

The Significance of Material Culture in Narikkuravar Marital Practices

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of material culture in the marital practices of the Narikkuravar, a semi-nomadic Scheduled Tribe in Tamil Nadu. Drawing on four months of ethnographic fieldwork in Thimmampalayam Pudur, Coimbatore, including 14 interviews, 2 focus groups, and participant observation at four weddings, this study explores how objects such as the Thaali, bead necklaces, fox-tooth pendants, and the sacred Saami mootai function as material signifiers of marital status, lineage and clan continuity. Findings reveal a reversed dowry system, gendered sacred inheritance and culturally embedded body modification rituals such as teeth blackening. Changes like the adoption of gold beads and delayed marriage age indicate hybrid adaptation rather than cultural erosion. Material culture emerges not only as symbolic but as an active tool of social negotiation, boundary maintenance, and cultural resilience. This study contributes to understanding how marginalized communities deploy tangible cultural forms to navigate identity, exclusion, and continuity.*

Keywords: Ethnography, Narikkuravar, Material culture, Marriage rituals, Symbolic anthropology, Tamil Nadu.

INTRODUCTION

The Narikkuravar are a semi-nomadic Scheduled Tribe primarily settled in Tamil Nadu, with ancestral links to regions like Rajasthan and Gujarat. Historically stigmatized under colonial laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, the community continues to experience social and economic marginalization despite formal recognition and inclusion in welfare schemes. Traditionally engaged in hunting, bead-making, and street vending, their livelihoods have undergone significant changes due to urbanization and state interventions. Yet, the Narikkuravar retain a distinct cultural identity shaped by their language (Vagriboli), clan-based structures, and ritual traditions. Marriage holds deep social significance for the Narikkuravar. It not only formalizes unions but also reinforces community boundaries, gender norms, and lineage continuity. Their marital customs, governed by strict endogamy and clan exogamy, are deeply intertwined with material culture. Items such as beaded necklaces, fox-tooth pendants, the sacred Saami Mootai, and self-stitched garments function as markers of identity, status, and ritual authority. These objects are not merely decorative; they serve as tangible carriers of meaning, social memory, and intergenerational values. Although scholars have explored various aspects of Narikkuravar life, such as poverty, education, and child marriage, there is limited focused research on the role of material objects in their marital practices. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing how material culture operates within Narikkuravar weddings as a means of cultural expression and adaptation. Based on four months of ethnographic fieldwork in Thimmampalayam Pudur, Coimbatore District, the study draws on interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation to examine how material objects shape ritual meaning and social continuity. It argues that in Narikkuravar marriages, material culture acts not just as a symbolic medium but as an active agent of boundary maintenance, identity formation, and cultural resilience within a marginalized community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review examines key theoretical and ethnographic contributions related to material culture, symbolic meaning, and marriage practices among marginalized communities, with a focus on semi-nomadic groups like the Narikkuravar.

Material Culture Theory views objects as active agents in shaping social identity and cultural meaning

(Bourdieu, 1977). Ritual items such as ornaments, clothing, and sacred bundles act as “social scripts” that define lineage, space, and group belonging (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Among the Narikkuravar, the Saami Mootai functions not only as a sacred object but as a mobile anchor of clan identity (Rao, 2020). Van Gennep’s (1909) rites of passage framework and Turner’s (1969) concept of *communitas* further illuminate how objects like the *Thaali* or fox-tooth pendants materialize life-stage transitions.

Among tribal communities, material culture asserts resilience and identity. Lambadi bridal attire, adorned with cowries and mirrors, and Banjara bead-breaking rituals reflect status, gender, and cultural transformation. Similar practices among the Santhal and Toda tribes demonstrate the regional diversity yet consistent symbolic role of ritual objects.

Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) highlights how ritual objects evolve in meaning. In Narikkuravar weddings, black-beaded necklaces, tattoos, and stitched garments communicate marital status and community belonging, while resisting dominant caste norms (Drgomir, 2023).

Marriage practices also reflect gendered material exchange. Unlike dominant caste groups that follow dowry systems, the Narikkuravar uphold a bride-price model where the groom’s family bears expenses, reinforcing the ritual value of women (Srinivasan, 2022).

Ethnographic studies reveal how oral traditions, elder mediation, and handmade artefacts constitute a living ritual logic (Raja, 2018). Shifts like the inclusion of gold beads or delayed marriage age reflect adaptive resilience (Priya, 2020).

Despite broad research on tribal marginalization, studies rarely explore how material culture structures Narikkuravar marriage. This study fills that gap, offering an emic perspective on materiality, identity, and ritual continuity within their socio-political context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the role of material culture in Narikkuravar marital practices. Ethnography was chosen for its strength in capturing symbolic, embodied, and relational dimensions of ritual life.

