A Kodava Wedding

It is January, the season for weddings in India. I have been to three in the last month and am now fitting my bags into a friend’s car for a trip to the fourth, in Kodagu, the mountainous precinct of Karnataka famous for its coffee plantations. It is early morning in Bangalore, the town in south India where I grew up. Watchmen wrapped in thick scarves ease their patrols to drink a cup of coffee or smoke a beedi; neighborhood pit dogs loiter about the gates of apartment buildings.

We are driving to Coorg (as Kodagu is commonly known in English) to attend the wedding of two high-school friends. The bride’s family is from Kashmir. They have already held a Kashmiri wedding in Bangalore—one of the three I’ve attended. The groom’s family, like many others in Coorg, are Kodavas, the landed clan that have long populated the region. Though their customs and language bear certain surface similarities to their neighbors’, their divergences are the more intriguing. Most strikingly, they are more Mediterranean-looking than Indian. Armchair historians have claimed for them ancestors as varied as the Romany, early Arab traders, and, most popularly, breakaway regiments from the army of Alexander the Great, who traveled south after the ruler’s failed conquest.

Above: The groom and his entourage begin the procession to the wedding pandal.

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I'm excited to be attending a Kodava wedding, not least for the spectacle it presents. Cultural history is a compelling undercurrent in the rites of marriage: the ceremonial language, the evocative rituals, the place of the family in the marriage contract—all expose social moorings otherwise hidden beneath the veneer of modern life. But for me, the wedding speaks most tellingly in its festive cuisine, which I'm looking forward to experiencing firsthand in the days ahead.

The journey to Coorg takes us through plains of ferrous agricultural land. The highways are fraught with large lorries carrying sugarcane, payloads of sand, or towering bales of grass. The sky is a searing blue; there is little shade except for the pixelated light as we pass through tunnels of tamarind. Apart from the changing crops on either side of the road, from millet to sugarcane, and then to the stubbled remainder of paddies, the landscape remains the same for most of the drive. A change in foliage announces our arrival at the skirts of a different realm. Before I notice the uphill grade of the road, I see coffee plants, low under shade trees wreathed in clusters of green pepper. The lowland setting is anomalous—a mountainous feature on the plains. As we begin to climb, the sides of the road fall away, replaced with the tops of trees. We rise and turn as we drive, heading away from the plains through the walls of paradisiacal Kodagu. We arrive at the wedding venue late in the afternoon. A large, empty tent stands out front, white and pristine against a backdrop of deciduous forest.

The groom's mother stands in front of the small hotel lobby, taking in the preparations. She leads me to the kitchen to meet Samad, who is in charge of the food for the evening, and explains my interest to him. Samad is a compact man with a luxurious moustache and an obliging manner. He takes me into the kitchen for a tour. The room is low and ill lit by small windows that let in little natural light, making it cave-like and dark while the sun is still out. The walls are coated with soot from countless cooking fires. There is little equipment beyond a number of burners. Preparations for the next day's feast have already begun.

Wide aluminum colanders are heaped high with kadambuttu and nooputtu—rolled balls of cooked tari, a stone-ground rice flour—waiting to be steamed and, in the case of nooputtu, pressed into nests of thin noodles. The half-dozen young cooks are all male, busy with culinary negotiations but otherwise unhurried. I ask Samad what else is on the menu for the evening. He pulls out a large metal pot filled with pieces of pumpkin—the beginnings of a curry, he tells me, a specialty of the region.

Samad's printed menu for the next day has a number of items drawn from the pan-Indian wedding menu: fresh jalebi—a North Indian sweet made by frying thin spiral trails of gram-flour batter in hot oil and then soaking them in a sugar syrup. The result is like a spun-sugar funnel cake. Neer dosa, crepes made of rice flour, are one of the fine native curiosities of the Konkans and Tulus of India's west coast. But alongside these specialties are Kodava stalwarts like mudurekanji, a long-simmered mixture of horse gram (a type of lentil); pandi curry, dark and unctuous with pork; spicy pickled pork; and koilemeenu, a fiery red pickle made with the small fish that teem in the paddy fields throughout Coorg. Though they are easily caught in a reed basket, they are difficult to gut and clean of grit, so that the pickle isn't prepared as frequently as it once was.

