

Conducting a Kodava Funeral in North America

A practical guide to preserving Kodava funeral customs in a North American setting

Prepared by Kodava Koota • Cultural guidance for families and community volunteers

Introduction

Funeral rituals across communities have evolved around belief systems, ancestral traditions, and practical realities. Kodava funeral customs are deeply rooted in ancestral worship. The purpose of these rituals is to honor the departed, support the bereaved family, and provide comfort and help them find closure.

This guide adapts practices followed in Kodagu for families living in North America. Some customs are difficult to reproduce exactly because funeral-home procedures, local laws, distances, weather, and community support are different. The intent is to retain the character and meaning of the tradition without placing an unreasonable burden on a grieving family.

Kodava customs are part of a strong oral tradition and may vary somewhat by family, okka, or village. Families should follow their customary practice where known. When that is not practical, a respectful North American adaptation is appropriate.

How to use this guide

Where a practice is described as “traditional,” it reflects customary practice in Kodagu. Where an adaptation is suggested, it is intended only to make the ritual workable in North America. Funeral-home rules, fire codes, transportation rules, and consular requirements should always be confirmed locally. See the companion “Practical Information & Current Resources” document for information that changes over time.

For deeper background on the rituals as followed in Kodagu and their significance, please see Kodava Koota’s Chaav Paddathi video and related resources on kodavas.org.

1. Immediately After a Loved One Passes Away

- **Hospital or care-facility procedures:** If the passing occurs in a hospital or care facility, the remains will be handled according to the facility’s procedures and transferred to the selected funeral home or mortuary. A family member or friend can begin coordinating with the funeral home while the immediate family returns home.
- **Neer Kodpa (last offering of water):** Traditionally, a few drops of coconut water, Kaveri or Ganga water, or regular water are offered to the person. This reflects the belief that the departed should not be thirsty on the journey ahead. If permitted by the facility, the family may perform this there; otherwise it may be done later during the viewing.
- **Notifying family and friends:** Ask close friends or extended family to help inform the community. Kodava custom does not require people to wait for a formal invitation before attending a funeral. Phone calls, WhatsApp groups, and community networks are practical ways to share the information quickly.

- **Support with food:** Friends and relatives traditionally bring vegetarian food to the bereaved household because the immediate family does not normally cook during this period.

2. After Returning Home

- **Bathing and changing clothes:** Family members traditionally bathe or shower after returning from the hospital or after close contact with the body. This is associated with ritual purification. Change into clean, light-colored clothing.
- **Laundering:** Wash the clothes worn to the hospital or care facility.

3. Dress for the Mourning Family

- **Men:** The spouse, brothers, and adult children of the deceased traditionally wear white: a white panche/dhoti/mundu with a white shirt and a nippu thuni (a white cloth worn over the shoulder and the ends pinned are together under the neck in front.). In North America, a white kurta pajama or a white shirt with light-colored pants is a practical alternative.
- **Women:** The spouse, sisters, and adult children traditionally wear a white saree and nippu thuni. A white or off-white salwar kameez is a practical alternative.
- **Younger relatives:** Children and younger siblings may also wear the nippu thuni.
- **Footwear and duration:** Traditionally, the family goes barefoot. In North America, socks or shoes may be worn when weather, safety, or facility rules make that necessary. White or light-colored clothing is generally continued through the formal mourning period until Maadha.

4. Funeral Planning — What the Family Needs to Decide

Friends and extended family should take the lead wherever possible so that the immediate family is not burdened with logistics.

- **Choose a funeral home:** Contact a licensed funeral home or mortuary and arrange a meeting. Tell them early that the family will follow Kodava customs and may need access for dressing, viewing, ritual objects, and a final water offering.
- **Select clothing:** Prepare the clothing, including undergarments, that will be used to dress the deceased.
- **Choose a photograph:** Select a recent, clear color photograph for the viewing or memorial display.
- **Coordinate practical requirements:** Ask the funeral home about viewing times, cremation timing, open-flame rules, casket access, who may assist with dressing, and whether the family may participate in initiating the cremation.