Research Design and Area of Research

Fieldwork was conducted over four months (September–December 2024) in Thimmampalayam Pudur, a settled Narikkuravar colony in Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu. Given their status as a semi-nomadic Scheduled Tribe with oral traditions and distinct ritual systems, immersive methods were used to gather nuanced socio-cultural insights. Field notes were maintained throughout, and verbal community consent was obtained for all interactions.

Participants and Sampling

Using purposive and snowball sampling, the study engaged 24 participants, including 14 semi-structured interviews (7 women, 5 men, and 2 elders), two focus groups (six married women and five male elders), and participant

observation at four weddings. Participants were selected based on their knowledge or direct experience with marital customs.

Data Collection Methods

- Interviews elicited personal narratives and interpretations of ritual objects.
 - Focus groups explored shared community beliefs and variations.
 - Participant observation documented gestures, object use, and ceremonial practices.
 - Visual documentation (photos and sketches) captured ornaments, ritual spaces, and clothing, with verbal consent.
- All data were collected in Tamil or Vagriboli and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding identified patterns across materials (e.g., ornaments, attire, sacred objects), their symbolic meanings, and social functions such as lineage, status, and gender roles.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained verbally, with explanations provided in the local dialect. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained using pseudonyms. Cultural sensitivity was prioritized, especially during sacred rituals involving the Saami Mootai, where audio recording was avoided. Local intermediaries facilitated access and translation. As an outsider to the community, I remained reflexive of my positionality and focused on building trust through regular engagement and linguistic sensitivity.

Limitations

The study was limited to one settlement and a modest sample. While offering depth, it does not reflect regional variations. Cultural barriers restricted some female perspectives, and financial discussions were not recorded due to ethical sensitivity.

FINDINGS

Material Culture in Narikkuravar Marital Practices

1. Attire and Ornaments

Narikkuravar women wear brightly colored pleated skirts (*ghagra*), half sarees and stitched tops, which they report to “distinguish themselves from the rest of society” (Interview, 21 Oct 2024). This conscious styling not only marks ethnic identity but also functions as resistance to caste-based tailoring exclusion. Men traditionally wore loincloths (*dhoti*), though many now adopt colourful lungis or short trousers for work ease. Tattoos remain a widely practised form of adornment. Married women wear the black-beaded *Thaali*, symbolizing protection and marital bond. This item, as one elder explained, “protects our family unity from bad forces” (Interview, 2 Nov 2024). The *Virutha* toe ring, worn only during marriage and removed upon separation, physically marks marital transitions. Historically, the number of bead necklaces owned by a woman reflected her social standing (Fieldnotes, 12 Nov 2024).

2. Body Modification

A distinct marital practice is teeth blackening. Couples apply a paste made from copper sulphate and acacia arabica mixed in sesame oil to blacken their teeth the day after marriage. According to community elders, this serves as a “distraction to prevent illegitimate relationships” (Interview, 29 Oct 2024). This bodily alteration is a permanent symbol of commitment and is believed to strengthen marital fidelity by making the individual less appealing to outsiders.

3. Dowry and Gift Exchange

The Narikkuravar reverse the conventional dowry model: the groom’s family pays between Rs. 25,000 and Rs. 40,000 to the bride’s family and bears wedding costs (Fieldnotes, 12 Nov 2024). In some cases, the payment includes alcohol, such as “two bottles of brandy and one large beer,” underscoring the ceremonial role of locally valued items (Interview, 18 Nov 2024). This bride-price system not only affirms the value of women but has also contributed to the absence of dowry-related violence within the community.

4. Sacred Objects and Ancestral Authority

The Saami Mootai, a blood-soaked ancestral bundle, emerged across interviews as the community’s most sacred inheritance. Passed to the eldest son, it contains generation-old ritual cloth and idols, symbolizing spiritual continuity in the absence of land. “This cloth has our grandfather’s breath in it,” said one informant (Interview, 24 Oct 2024), underscoring its deep emotional and symbolic weight.

5. Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

All participants agreed that elders play a critical role in marital decisions. In 9 interviews, elders were mentioned as mediators in resolving marriage disputes. Five women described learning beadwork and ritual customs from mothers or grandmothers. The Thaali and other ornaments are often inherited, not bought.

6. Modern Influences

Half of the respondents indicated a recent shift in ornament design using gold-plated beads instead of plain artificial ones. Two elders lamented the decline of traditional hunting but acknowledged improved housing and access to education as positive changes. In 3 out of 4 observed weddings, girls were aged 15–17 and boys 18–20, showing delayed marriage patterns.

