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# (Korean-Tamil) Language and Cultural similarities, Maritime Trade between Early Historic Tamilakam and Korea

**Selvaraj Arokiyaraj**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Food Science & Biotechnology*

*Sejong University, South Korea*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5486-7246>

**Gayathri Ravichandran**

*Scholar, Faculty of Epigraphy, Thanjavur Tamil University, Thanjavur, India*


**Athanur Chozhan**

*SIBI Pathipagam, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India*

**Kannan Narayanan**

*Director, Institute of South and East Asian Studies*

*Kadikai Virtual Academy of Excellence, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0508-658X>

**Abstract**

*There are several similarities found between the Korean and Tamil culture of India that many people are unaware. The present article discusses the similarities in language, food, and culture. Probably the Iron Age trade relationship and spread of Buddhism from Tamil Nadu bound these two great maritime nations. Besides, evidence emerges from classical Tamil literature (Sangam period 600 BCE to 300 CE), archeological findings and anthropological discoveries found in Adichanallur, a pre-historic harbor site, indicate that people of Mongoloids race traveled to the ancient seaport of Korkai, Tamil Nadu and Tamil people may have traveled to Korea for trade or missionary activities. This could be the possible reason behind the language and cultural similarities between these two nations.*

**Keywords:** Ancient trade, Korean-Tamil similarities, Cultural similarities, Buddhism, India

**Introduction**

There is historical evidence to show that ancient Tamilar/Tamil (Dravidian language family), India traded across the seas with different regions of the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asian countries. The first evidence of ancient maritime contact appears in the second half of the first millennium BCE from Ban Don Ta Phet in West-Central Thailand, dated to the early 4th BCE (Ian C. Grover and Jan Don Ta Phet, 1990). Ancient Tamil Sangam (600 BCE to 300 CE) poem “Narrai” narrates commercial as well as a cultural link between South India (Tamilakam) and other countries (Takahashi, 1995; Zvelebil, 1974).

“Vēru palnāṭṭiṛ kālṭaravanta

palavi nai nāvāy tōṅṅum perunturai” (Narrai 295: 5, 6)

Meaning, ships from various countries and cultures have docked at the port in ancient Tamizhakam/Tamil Nadu. Korkai (3rd century BCE - 4th centuries CE) an ancient port from Tamil Nadu was once considered the cradle of South Indian civilization (Arunachalam, 1952). Archaeological excavations at Korkai and Kayal (east of Korkai) unearthed pearl oysters, shells, Buddha images, coins, and funereal urns (Robert Caldwell, 1877). The functioning of pearl factories and shell cutting industries reported in ancient text Chilappadharam (*Korkaiyam perunturai muttodu poondu* - 14:180). Meaning, exchange of pearls (Muthu - Tamil) from the ancient port Korkai (Shankar Raju and Ganesan, 1979).

The main motivation for this article is my observation and interaction with the people in Korea since my (S. Arokiyaraj) arrival here in South Korea (Month of May 2013). I am native of Puducherry and originated from the Madanagopalapuram village (Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu, India). I stayed in the countryside in Korea, witnessed and participated in some of the local functions and celebrations of the people here. Some of the cultural exhibits during the functions in Korea are similar to the way my own family, relatives and neighbors do in my native place, Tamil Nadu. This experience of mine aroused my curiosity to probe further into the culture and use of some words by people in South Korea and Tamil Nadu. Similarities in language, food, and cultural expressions in South Korea and Tamil Nadu drew my attention to do a comparative study.