For death certificates, funeral-home resources, shopping suggestions, local ash-scattering rules, and India repatriation/consular information, refer to the companion document “Practical Information & Current Resources.”

5. Items to Prepare for the Rituals

Use what is reasonably available. If an item cannot be obtained, use a practical substitute or omit that step rather than placing additional stress on the family.

- White clothing for the deceased and immediate family; nippu thuni for those observing mourning rites.
- Vibhuti (sacred ash) and a coin for the forehead; a Kuri Unde if the family follows this practice.
- A small scratched or broken mirror, if the family follows this optional custom.
- Water for Neer Kodpa: regular water, coconut water, or Kaveri/Ganga water, with fresh Tulsi leaves.
- For a deceased man wearing traditional dress: white Kupya, Chele, Mande Thuni, and Peeche Kathi if available.
- A coconut shell and cloth wick for thenge thiri; if open flames are prohibited, use a battery tea light temporarily and remove it before cremation.
- A mud pot or substitute container with water, one whole coconut, and a kindi or other metal water vessel for the final procession.

6. Day of the Funeral — Dressing the Body

Funeral-home staff normally prepare the body, but Kodava traditional clothing has specific requirements. A family member or knowledgeable friend should arrive early and guide the staff.

- **Deceased man:** A white Kupya is traditional. A white kurta pajama is a practical alternative; if white is unavailable, use an appropriate light-colored outfit.
- If using a Kupya, it is traditionally worn front-to-back for the funeral. A white Kupya stitched for the man's wedding is traditionally preserved for this purpose.
- Fold the Chele and place it at the waist so that it appears worn, but do not wrap it tightly around the body. Place the fold on the right side—the opposite of how it is normally worn during life.
- The Peeche Kathi, if used, is placed on the opposite side from its usual position during life. Keep it easy to remove before cremation.
- The Mande Thuni may also be placed with the traditional attire.
- The Kupya is traditionally cremated with the body. The Chele, Peeche Kathi, and Mande Thuni should be removed before cremation.
- **Deceased woman:** Dress the body in a saree. A colored saree is generally chosen for a married woman and a white or light-colored saree for a widow. Favorite jewelry may be worn for the viewing, but valuables must be removed before cremation.
- **Forehead:** Apply Vibhuti horizontally across the forehead using three fingers. Traditionally, a gold coin is placed on the forehead; this is optional, and another coin may be used if desired.
- **Hands and body position:** Rest the hands gently across the chest. In Kodagu, deceased men are traditionally seated with legs crossed and women with legs extended. In North America, the body will generally be laid flat in a casket.
- **Direction:** If practical, align the body north-south with the head toward the south. If the funeral-home layout makes this difficult, prioritize a safe and orderly viewing.
- **Other ritual elements:** Keep a Kuri Unde nearby. A small scratched or broken mirror may be placed as if held by the deceased; this is optional.

7. Attending a Kodava Funeral

- **General attire:** Guests traditionally wear white or other light-colored clothing.
- **Men:** A white shirt with light-colored pants is appropriate. Men attending as visitors should not wear a white Kupya.

- **Women:** A white or off-white saree, including a saree tied in the Kodava style, is appropriate.
- **Headwear:** Hats, caps, and other casual headwear are traditionally removed as a mark of respect.

8. Viewing and Main Hall Preparation

- **Neer Kodpa setup:** Prepare a metal plate or shallow vessel with water—regular, coconut, Kaveri, or Ganga water—and fresh Tulsi (holy basil) leaves. If Neer Kodpa is not offered during the public viewing, it may be done before cremation.
- **Family seating:** Traditionally, close female relatives sit near the body and fan it. In North America, it is practical for the immediate family to sit in the first row of the viewing chapel.

9. Paying Last Respects — Chavuk Kai Kodpa and Neer Kodpa

- **Visitor etiquette:** Remove hats or casual head coverings before approaching the body. Shoes are traditionally removed; socks may remain on.
- **Chavuk Kai Kodpa:** Approach the body, lightly touch the chest of the deceased with the back of your palm, and then touch your own chest with your palm. Visitors who do not wish to touch the body may simply offer Namaste while standing beside the casket.
- **Neer Kodpa:** Dip a Tulsi leaf into the prepared water and gently apply it to the lips of the deceased. This is optional for visitors.