Samad says that as the evening wears on there will be more to show. “Roasted chicken, fish, salad,” he tells me, promising what sounds like a distinctly Western sideboard, then adding that I need to come back to see the nooputtu being formed. For now I'm ushered out to meet with friends over coffee and await the arrival of the bridal party.

Evening comes on slowly. A small group of guests gather under a soaring arbor of twisted vines. In this season, late in the Indian winter, the vines are bare of fruit and flowers, revealing patches of night between the tangle of branches and strings of hanging lights. I return to the kitchen. In a large vat a vast layer of chicken thighs and drumsticks sizzle as they render their fat. The air is thick with the aroma of roasting chicken and spices. Once the chicken is cooked, it is tossed with chopped herbs and green chiles. Samad takes me aside to a large saikala, an enormous steamer made of beaten aluminum. Displayed grandly on top is a whole seer fish smeared in a thick spice paste and laid out on a bed of banana leaves—an unlikely but impressive centerpiece for this forest celebration and, like the chicken, a twist on the familiar buffet-table saws of steamed fish and roast bird.

I return to the kitchen throughout the evening, now to see the kadambuttu emerge, steaming, from the saikala, now to watch the two-person operation of pressing the nooputtu into shape. In the courtyard the guests have endured several rounds of coffee that has long gone cold, but the bus and its escort cars are still making their way along the curving mountain roads. With little preamble, the quiet ceremony of invoking the blessings of family ancestors begins. In the background a band of musicians strikes a shrill note. The groom’s family, in odd numbers, takes to the small stage, which is thickly hung with garlands of jasmine and marigold.

Though the Kodavas are nominally classed with the numerous Indian Hindu groups, they are, often by their
own account, more invested in the worship of their ancestors, and of the more animist aspects of Hindu deities. The groom and his family throw grains of uncooked rice at framed pictures of family members and at a portrait of Talakaveri that hangs in the midst of them. (The goddess Talakaveri is named for the source of the river Kaveri, which originates in Kodagu.) Though the ceremony is conducted in view of the guests, it is presided over only by family elders.

When the bus finally emerges from the forest, signaling its arrival with a few blasts of the horn, the ritual pauses until the bride and her family join in the blessings on stage—now an invocation of benedictions from the family’s elders. After the last handfuls of rice have been thrown, the family steps down to join the guests in the late-night feast. The lids are raised on the chafing dishes as guests are corralled toward the buffet table. The fish stares blankly from its steaming bed alongside mounds of kadambuttu, large bowls of mutton curry, the chile- and herb-spiked chicken, numerous vegetable dishes, and an assortment of homemade pickles. A large bowl of payasam, a rice pudding made with tari and cashews, provides a sweet finish to the meal.

I wake up early the next morning, eager for the day’s celebration. Few customs of the Kodavas are as widely known among other Indians as those of their weddings. The most striking elements are the baale birud—the felling of a row of banana trunks by one or more young men from the groom’s family—and the ganga puja, the often hours-long ritual in which the new bride carries pots of water on her head from a well to her new family’s house against a tide of dancing relatives and other partygoers, all of whom try to slow her progress. I join a group of spectators gathered alongside a row of ten or so banana trunks. The groom stands close by, dressed in a white kuppya, a tunic cinched at the waist with a red-and-gold cloth. He wears a turban and a scabbard at his waist, and his wrists are enclosed in two gold bracelets. The banana trunks are about a foot thick and four feet high.