A literature survey does not reveal much study/research on these topics. In 1905, Homer B. Hulbert was first to hypothesize the similarities between Korean and Dravidian languages but was unable to provide much convincing evidence to support his findings (Hulbert Homer B, 1905). Later, Morgan E Clippinger proposed his article 'Korean and Dravidian: Lexical Evidence for an Old Theory' presents over 400 sets of words that were similar between the two languages (Clippinger Morgan, 1984). Recently, in South Korea, Korean scholar GI Moon Yang learned Tamil and now teaches Tamil in Korean language in his You Tube channel Muuni TV (무니티비/முணி TV). In addition, he wrote several books about Tamil language & grammar in Korean

language along with his co-authors Haribalan Perumalsamy and Sureshkumar Manthiriyappan (Yang Gi Moon, 2014, 2016). However, not much research was carried out on these Korean – Tamil (Dravidian) cultural links. This article discusses the similarities found in the language, food and culture between Korean and Tamil and discusses possible reasons for these similarities of which people are unaware.

### **Geographical Location of Korea and Tamil Nadu**

The Korean Peninsula is located in South East Asia. The Korean Peninsula is bordered by the Yellow Sea to the west, the East China Sea and the Korean Strait to the South, and the East Sea. Han River, which is a major river in South Korea and the fourth-longest river on the Korean peninsula, has played an important role in the trade route to China during the three kingdoms of Korea (Liu, 2015).

- Korean is the official and national language of both Koreas. Recognized as minority language in the Yanbian Korean (Autonomous) and Changbai Korean (Autonomous County of Jilin Province, China). Also spoken in parts of Sakhalin, Russia and Central Asia. In the 15th century, King Sejong the Great developed an alphabetic featural writing system known today as Hangul.

Tamil Nadu is located on the southern border of the Indian peninsula. Tamil Nadu is the most urbanized state in India and one of the most industrialized states. Tamil was the first to be classified as a classical language of India, one of the 22 scheduled languages in the Constitution of India and official language in countries such as Singapore and Sri Lanka. Besides Tamil Nadu, Tamil language was spoken by Tamils in the Union Territory of Pondicherry and Andaman & Nicobar Islands and by significant minorities in South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala and Karnataka. It is also spoken by the Tamil diaspora found in many countries, including Malaysia, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia. In fact, it has constitutional recognition in South Africa, Mauritius and Malaysia.

## Similarities in Foods, Language and Cultures

Table 1 shows the similarities between Korean and Tamil words with respect to family relationships, agriculture, and body parts. Koreans consider rice as a staple food. They distribute, as the Tamils would do, sweets made up of rice, such as Adhirasam, on events such as the birth of a child, housewarming ceremony, etc. Other items such as Oorugai (김치-Kimchi), Kozhukattai (송편-Songpyeon), Sesame cake (엿강정-yeotgangjeong), Adaidosai (김치전-kimchi-jeon), Sweet Pongal (약식-Yaksik) are very similar among the Korean and Tamil cultures. Chundakanji in Tamil culture is a fermented rice wine as Makgeolli (막걸리) in Korea (Figure 1).

Pongal (Tamil New Year and Harvest festival) is an important traditional festival for Tamils living in India and abroad. During this occasion, people thank nature with food prepared in rice and with local fruits and vegetables (Figure 2a). Kaanum Pongal is an event that follows the second day of Pongal; on this, day people visit their neighbors and friends and share homemade sweets. Moreover, the newly wedded couples with their kids get the blessings from the elders of the family on this important occasion. Korea has similar traditions during the Seolnal (설날) and Chuseok festivals (추석) (Figure 2 b). Pearl (Muthu in Tamil) diving in the deep seas in Tamil Nadu is mentioned in the ancient Tamil literature poem as *Korkaiyam perunturaimuttodu poondu* (Chilappadiharam- 14:180). Even today, women in Tamil Nadu are involved in diving practices. Similarly, this kind of sea-diving act by women was found in the southern coastal region of South Korea (Narasiah, 2005). Meat is served at the death ceremonies in both Korea and Tamil Nadu. Ancestor worship (Munnoor Vazhipaadu in Tamil) is practiced in the countryside of Tamil Nadu. On that day, rice, meat, and fruits are served in front of an altar as a respect for their ancestors and their spirits. Similarly, 'Jesa', ancestor worship is practiced in Korea. Animal sacrifice is another thing common in both the cultures. In the countryside Buddha temple in Korea resembles the Ayyanar temple in Tamil Nadu as shown in Figure 3.