Printable instructions

A separate one-page “Procedure for Paying the Last Respects” is included as a companion document and may be printed and placed near the body for visitors.

10. Procession to the Cremation Location

- **Moving the casket:** Traditionally, the bier is rocked or swung three times before the procession begins. A modern casket is extremely heavy, so this step may be omitted. Use the funeral-home trolley or other safe method recommended by staff.

Thenge Thiri (Coconut Wick Lamp)

- Before leaving the viewing area, light a cloth wick (thiri), ideally in a coconut shell (thenge thiri). A relative carries it in front of the casket.
- If travel by vehicle is required, extinguish the flame before entering the vehicle and relight it at the cremation location if permitted.
- If the facility prohibits open flames, a battery tea light may be used in the coconut shell during the procession. Remove the plastic light before cremation, leaving only the coconut shell.

Ritual vessels and procession order

- The spouse carries a mud pot filled with water, or a substitute container if a mud pot is unavailable.
- A son or daughter carries a whole coconut, representing a seed.
- A relative or close friend carries a kindi filled with water, symbolizing the relationship with other families (Okkas).

- The person carrying the thenge thiri walks at the front. Traditionally, the spouse is near the left side of the head, a son or daughter near the left side of the feet, and a nephew or close friend near the right side of the feet. Other attendees follow.

11. At the Cremation Location

- **Position:** If possible, position the casket with the head toward the south. If the facility layout does not allow this, another orientation is acceptable.
- **Circumambulation:** If space and facility rules permit, those carrying the thenge thiri, mud pot, coconut, and kindi walk around the casket three times counterclockwise.
- **Breaking the Spousal Bond:** Drain the water from the pots and kindi. Break the mud pot, if used, and the coconut, then discard them. This ritual symbolizes the completion and end of the spousal bond at a physical, corporeal level.
- **Purification:** Close relatives lightly wet their hands, feet, face, and the corners of their clothing.
- **Final Neer Kodpa:** The immediate family and other attendees may perform Neer Kodpa one final time.
- **Remove valuables:** Before cremation, remove all metal items and valuables, including jewelry, the forehead coin, Chele, Peeche Kathi, and Mande Thuni.
- **Cremation:** After the final viewing, tell the crematorium staff that the family is ready. Facility practices vary; where permitted, immediate family members may be invited to participate in initiating the cremation.
- **Returning home:** After the service, the family may arrange light refreshments. Bread, jam, and coffee are a traditional simple offering.

12. Ashes After Cremation

- **Collection:** The crematorium will advise when and how the ashes can be collected and what container will be provided.
- **Local scattering:** A family may choose to scatter a portion locally. Rules vary by state, province, municipality, park, waterway, and private property. Check the applicable local rules before scattering.
- **Storage tradition:** Kodavas do not traditionally bring human ashes inside the home. If the ashes are being kept temporarily, the urn may be placed outdoors under a tree, traditionally one that exudes sap, until the family is ready for final immersion.
- **Kaveri immersion:** Taking the ashes to the Kaveri for final immersion is traditional. Travel and consular requirements vary; use the companion “Practical Information & Current Resources” document and confirm current requirements before travel.

13. Mourning Protocols and Customs

Thak Parichiduva (Expressing Condolences)

Friends and community members traditionally visit the bereaved family to express condolences and give the family space to share their grief. Visitors often bring cooked food.

General mourning guidelines

- **Duration:** Formal mourning continues until the Maadha ceremony is completed.

- **Timing of Maadha:** Maadha is traditionally observed on the 7th or 11th day after the passing; the 11th day is common. An appropriate odd-numbered day may be chosen when family or scheduling circumstances require it.
- **Kaal Pudipo:** During active mourning, family members traditionally refrain from touching the feet of elders when greeting them.
- **Household practices:** A lamp is traditionally kept continuously lit in the home through the mourning period. Those observing the mourning restrictions refrain from alcohol and non-vegetarian food.

