



## An anthropological exploration of hunting practices and food culture among the Kuravar community in Tamil Nadu

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### Abstract

The Kuravar community has a strong preference for meat-based foods, and as a result, they consume meat at least once a week. Compared to neighboring communities, the Kuravars tend to eat meat more frequently. Meat from domesticated animals such as goat, chicken, and duck form a significant part of their diet. Typically, they purchase and cook either fish or goat meat once a week. They also consume pork and cat meat whenever it is available, particularly during festivals, family gatherings, and religious ceremonies.

Wild animals such as wildcats, quail, herons, squirrels, and monitor lizards—hunted from the forest—are also among their preferred sources of meat. To obtain these, they often go hunting in groups, a practice they continue to uphold. Thus, the food culture and hunting practices of the Kuravar community, deeply intertwined with their social, cultural, and livelihood systems, are thoroughly and comprehensively discussed in this research paper.

**Keywords:** Kuravar community, food culture, hunting habits, ethnic group

### Introduction

The food culture of the Kuravar community is fundamentally based on their habitat and a lifestyle that is closely integrated with nature. They obtain food through the collection of forest products such as tubers, fruits, grains, meat, and fish, as well as through hunting and some agricultural activities. These food habits are deeply intertwined with the traditions, rituals, and religious practices of their society.

Additionally, they engage in various bamboo-based crafts such as cutting bamboo trees, stripping them into thin sticks, and weaving them into baskets. They also make coops (called panjaram) for housing chickens and tools like bamboo sieves (muram). The Kuravar women are known for their skills in palmistry and fortune-telling.

In their dietary habits, meat plays a prominent role and distinguishes them from other communities. Most of the meat they consume is from animals they themselves hunt, revealing a unique food preference. In this sense, food holds great cultural significance for the Kuravars, and hunting holds an equally important place in their traditional practices.

Since the Sangam era, the Kuravar community has actively engaged in hunting. Whether as a complete lifestyle or as a significant part of life, their association with hunting continues to this day. Thus, identifying them as a tribal community would not be an exaggeration. This is because they continue to define themselves as a community where hunting is one of their cultural identities.

Among the various forms of hunting, cat hunting stands out as a distinct identity of the Kuravars. They craft their hunting tools themselves, tailored specifically to the animals they intend to hunt. These tools are simple yet ingeniously adapted to their purpose. The practice of sharing the hunted animals equally among group members reflects a core aspect of tribal culture in the Kuravar community.

### Significance of the Study

Understanding the Kuravar community's food practices has significance on multiple fronts:

- It sheds light on indigenous ecological knowledge—how to locate, track, prepare, and consume flora and fauna in ways attuned to the environment.
- It reveals how social identity is bound up with food and hunting—how certain meats or huntings are not just about nutrition, but about status, ritual, kinship, and group cohesion.
- It provides insight into the transformations imposed by colonial laws, forest departments, and conservation legislation, which often criminalized or restricted hunting practices.
- It also shows how modernization—through urbanization, changes in livelihood, exposure to other food cultures—shapes or erodes traditional foodways.

Thus, this study is not only of academic interest but also has relevance for policy, conservation, tribal welfare, and food security.

### Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To document and analyze traditional food practices of the Kuravar community: staple foods, meat consumption, gathering, agriculture, cooking methods.
- To understand the cultural importance of different meats—domestic and wild—and how these relate to ritual, festival, health beliefs.
- To map out the hunting practices: what species are hunted, what methods and tools are used, who participates, how hunting is organized socially.
- To study the hunting implements (karuvigal) and the technical knowledge associated with their making, use, seasonality.

- To explore how modern forces—legislation (wildlife protection, forest laws), market forces, changing aspirations—have changed hunting and food culture among the Kuravars.

### Research Methods

This study was conducted using the ethnographic method, a specialized research approach in social-cultural anthropology, carrying out full fieldwork and employing traditional anthropological tools and techniques. The data required for the study were gathered from primary and secondary sources.

### Food Habits of the Kuravar Community

Generally, the Kuravar community have the habit of consuming both meat and vegetable-based food. In the early days, their primary food consisted of millet varieties like thinai (foxtail millet), kelvaragu (ragi), kambu (pearl millet), cholam (sorghum), along with rice. In their isolated lifestyle, it was customary for them to eat ragi porridge along with raw onions and jaggery. In the current generation, only a few people make porridge from ragi and consume it. Many now prefer rice-based dishes cooked in modern methods.