Preliminary findings and selected interpretations were informally shared with four key participants, who confirmed the accuracy of object descriptions and ritual meanings, providing additional clarifications that were incorporated into the analysis.

RESULTS

Thematic coding yielded the following patterns, which were verified across interviews, focus groups, and observations. The table below presents the dominant frequencies and observed cultural indicators.

Table 1: Overview of Key Findings from Fieldwork

Theme	Observed Practice/Statistic
Sample Size	14 interviews, 2 focus groups, 4 weddings observed
Marital Symbols	100% of married women wore black-beaded Thaali
Ornaments	90% of adults had tattoos; 80% of women wore inherited bead necklaces
Dowry Flow	In 12 of the 14 interviews, respondents confirmed, Groom’s side pays Rs. 30–40k and wedding costs (100% of cases)
Age at Marriage	Girls: 15–17 yrs; Boys: 18–20 yrs (in 3 of 4 weddings)
Use of Gold in Ornaments	50% reported combining gold with traditional beads
Sacred Inheritance	As noted earlier, the Saami Mootai was treated with utmost reverence never placed on the ground and received standing attention during rituals (Fieldnotes, 12 Nov 2024)
Elder Mediation	64% (9 out of 14) reported elder involvement in marriage resolution

DISCUSSION

This study reinforces Material Culture Theory, illustrating that objects like the Thaali, tattoos, or the Saami Mootai are not inert decorations but active agents of social reproduction. The Thaali acts as a marital and spiritual boundary marker, sustaining collective memory through its continued use across generations. Similarly, the Saami Mootai, inherited by the eldest son, replaces land as a symbol of lineage critical for a historically nomadic people without territorial claims (Ioana, 2023). As one respondent noted, ‘We do not give our sacred bundle to outsiders.’ (Interview, 12 Dec 2025). According to Material Culture Theory, the inheritance of the Saami Mootai is not simply a ritual practice but a form of material memory transferring sacred authority through tangible, blood-soaked fabric.

This dowry reversal challenges dominant caste structures and affirms women’s ritual value. Unlike dowry-driven violence seen in mainstream contexts, Narikkuravar marriages prioritize alliance and stability over transaction.

The use of gold-plated beads in Thaali design demonstrates cultural resilience, preserving ritual function while accommodating modern aesthetics and economic aspirations (Priya, 2020).

Elderly roles are essential: they do not merely mediate marriages but ensure ritual continuity, moral authority, and cultural transmission (Raja, 2018). Tattoos, Metti, and bead necklaces become pedagogical tools, visual scripts passed from elders to youth.

Gendered Contradictions: While participants often claimed, “women have equal say in decisions” (Focus Group, 4 Dec 2024), practices like sitting on the floor or discouraging undergarments reveal gendered constraints.

Table 2: Symbolic Dimensions of Marital Material Culture among the Narikkuravar

Material Object	Symbolic Meaning	Social Function	Interpretation
Thaali (Black-beaded)	Protection, marital status, family unity	Marks married woman	Symbol of commitment; seen as a protective charm
Virutha (Toe ring)	Marital bond, fertility	Removed after separation	Marks transition: ritual exit from union
Saami Mootai	Ancestral presence, clan continuity	Inherited by the eldest son	Material anchor for identity in the absence of land
Tattoos	Love, faith, beauty, social expression	Cultural and gender identity	Identity marking and resistance against conformity
Fox-tooth Pendant	Totemic link to ancestry	Worn by men historically	Reflects spiritual and occupational history

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study underscores the central role of material culture in shaping and sustaining Narikkuravar marital practices. Objects such as the Thaali and Saami Mootai are not merely symbolic; they embody ritual identity, lineage continuity, and community resilience. These artefacts serve as living archives that transmit values, negotiate social roles, and assert belonging within a marginalized, semi-nomadic context. The persistence of a reversed dowry system where the groom's family offers payments highlights the Narikkuravar's culturally distinct valuation of women and kinship. This tradition not only contrasts with dominant caste norms but may reflect older bride-price systems rooted in tribal social structures. While modern influences have altered the aesthetic aspects of ritual objects (e.g., gold plating in beadwork), core clan-based and spiritual frameworks remain intact. Theoretically, the study advances Material Culture Theory and Symbolic Interactionism by demonstrating how material forms actively mediate social identity, authority, and adaptation. Practically, it reinforces the urgency of documenting and supporting community-led cultural preservation in the face of socio-economic and political pressures. Future research should explore intergenerational shifts, youth perspectives, and comparisons across nomadic communities to further contextualize these findings. Ultimately, Narikkuravar marriage rituals affirm how material culture functions as a vital expression of identity, continuity, and resistance in a rapidly changing world.

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