The Two Tiers of Mourning

Families may observe two levels of mourning. Those choosing to observe either level traditionally bathe or shower each morning until Maadha.

Mengathe Nippa (Standard Mourning)

This level is generally followed by close family members, including children and younger siblings.

- **Ritual Shaving:** Men traditionally shave the head, beard, and mustache, leaving a small tuft at the upper back of the head in families that follow that practice. Male children of the deceased may shave completely when the second parent passes away. They traditionally do not shave again until Maadha.
- **Attire and adornments:** Women traditionally avoid gold jewelry; silver may be worn if needed. A nippu thuni is worn.
- **Dietary and social restrictions:** Traditional restrictions include avoiding meat, fish, mushrooms, honey, betel leaves, areca nuts, milk, and liquor, and avoiding mustard-seed seasoning. Close relatives traditionally avoid attending weddings and other auspicious social occasions during this period.
- **Religious spaces:** Those observing Mengathe Nippa traditionally do not visit temples or other places of worship during this period.
- **Traditional exemptions:** Pregnant women, engaged women, and people who are ill are traditionally exempt from Mengathe Nippa and Kulik Nippa.
- **Ending Mengathe:** Those observing Kulik Nippa cook rice, mix it with banana and ghee, and offer it to the person observing Mengathe. A small portion is placed outdoors for birds, and the remainder is consumed by the Mengathe observers, marking the end of their restrictions.

Kulik Nippa (Austere Mourning)

This more austere level is observed only by the closest relatives—typically the surviving spouse and one or two immediate family members.

- **Attire:** Men traditionally wear a white panche/mundu and nippu thuni. Women wear a white saree and nippu thuni.
- **Cooking:** In addition to the Mengathe restrictions, those observing the full Kulik Nippa traditionally cook their meals separately outside the main house. In North America, an outdoor grill or other safe outdoor cooking arrangement can be used when practical.
- **Meals:** Traditional practice is one main meal at lunch, after separately preparing and first offering meedhi. Breakfast is skipped. A light snack or fruit may be taken in the evening rather than a full second meal.
- **Sleeping:** Observers traditionally avoid an elevated bed. A mattress on the floor or a sleeping bag is a practical alternative.

- **Outdoor food offering:** Facing the direction of the crematorium, the spouse or another person observing Kulik Nippa places a portion of the day's food on three banana leaves or paper plates outside the house.
- **Ending Kulik Nippa:** On Maadha day, offer one dosa, betel leaves, and areca nuts outdoors while facing the crematorium. The silver wrist chain worn by the spouse is removed and placed safely in the family prayer area. This marks the formal end of Kulik Nippa.

14. Maadha — Celebration of Life

Maadha marks the formal end of the principal mourning period and shifts the focus toward remembering and celebrating the life of the deceased. Family and friends gather for a meal.

- **Menu:** The meal typically includes dishes the deceased especially enjoyed. Hesaru Payasa, a sweet payasam made with yellow mung dal, is specially prepared. Those younger than the deceased traditionally eat it; elders normally refrain.
- **Grooming:** Those who have refrained from shaving may shave after the rites have concluded, subject to any family-specific practice connected with a later Kaveri visit.
- **Kaveri visit:** Immersing the ashes in the Kaveri is traditional. The spouse and children ideally make this journey within one year of the passing when practical.

After Maadha

- **Festival celebrations:** Traditionally, the immediate family does not celebrate major Kodava festivals for a year. In North America, families may decide how closely to follow this custom based on their circumstances.

Conclusion

The purpose of these rituals is to honor the departed, provide structure during a difficult time, and help the family grieve together. Follow the customs as closely as practical, but do not allow an unavailable item, a funeral-home restriction, distance, weather, or another North American constraint to create guilt or additional distress.

Kodava customs have always been carried forward through families and community. Where the old form can be followed, preserve it. Where it cannot, preserve the intent and adapt respectfully. Doing the best that is reasonably possible is not a lesser observance—it is how a living tradition continues in a new place.

Kodava Koota is available to support families and welcomes suggestions that can improve this guide. Contact: info@kodavas.org

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