At present, the food habits of the Kuravar community are not very different from other caste people living in their surroundings. The food they cook is very hygienic and healthy. They have adopted not only their traditional cooking methods but have also included new food varieties from other castes. Their staple food includes rice, ragi, thinai, varieties of lentils, and vegetables. Whether they live in metropolitan cities, towns, or rural areas, Kuravars maintain the practice of eating three meals a day. In the morning, it is usually the leftover food from the previous night. For those going to work or school, breakfast items like idli and dosa are included at home or bought from eateries. Kuravar men usually have these foods with coffee or tea.

In some Kuravar households, rice porridge is made in the morning, and onions are added as a flavor enhancer. In lunch and dinner, they usually cook rice along with boiled lentils and vegetables to make curries. In small towns and rural areas, lunch and dinner include rice with ragi or thinai, along with chutney or curry made from pulses. Except for a few, most Kuravars do not consume milk or curd. In urban areas, some Kuravar women send their children to bring coffee or tea from eateries.

### Meat Consumption

Kuravars enjoy eating meat, so they eat meat at least once a week. Compared to the surrounding population, Kuravars consume meat more frequently. The meats they consume mainly include goat, chicken, and duck. Once a week, they buy and cook either fish or goat meat. Whenever they get the opportunity, they also eat pork and cat meat. Especially during festivals and other important socio-religious occasions, they consume meat.

They also like meat from wild animals hunted from the forests such as wild cats, quails, cranes, squirrels, and monitor lizards. Along with these, they include native chicken and duck eggs in their meals. They eat three times a day.

The meat varieties consumed by Kuravars living in villages and small towns are more diverse than those in big cities.

This is because rural Kuravars have more access to hunt animals like rabbits and small birds like cranes. In big cities, it is not possible for Kuravars to carry out hunting activities. Mostly, whenever the opportunity arises, they include pork and cat meat in their meals.

### Pork in Kuravar Culture

We must specifically mention that pork plays an important role in the cultural practices of the Kuravar community. In life-cycle rituals such as marriages, ear-piercing ceremonies, and puberty rituals, pork feasts are a major aspect. Along with pork, alcohol is mandatory at such events. There is also a practice among Kuravars of cooking and eating the pig while it is still piglet-sized. Similarly, they offer pigs as sacrifices to their clan deities and host feasts with the sacrificed meat. That much significance pork holds in Kuravar life. (This practice is also seen among the Malayali tribal people living in the Western Ghats.)

Kuravar community have the tradition of sacrificing pigs to their clan deities. They also collect pig waste and sell it as fertilizer to other community members for their agricultural lands. They even cook pork while the pig is still young. In their life rituals, pork feasts and alcoholic drinks are mandatory. Furthermore, 'fat' extracted from pork is in high demand among other communities. Grains mixed with pig fat are used as feed for chickens, and with that fat, they make snacks like panyaram and dosa. Even today, other community members regularly visit meat shops run by Kuravars to purchase pork.

### Kuravars and Cat Meat

A food habit not seen among most other communities but found among Kuravars is their preference for eating cat meat. They hunt the preferred cat and cook it as food. They say there are reasons for cat meat being in their favorite food list. They believe the fat obtained from cat meat acts as a medicine for tuberculosis. Similarly, they say cat meat has medicinal properties that cure piles. They also believe that the tooth of a cat, if ground with fresh milk and consumed, can neutralize rat-bite poison. Along with this, they say that wild cat meat helps cure diseases like whooping cough and tuberculosis, and they believe that eating cat meat enhances beauty and male potency.

### Medicinal Properties of Cat Meat

The fat extracted from hunted cats is believed to be a remedy for tuberculosis (V. Dharmadas, 1999: 15). Cat meat is also considered beneficial for treating piles. It is said that if a cat's tooth is removed, ground into a paste, and mixed with milk and consumed, it can neutralize the poison from a rat bite.

According to the Irula community, the meat of wild cats serves as an effective traditional remedy for ailments like whooping cough, chronic respiratory conditions, and tuberculosis (Su. Sakthivel, 2004: 326). The Siddhars (traditional Tamil healers) claim that eating cat meat enhances physical beauty, body warmth, and promotes blood development (Rathina Pugazhendhi, 2004: 75).

These medicinal beliefs regarding cat meat, which is a favorite among the Kuravars, have been documented by various researchers. Dr. Mani K. Panneerselvam compiled and recorded these findings (2009: 73) [6].

### Kuravar Hunting Practice

From going hunting as a group to sharing the hunted animals among themselves, Kuravars are a community with

unique cultural identity. The hunting tools used by Kuravars are notable. Because the tools they carry are handmade by themselves. Based on the animals they hunt, they prepare simple but effective tools using local techniques.

### **Tools Used to Hunt Cats**

Next to pork, cat meat is most preferred by Kuravars. They are skilled in hunting wild cats that roam in forested areas. For such hunts, they carry two types of tools they craft themselves using simple techniques.