Although I have never seen the ritual performed, I’ve always understood the baale birud as a sop to times when battle involving swords was more real and concern about protection less symbolic. But watching the first contender pick up an odikatthi, a sword now used only ceremonially, I feel a slight unease, the kind one feels around a loaded gun. The odikatthi is narrow at its hilt, curving into a broad sweep of shining metal; its edge throws off light in facets, as though its keenness has been hammered in. An older male relative instructs the swordsman to swing diagonally down, and in swift succession he cuts down at least half of the trunks. The next contender, another high-school friend, steps up to fell the remaining trunks. When his sword gets stuck in one of the stumps, the crowd breaks into good-natured booing and catcalls. Undeterred, he fells the last of the trunks with a flourish and then dances a turn, holding his hands and the sword in the air. The crowd erupts in laughter and applause. The ritual over, the groom and his retinue begin the procession toward the wedding tent. The groom’s sister precedes him, carrying a wicker basket filled with uncooked rice and other dry provisions.

Once the groom has been installed on the pandal—the ceremonial stage—the bride and her escorts slowly make their way up, accompanied by the tinny blare of trumpets and the clang of drums. The bride wears her red sari in the Kodava fashion, with the heavily brocaded pallu hanging in a cape-like panel in front of her chest rather than slung back over her shoulder. A golden veil covering the sides and back of her head complements the red one worn by the groom.

On stage, the couple receive more blessings from the gathered elders of their families. There is no religious officiant, just a supervising cast of relatives. The mother of the bride feeds the groom a mixture of milk and rice—a gesture of his acceptance as a new member of his wife’s family. The remaining relatives shower the couple with rice and feed them milk from a silver pot. The rites that follow unfold in the company of family members as guests look on, appreciative but distant.

Today’s wedding is a giant gathering, unlike the relatively small dinner of the night before. Samad’s kitchen can’t cater for a crowd of seven hundred people, so an outside caterer has been brought in. I poke my head into the open-sided kitchen tent. Large mounds of chopped vegetables wait to be added to pans simmering over wood fires; nearby a cook stirs a huge dish of mutton with a perforated ladle the size of an oar. The cooks humor me with a short tour but soon have to get back to work. As I leave the tent I run into Samad, who is still very much in charge of the day’s cooking, coordinating the efforts of the caterer and his own staff. He introduces me to the caterer, who proudly talks me through the menu for the lunch.

Work is already beginning on the buffet line. Two jalebi makers sit by a large karhai of oil set over a powerful burner, readying themselves for the inevitable rush. Another two cooks dressed in white aprons and toques are stationed at a seasoned cast-iron flattop, preparing neer dosa. They pour the liquid batter in a thin skin that eventually covers the entire griddle, releasing a cloud of steam that envelops them both. As the batter bubbles and firms up, they drizzle
oil over it. Once the bottom of the crepe is browned, one of the cooks cuts and folds the broad swath into smaller portions, which he quickly arranges in a serving dish. He throws a handful of water onto the hot griddle, creating another rush of steam, then sweeps it clean with a long switch cut from the center of a banana leaf.

The wedding tent is full of the sound of laughter, the trumpeting and drumming of the band, and the loud murmur of guests talking. As the ceremony on the stage comes to an end, crowds line up at the buffets. The caterer points out the pandi curry, dark and slick with oil, and the mudurekanji—“Forty-eight hours of cooking,” he assures me. One of the groom’s uncles is dubious of this claim, but the pork is remarkable—tender and mellow despite the peppery blend of spices and the powerful kachampuli with which it is seasoned. Kachampuli, the ripe fruit of a tree of the same name (Garcinia gummi-gutta, related to mangosteen and kokum), is used in various forms in Kerala, Kodagu, Mangalore, and other parts of south India. In Kodagu kachampuli is left to ferment in baskets in the sun. It exudes a thick, black, astringent liquor that is carefully collected and stocked in every Kodava kitchen. Its veneration in Kodava cuisine can be likened to the cult of fine balsamic vinegar. It thickens and mellow with age, and vintage bottlings are often pulled out for special occasions.

