerings for Thai Pongal in the observed Nattukottai Chettiar household. Participants from both communities explained that this practice is consistent with South Indian traditions. Tamil was widely used for communication among participants in the observed temple activities, constituting a linguistic barrier to participation for people who do not understand Tamil. Thus, Pongal among the Nattukottai Chettiars is practiced within social relations centered on same-caste kinship, caste-based temple governance, Tamil language use, and continuing networks with South India.

In contrast, among the *Peranakan* Indians, ties with South India weakened in part because interethnic marriage made it difficult for them to be accepted within Indian society, where caste consciousness remained strong. Meanwhile, they developed closer relationships with people in the destination society through cohabitation and marriage with local residents, collaboration in temple governance, and the use of Malay. These social relationships are also reflected in Pongal practices. At Sri Kailasanathar Temple during Thai Pongal, a priest married to a *Peranakan* Indian woman performs the principal rituals, while people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds pour milk into the Pongal pot and share the prepared Pongal. During Parchu, ancestral offerings include foods associated with local foodways, such as nasi lemak. Rituals using red candles and two 20-cent coins are

interpreted by community members as reflecting Chinese cultural influence. The food offered to ancestors is subsequently shared not only among relatives but also with neighbors and participants from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Thus, *Peranakan* Indian Pongal has been practiced in a context in which ties with South India weakened, while people in the destination society were incorporated into kinship relations and temple governance, and relationships with local society were deepened through a shared language. The Chinese woman's account that she could participate at an Area A temple because she understood Malay illustrates the relationship between everyday communication and religious participation. In contrast, the Nattukottai Chettiar man's account of education in India and visits to relatives living there illustrates the continuation of transnational family relationships with South India.

However, this contrast does not mean that variations in practice are absent within either community. Among the *Peranakan* Indians in particular, variations are observed among households and individuals. For example, some people do not perform Parchu during Bhogi but instead conduct ancestral rituals on the eve of Deepavali. There are also households that, like the Nattukottai Chettiars, prepare both sweet Pongal and Ven Pongal. Such variations indicate that some cases do not fit the principal contrast between the communities. Even within the same community, kinship and marriage relations, language use, ties with South India, and involvement in temples and associations are not uniform, and differences in religious practices are also observed. Therefore, rather than characterizing the practices of either community as uniform, the comparison must take their internal diversity into account.

The contribution of this comparison lies in examining two communities that share cultural and religious origins but settled in the same Melaka through different historical and social backgrounds, and in specifying the correspondence between differences in religious practices and the social relationships each community has developed. Drawing on Wimmer's (2008) boundary-making theory, the boundaries of the two communities can be understood as having been organized differently through marriage relations, temple governance, and language use. This study examines differences in these social relationships in relation to the roles of ritual officiants and patterns of participation in festivals. In particular, by examining caste-based temple governance and temple governance that incorporates people from diverse backgrounds alongside observed differences in ritual officiants and participants, it specifies the relationship between historically formed community boundaries and religious practices.

Ammerman (2016) argues for including religious institutions and traditions in the analysis of lived religion. In the cases observed in this study, the Nattukottai Chettiars shared Pongal offerings primarily among same-caste relatives and community members, while the *Peranakan* Indians shared them across ethnic and religious boundaries. By examining this difference alongside marriage, kinship, and temple governance, the comparison of the same festival clarifies how institutional arrangements and everyday relationships are reflected in who participates in rituals and with whom offerings are shared.

Furthermore, in relation to transnational approaches (Levitt, 2007; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), this study examines continuing networks with South India and interethnic relationships within the destination society through the same analytical framework. The comparison of the two communities shows how differing configurations of transnational and local ties correspond to differences in ritual officiants, language, offerings, and participation.

Overall, the comparison shows that, among communities sharing religious traditions, differences in the organization of local and transnational social relationships correspond to differences in the concrete practice of the same festival. These findings make a comparative ethnographic contribution to existing research on boundary-making, lived religion, and transnationalism by specifying the relationship between historically formed social relationships and ritual practices. However, these are interpretive associations based on ethnographic materials and do not demonstrate definitive causal relationships. In particular,

the observation of only one Nattukottai Chettiar household limits the extent to which variation across households can be generalized.

4. Conclusions

This study compared Pongal among the Nattukottai Chettiars and *Peranakan* Indians, two communities that share cultural and religious origins but settled in the same Melaka through different historical and social backgrounds. The results suggest that differences in ritual officiants, language use, preparation and sharing of offerings, and participation in festivals correspond to differences in marriage relations, temple governance, and ties with South India and local society. Differences in rituals and offerings were also observed among *Peranakan* Indian households. The contribution of this study lies in showing the relationship between historically formed social relationships and concrete religious practices through a comparison of the same festival within the same destination. In doing so, it provides comparative ethnographic findings that specify the correspondence between local and transnational social relationships and ritual practices for existing studies of boundary-making, lived religion, and transnationalism.

However, these findings are interpretive associations based on ethnographic materials and do not demonstrate definitive causal relationships. Household observations of Pongal were uneven: one Nattukottai Chettiar household was observed in 2025, while two *Peranakan* Indian households were observed in 2023 and five in 2025. The former household was selected because of its prominent role in the commercial and religious life of the small community, but observations of a single household limit the extent to which household practices can be generalized to the community as a whole. Therefore, this comparison does not demonstrate uniform religious practices within either community or establish marriage, language, temple governance, and connections with South India as independent causes of differences in religious practices. Further research in Melaka and India is needed to examine how the relationships between social relations and religious practices differ across households and change over time.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, M.K.; Methodology, M.K.; Software, M.K.; Validation, M.K.; Formal Analysis, M.K.; Investigation, M.K.; Resources, M.K.; Data Curation, M.K.; Writing–Original Draft Preparation, M.K.; Writing–Review & Editing, A.P.P.; Visualization, M.K.; Supervision, M.K.; Project Administration, M.K.

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Ethical Review Board Statement

The fieldwork was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines of the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology and the procedures required for ethical review. To protect participants' privacy and prevent potential harm or disadvantage, information considered private or confidential was excluded from publication, and individual names and other identifying information are not disclosed in this article.

Informed Consent Statement

Prior to interviews and participant observation, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and how the collected information would be used, and informed consent was obtained from participants. Participation was voluntary.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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