### **Kaasika Bonu**

First, they take a one-foot-long heavy wooden log and hollow it to a width of about seven or eight inches. Then they take ten umbrella spokes, tie them together tightly with a strong rope, and attach another rope at the front. They attach both the wooden log and the tied spokes together. This traditional device is called 'Kaasika Bonu'.

### **Bonu Petti (Cat Box)**

Secondly, a modern tool currently used is the 'Bonu Petti' or cat box. This box is made by Kuravars themselves using sturdy iron rods in a rectangular shape. Inside this box, they place dry fish or other meat as bait and leave it at night in forest areas where cats roam. The next morning, they collect the box with the trapped cat.

### **Squirrel Hunting Tool**

To hunt squirrels, Kuravars use a tool called 'Ambukkali'. It is a 20-foot-long bamboo rod, and at its thin tip, they attach a sharp iron spike about three and a half feet long, known as 'Sinukku'. Slightly below the tip, there is another sharp edge. This is used to precisely strike and catch the squirrel. The entire Sinukku is shaped like a sharp cone. It is prepared in iron workshops and used.

### **Turtle Hunting Tool**

Turtles, called 'Suluvaan' by Kuravars, are hunted using a tool called 'Sulukki'. This is also made of a long bamboo rod with a sharp iron tip. This Sulukki is also called 'kuthukambu' or 'tharaikambu'. Hunters walk along the edges of ponds jabbing into the water. When it hits the turtle shell, it makes a sound. By identifying the sound, they know whether it's a rock or turtle. They keep jabbing in a circular pattern in the area to catch the turtle.

### **Tools for Catching Birds**

Kuravars follow various methods to hunt birds. Their hunting tools are simple and made using local knowledge. Kuravars themselves make these tools.

### **Mukkoodu**

To catch birds like quail, owls, and cuckoos, they use a tool called 'Mukkoodu'. This is made using bamboo sticks. Two bamboo sticks are bent like bows; one is placed inside the other. These bent sticks are placed on the ground like an inverted basket. A strong thread is tied in the middle with bait to attract the birds.

### **Kannivala (Noose Nets)**

To catch birds like myna and water birds, they make fine iron wire nets called Kannivala. Thin iron wires are cut into three-inch lengths and attached to tight mesh nets. These are planted like seedlings in muddy places near water bodies. Birds coming in search of food get trapped in the nets.

### **Meetta**

To catch cranes, they use a device called Meetta made of bamboo and umbrella spokes. At the tip of a bamboo stick slightly under two feet long, they insert a two-inch iron pipe. In the center, an umbrella spoke is attached with a strong thread or tendon tied to its tip. Near the base of the bamboo, two small bamboo sticks are tied on four sides, and four three-inch sticks are tied to it, completing the Meetta device. Once at the crane-catching site, the umbrella spoke with the thread is bent and held in place with a live insect used as bait. When the crane comes to catch the insect, it gets caught around the neck.

### **Ottukkambu (Sticky Pole)**

An old method used to catch birds sitting on tall trees. A bamboo stick five to ten feet long is coated with a sticky substance on its tip. Kuravars carry multiple such poles to reach the birds. When the stick touches the bird, it sticks due to the adhesive.

### **Ottu (Sticky Substance)**

This is the sticky paste used on tools to catch birds. It is made by mixing latex from fig or peepal trees with coconut oil. Kuravars make and store this paste inside bull horns, which keeps it usable for up to three months.

### **Using Dogs for Hunting**

When going hunting, the Kuravars customarily took not only the hunting tools they made but also the hunting dogs they raised. Especially when going to hunt squirrels, cats, and monitor lizards, they used to take these hunting dogs along. Kuravars say that they began training these dogs from when they were puppies for this purpose. It is also said that each household used to raise two dogs. However, this practice is no longer followed today.

### **Hunting Method**

When going to hunt animals like cats, squirrels, turtles, monitor lizards, owls, quails, partridges, and cranes, the Kuravars never go alone—they always go as a group. Only in the absence of group members do they go alone, which is rare. On the day before a hunt, all members gather and decide where to go and which animals to hunt, and act accordingly. After returning from the hunt, they divide the hunted animals equally among themselves.

For the Kuravars, hunting was once a primary occupation during the food-gathering era. Later, it became a hobby or preferred activity. This change was due to various circumstances such as being evicted from forests and hills, forcing them to take up other jobs for their livelihood. Even today, in the midst of their busy lives, they set aside other tasks and eagerly go in groups for hunting on chosen days.

Similarly, they also go hunting to meet the needs of the sick, pregnant women, or visiting relatives and guests. Such visitors are also taken along on the hunt. After the hunt, it is their custom to host a feast with meat and liquor to entertain their guests.