In Korea, the village people would pray to Chilseongnim (칠성님) hoping for a great harvest. Once the ritual is over, the village people would set

fire to the dry weeds using torches (Dalbyeosjib - 달뻬집). The purpose of setting fire to the rice field is to kill insects and fertilize the field before planting crops. Next, there is a play called jwibulnol-I (쥐불놀이) that children would go out in the rice field, set a small fire in a tin can with a long wire/rope handle attached, and enjoy spinning it (Figure 4). Similarly, village people and children in Tamilnadu practice this kind of ritual named Cokkappanai & Māvōli during the Tamil month Karthigai.



**Figure 1: Korea-Tamil Food Similarities**

- a) Yaksik - Pongal, b) Yeotgangjeong - ElluMittai, c) Kimchi - Oorugai, d) Seongpeon - Kozhukattai, e) Kimchi-jeon - Adai, f) Makgeolli - Chundakanji

## Possible Reasons for Language and Cultural Exchanges

The most possible reason behind this language, food, and the cultural relationship might be an active ancient sea trade during the Iron Age. The spread of Buddhism from ancient Tamil Nadu to other Asian regions. Ancient Tamil Nadu had considerable trade links with the Middle East, Europe (Greece and Rome), and China through its southern coastal (Figure 5 a, b, c) regions.

## Archaeological Evidence of Tamils Trade Relations With Foreigners

Adichanallur pre-historic harbor site (1000 BC - 600 BC), Tamil Nadu, India considered as the ancient cradle of Iron Age civilization, has a long and continuous history of human occupation located 25 km away from the port of Korkai. In the year 1986, Kenneth Kennedy studied five

skulls from Adichanallur, kept at the Egmore museum, Tamil Nadu. He noticed the existence of three major races in Adichanallur excavation site (Kenneth AR Kennedy, 1986). Chatterjee and Gupta studied the skulls collected from the Adichanallur site. The authors were convinced that the skulls had resemblances with Mediterranean and Proto-Australoids types (Chatterjee and Gupta, 1963). To support their findings Raghavan et al. (2010), conducted FORDISC analysis of nearly 85 human skeletons placed in a squatting position in giant clay urns (Excavation by Archaeological Survey of India). The purpose of FORDISC analysis is to compare the Adichanallur skeleton data with worldwide populations. His findings proved the existence of other racial groups such as Caucasoid 35%, Mongoloid 30%, Negroid 14%, Australoid 5%, Dravidian 8%, and mixed traits 8% in this area (Figure 6). Here, we mention the famous Tamil quote “*Yaadhum Oore Yaavarum Kelir*” by Kaniyan Poongunranar (600 BCE – 100 CE). Meaning, we harbor a feeling of kinship for all places and all people is our own. Kaniyan Poongunranar rejected the division of humankind into various categories (caste, color, country etc.) and emphasized the universality of all humans. About ancient Korea – Tamil maritime relationship, it is observed that the indigenous people from Northeast Asian regions (Korea, China, Japan, etc.) traveled to the ancient port Korkai, Tamil Nadu for trade purposes. This confirms the settlement of Northeast Asians in Tamil Nadu. Vice versa, Tamil people might have traveled to Korea and Northeast Asia for trade or missionary purposes. In support of this, Susumu Ōno and Hulbert propose that ancient Tamils had migrated to Korea and Japan (Susumu, 1970; Nak-chun, 1987). South India had a thriving maritime trade; Roman coins were even circulated in their original form, albeit slashed at times as a gesture disclaiming intrusion of foreign sovereignty (Krishnamurthy, 2008; Narasiah, 2005). Two copper coins of Tamil origin were found in KhuanLuk Pat (Khlung Thom), an ancient port city in Krabi province on the West coast of Thailand (Shanmngam, 1994; Vikas Kumar Verma, 2006). Glass beads were discovered in the tombs of the Han dynasty in the Valley of the Yellow river and Yangzhi in South China dated to the period