Nearby platters contain biryani, curries of chicken, mutton, and fish, several vegetable dishes, sambhar, and the full complement of Kodava putus: nooputtu, kodambuttu, paaputtu (formed into a disk and cooked with milk and fresh coconut), and white rice. Now that the wedding ceremony and its attendant rites are finished, the rest of the afternoon passes in a languorous meal. Traditionally, the married couple retreat to separate quarters to eat with a couple of close friends, but today they sit down to eat once the crowd has begun to thin, sharing a meal from a silver plate.
The puja begins with a coconut being broken into the water of the well. Two small pots are filled and placed atop the bride’s head. Her escorts, too, each receive a small pot filled with water. As the music begins, a crowd gathers and starts to dance, clapping in time as the bride and her company head into the throng. On the face of it, this seems a painful way of inducting the bride into her new family, but the revelers seem largely preoccupied with their own dancing, and it is only a small contingent of diehards, at the front of the group, who seem truly committed to obstruction. Whenever the dancing wall freezes, preventing any forward movement, a number of older relatives shout in disapproval and intercede on behalf of the bride. Yet despite all their efforts, the procession moves only haltingly.

By late afternoon the tent has emptied of guests. For a short while there is no sound except for the preparations for the evening meal and for the ganga puja, the raucous culmination of the day’s ceremonies. The tone of the evening is a departure from the formality of the morning—relaxed, convivial, and a little weary, as if in preparation for an exhausting home stretch. I ask one guest how long the puja can last. She answers with a laugh that the longest she can recall was ten hours. The ganga puja is meant to symbolize the new bride’s willingness to help in the chores of her new household. In the days when wedding ceremonies were held at home instead of at resorts, she would carry two small pots of water on her head from the well to her mother-in-law’s kitchen while friends and family danced in her way to the accompaniment of a protracted, repetitive march. Today, a small tank of water has been decorated like a stone well for the purpose, and the bride’s route takes her to the pandal instead of to a kitchen. Nevertheless, her progress promises to be just as arduous.

Above: The cooking begins outdoors over open fires. Opposite: A saikala, or steamer, is used to make the nests of thin noodles known as nooputtu.
There is a constant banter between those in the fray—coy entreaties from the bride’s friends to try and move the party forward, and earnest requests from the groom for clemency for his new bride, and all the while the cluster of dancers plots its course with aching slowness along the hundred or so meters from the well to the pandal. Some guests bargain with the forward ranks of dancers, trying to broker a few steps out of them; others rush in with fingers wagging when it looks like one of the bride’s friends is about to temporarily relieve her of her burden.

The evening wears on, and the ganga puja nears its fourth hour. After partaking of the buffet of Western and Indian-Chinese food (a specialty unto itself), most of the guests have bid farewell and left. Only family and a handful of friends remain. The dancers have been reduced to two resolute young male cousins and a changing band of friends and relatives. There has been speculation all evening about who will break first, the bride or the dancers. Suddenly, the activity changes pace. With still more than half the route left to go, the dancers pick up their feet with renewed energy. For the first time they turn their backs to the bride and her friends and begin to move forward. One of the bids has finally hit home—the promise of five bottles of whiskey, as it turns out. The bride’s sister-in-law receives her as she steps up to the pandal. The small crowd consolidates at the stage, clapping and dancing in one last access of enthusiasm. The musicians ratchet up the volume in a frenzy of sound. Finally, the drums and trumpets stop, and the ceremony is over.

The newlyweds sit down at a table in the courtyard with a group of friends, exhausted but happy. Half a bottle of Scotch is procured (perhaps purloined from the promised cache) and metered out into glasses sneaked out of the deserted kitchen. We compete with stories of the day’s events, which the bride and groom seem to be hearing for the first time.

The one ritual that did not take place was the exchange of rings. It’s a slight omission, since the various other ceremonies hold greater traditional significance, but it is still a rite that they need to perform. Because the Kodavas follow their own customs, which are unenforced by any temple law and encouraged only by family and friends, this informal gathering seems a fitting sendoff. We toast the couple and they exchange rings. The pace and complications of modern life have encroached on life in Coorg, and even spectacular weddings like this one rarely run their traditional course any more. But beneath the clamor of modern incursions, the essence of a distinctive culture survives, growing richer with time, yet still keeping vigil over its past.