### **Squirrel Hunting**

Since catching squirrels is difficult, Kuravars go in groups rather than alone. Squirrels roam in search of food from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m., which is the best time to catch them. Therefore, the group usually departs by 6 a.m. One member carries the 'Sinukku' (iron-tipped spear called 'Ambukkali'), while others carry bamboo sticks.

To catch squirrels on trees, one Kuravar climbs and sits on a dense tree branch and shakes it rapidly. Startled by the movement, the squirrels scatter and run. The direction of their movement is anticipated, and those on the ground strike and catch the squirrels. If a squirrel is within striking distance, the one with the spear will stab and catch it.

In addition to this, the Kuravars use two other methods to catch baby squirrels. One is mimicking the sound of a squirrel to attract others, and then catching them using the spear. The other method is spreading nets. When they shake the tree branches, the frightened squirrels run into the waiting nets and get trapped.

### Monitor Lizard Hunting

Kuravars are highly skilled in catching monitor lizards, which live in forest areas with minimal human activity. They are also fond of eating monitor lizard meat, which they believe strengthens the body. They say it should not be eaten with disgust or hesitation; otherwise, the meat won't be beneficial. Additionally, Kuravars believe that monitor lizards have strong marital bonds between male and female partners.

Monitor lizards found on trees, bushes, shrubs, and rocks are targeted using a long spear (Sulukki). One person strikes the lizard on the head, while others remain quiet to ensure the lizard doesn't escape. Once caught, the head and tail are tied together and carried back. After bringing it home, the strong skin is removed, and the meat is thoroughly cooked and eaten.

### Cat Hunting

Kuravars are especially skilled in hunting cats. Most often, they go hunting at night. They identify the presence of wild cats in the forests by their footprints and burrows, particularly in damp areas near streams, fields, and under river bridges. At these spots, they place cat traps ('Bonu Petti').

Inside these traps, they place live animals such as squirrels or rats as bait. Within a few hours, the cat, attracted by the bait, enters the trap and gets caught.

Similarly, they also catch cats from urban streets. Kuravars are experts in chasing and catching cats that roam around village marketplaces and streets. One person chases from one side, while another waits on the other side to catch it. For this, instead of traps, they use a spear to stab and catch the cat.

### Bird Hunting

Kuravars hunt water birds, cranes, mynas, owls, quails, and partridges that live near water bodies or dense forest trees. They use tools like snares, nets, 'Mukkoodu', and sticky poles ('Ottukambu') and go hunting in groups. Kuravars in the areas we studied described in detail how they prepare in advance and conduct these bird hunts.

### For the present and future, three points merit consideration

In considering the future of the Kuravar community's food and hunting traditions, three important points emerge:

#### 1. Policy Engagement with Community Practices

Conservation laws and policies must meaningfully engage with indigenous food and hunting traditions. Ignoring these practices risks not only alienating tribal communities but also losing valuable ecological and cultural knowledge passed down through generations.

#### 2. Documentation and Preservation

Anthropologists, local scholars, and tribal organizations should prioritize the documentation of rapidly disappearing knowledge systems—such as traditional tools, folk songs, hunting stories, and recipes—which are intimately tied to the Kuravar's food and hunting culture.

#### 3. Alternative Livelihoods and Sustainable Hunting

Supporting the food sovereignty of the Kuravar community can be achieved by exploring sustainable practices. These may include legal and regulated hunting, domestication of certain species, agroforestry, and ecotourism, all of which can empower the community economically while respecting their traditions.

Overall, the Kuravar community presents a compelling case of how an indigenous group continues to uphold its food culture amidst external pressures. For the Kuravars, hunting is not merely a source of food—it embodies culture, identity, ritual, belief, and an intrinsic relationship with the natural world.

### Conclusion

Based on recent field research, while the Kuravar community's food habits have adapted to different living environments—urban, semi-urban, and rural—they still maintain a consistent practice of eating three meals per day. Breakfast usually consists of leftovers from the previous night. For those attending work or school, breakfast foods such as *idli* and *dosa* are prepared at home or bought from nearby eateries. Coffee or tea is commonly consumed, particularly by the men in the community.

Despite these shifts, the community's preference for meat remains unchanged. Pork and cat meat continue to hold cultural and ritual significance and are consumed with high preference. Pork, in particular, is deeply embedded in the social and religious events of the Kuravars. Wild meats, including quail, jungle fowl, heron, and squirrel, are also commonly consumed.

Although modern wildlife protection laws have outlawed the hunting of many species, field data suggests that the Kuravar community continue to show strong interest in hunting—especially wild and domestic cats. This enduring interest demonstrates that hunting is still deeply rooted in their cultural identity.

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