between 200 BC and 200A.D. The historical record of the Han dynasty also mentions that Emperor Wu sent people to the Southern sea to buy glasses. It is probable that these glass beads reached China from Tamil Nadu via Mantai in Sri Lanka, Khlung Tom in Thailand and OcEo in Vietnam (Vikas Kumar Verma, 2006). This confirms the trading activities between Tamil Nadu, China and Thailand from the early historical period (Shanmngam, 1994; Krishnamurthy, 1997; Vikas Kumar Verma, 2006). China is the neighboring country of Korea. From this, we could infer that Tamils had trade relations via sea route between Korea and Tamil Nadu. Historian Sivagnanam Balasubramani (Orissa Balu) from the Tamil Nadu hypothesis that ancient traders utilized sea turtles as guides to travel between nations (The Hindu News, 2016).

#### **Probable Spread of Buddhism to Korea from Ancient Tamizhakam**

Buddhism is the popular religion in Tamil Nadu between 1st BCE to 5th CE. For evidence Chilappadharam, Manimekalai and Kundalakesi were ancient Tamil literary works that describe the life of merchants and the spread of Buddhism in the east (Zvelebil, 1974). Manimekalai mentions a celebrated Buddha Vihara at Kanchi (Madhaviah, 2000). Hee Sung (1978) reported that Buddhism was introduced first to the kingdom of Koguryo in 372 CE, followed by Paekche in 384 CE, and finally in the Silla kingdom between 527 and 535 CE. In relation to ancient Korea - Tamil maritime relationship, the period (1st BCE to 5th CE) of Buddhism religion between Tamil Nadu and Korea, show some correlations.

According to Samguk Yusa's, the spread of Buddhism in Korea was by Indian merchants rather than official Chinese envoys (Yusa, II I-iii, Adogira). In Mukhoja's story, Shin Chong-won (1977) mentioned foreign merchants played an important role in spreading Buddhism in Silla. However, he doesn't mention the country of merchants. We assume the merchants could have come from India. The reason is that incense is one of the most important Indian export items sold to China and for eastern nations. Kwangsu Lee, (1993) in his article “Trade and Religious contacts between India and

Korea in Ancient Times” reported that an Indian monk visited Silla Korea via Koguryo in A.D. 417 during the reign of King Nulchi. He was called A-do too or Muk-ho-ja meaning ‘dark complex foreigner’. For all probability, the dark, complex foreigner might have come from South India particularly from ancient Tamizhakam. South Indians are darker tone in color. From this literature, we understand that Indian Buddhist monks traveled to Korea to spread the Buddha’s gospel, and Korean monks making the assiduous pilgrimage to India via the sea route.

### **Three Kingdom Period in Ancient Korea and Tamil Nadu**

Ancient Tamil Nadu had three kingdoms like Chera, Chola, and Pandiya Kingdom (including the Aioi/Ay kingdom) (Figure 5 b). Greek geographer Claudius Ptolemy (2nd CE) described the presence of “Aioi/Ay” in ancient Tamizhakam. Similarly, Korea also had three kingdoms like Silla, Koguryo and Paekche (including Gaya territory) in ancient times. We could assume that the Korean territory Gaya (Kaya, 2001) and Tamil port Kayal (east of Korkai) were found to be similar in trade activities via river (Robert Caldwell, 1877). Tamil writer Athanur Chozhan mentioned the three-kingdom rule in ancient Korea in his book *Koreavin Kathai* (Athanur Chozhan, 2016).

### **Indian Prince**

According to a Korean book *Samguk Yusa*, in 48 CE, Kim Suro married a 16-year-old princess from distant Kingdom (Kim Choong soon, 2011). The Indian princess might be from Tamil Nadu (Aioi/Ay Kingdom), probably traveled to Korea based on the earlier trade relationship or missionary purpose with Northeast Asian countries. Prof. Kannan Narayanan had published the article “Tamil–Korean relationship” claiming that the Indian queen was from Tamil Nadu (Kannan, 2011). It is interesting to mention here that at present about 4000 Koreans are living in India, especially in Tamil Nadu (The Hindu News, 2016). Therefore, in such a situation, it might have become common for many Koreans to marry Indians and vice versa.

### **Indians Living in South Korea**

At present more than 10,000 Indians are living in South Korea working in multinational companies (Hyundai, Samsung, LG, Daewoo, etc.). Besides, there are research scientists, students and professors working at various world-ranking universities in South Korea. There are a number of associations in South Korea formed on ethnic/regional lines that undertake cultural and social activities. These activities not only provide the community an opportunity to socialize with fellow Indians and stay in touch with Indian culture but also spread Indian culture among Korean and other foreigners living in South Korea and thus play a vital role in strengthening India-Korea relationship.

### **Korea’s Influence in Tamil Nadu**

In 2015, Jung Nam Kim, President, Korean Society of Tamil Studies, spoke during the International Conference on “Cultural exchange between India and Korea in antiquity”, that there were 500 words found both in Korean and Tamil and in both these languages, these words were pronounced in the same way. The conference was organized by the Consulate General of Korea, International Institute of Tamil Studies and the InKo Centre, Chennai (The Hindu News, 2015). Many Korean companies such as Hyundai, POSCO, Samsung, LG, and KIA have invested in India and set up branches in Tamil Nadu. Moreover, in recent days Korean Pop and Korean dramas influence young Indians. In 2019, S. Arokiyaraj delivered a speech on “Thirukkural In Modern Era” highlighting equality, science, ethics, politics, love and humanity in Thirukural (300 BCE) at KOO & LEE Academia, Seoul, South Korea. Next, V. Janagaraj discussed about ancient Sangam literatures, D. Gnanaraj and S. Ramasundaram discussed about culture and Tamils living abroad. In the same year, a South Korean You Tuber, Traveler Lasol (대리여행자라솔) along with S. Arokiyaraj and B. Balamurali krishnan released a video on the topic WHY KOREANS AND TAMILS (SOUTHERN INDIA) ARE SO SIMILAR? Part 1&2 (<https://youtu.be/EB-38ST4Tf0>). The video reached more than 4,000,000 views and received 14,000 comments (as of 09/12/2020). This is the first Korean-Tamil

similarity YouTube video reached a million views in a short time. Moreover, this video created a new discussion about Korean-Tamil similarities and ancient Tamil-Korea relationship. After this video, many videos related to Korean-Tamil language similarities are trending.

### Author Personal Opinion about South Korea

Korean people are well educated, hospitable and friendly. Though I am a foreigner here, the people and families I met have made me feel at ease and my stay comfortable. Korea is much advanced in education, technology and standard of life. When I am in the Post Doc Researcher in Seoul National University where I work with my professor Kyoung Hoon Kim I learn a lot from the Korean educational institutions and people on hard work, sincerity and simplicity, love and respect for people and nature and reach out to people in need. I am sure my stay in South Korea offered me more opportunities to involve myself in both academic and cultural research.

### Conclusion

In this article, we discussed a few examples of Korean-Tamil cultural and linguistic similarities. As per our knowledge, this is among the first few articles that discuss similarities between Korean and Tamil, especially in language, food, and culture. This article puts forward ancient maritime trade between Tamil Nadu and South & North East Asian countries as cited in Tamil literature and archaeological findings in Tamil Nadu, India. Another possible reason for this exchange could be the spread of Buddhism from ancient Tamil Nadu to Northeast Asian countries. Based on this evidence, we suggest that India and Korea are not such distant countries. They are long bound by commerce in ancient times. Besides, one admires the acceptance of multi-culturalism in Korea in recent times. Therefore, promoting bilateral ties based on culture and language will greatly benefit trade between these two important economies in Asia. More studies on these lines in the future will surely yield more information that is valuable.

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Figure 2: Tamil-Korea cultural similarities  
(a) Pongal festival - Tamil Nadu  
(b) Chuseok festival - Korea



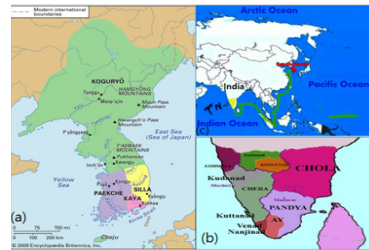
Figure 3: Tamil-Korea cultural similarities  
a) Animal sacrifice b) Temples

**Table 1: Similarity Between Korean and Tamil Words with Respect to Family Relationships, Agriculture, and Body Parts**

| Korea                     | Tamil                           | English               |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Appa (아빠)                 | Appā (அப்பா)                    | Father                |
| Eomma (엄마)                | Ammā (அம்மா)                    | Mother                |
| Eonni (언니) - Elder sister | Anni (அண்ணி)                    | Elder sister (in Law) |
| Nuna (누나) - Elder sister  | Nungai (நங்கை)                  | Younger sister        |
| Manura (마누라)              | Manaivi (மனைவி)                 | Wife                  |
| Na (나), Naneun (나는)       | Nān (நான்)/ Nānu (நானு)         | I                     |
| Neo (너), Neega (네가)       | Nī (நீ)/ Neenga (நீங்க)         | You                   |
| Kan (칸)                   | Kan (கன)                        | Distance              |
| Aap (앞)                   | Aappaal (அப்பால்)               | Next                  |
| Jogeeum-jogeeum (조금조금)    | konjam-konjam (கொஞ்சம் கொஞ்சம்) | Little by little      |
| Naeil (내일)                | Nalai (நாளை)                    | Tomorrow              |
| Sura (수라)                 | Sooru (சோறு)                    | Rice                  |
| Gada (가다)                 | Gada (கட)                       | To go                 |
| Paai(e) (배)               | PaaiMaram (பாயி) மரம்           | Ship                  |
| Aamaa (아마)                | Aamaa (ஆமா)                     | May be                |
| Naal (날)                  | Naal (நாள்)                     | Day                   |
| Kirida (그리다)              | Kirukutal (கிறுக்குதல்)         | Draw                  |
| Pul (풀)                   | Pul (புல்)                      | Grass                 |
| Maek da (먹이다)             | Maeika (மேய்க்க)                | Grazing               |
| Maettugi (매뚜기)            | Vettukkili (வெட்டுக்கிளி)       | Grasshopper           |
| Sori (조리)                 | Sori kai (சொரி-கை)              | Discharge             |
| Vae da (배다)               | Vaetu (வெட்டு)                  | Cut                   |
| Bov-rum 보름                | Ba-vur-nam-i (பவுர்ணம்/மி)      | Full moon             |
| Vae (배)                   | Vaeiru (வயிறு)                  | Stomach               |
| Eepal (이빨)                | Eeru + Pal (ஈறு + பல்)          | Teeth                 |
| Nun (눈)                   | Kan (கண்)                       | Eye                   |
| Meoli (머리)                | Mudi (முடி)                     | Hair                  |
| Kan (칸)                   | Kana (கன) அடி                   | Measurement           |



**Figure 4: Korea-Tamil Cultural Similarities**



**Figure 5: (a) Ancient Korea (b) Ancient (2nd CE)Tamilagam of South India (c) Tamil Nadu to Korea sea route (Green line). TN - Tamil Nadu**



**Figure 6: Skulls found in Adichanallur, Tamil Nadu, India (Photo: Raghavan, et al. 2010)**

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### Author Details

**Selvaraj Arokiyaraj**, Assistant Professor, Department of Food Science & Biotechnology, Sejong University, South Korea, **Email ID:** arokiyaraj16@gmail.com.

**Gayathri Ravichandran**, Scholar, Faculty of Epigraphy, Tamil University, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India.

**Athanur Chozhan**, SIBI Pathipagam, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

**Kannan Narayanan**, Director, Institute of South and East Asian Studies, Kadikai Virtual Academy of Excellence, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** nkannan@gmail.com.