

KUNDUVADIYAN – LIFE CYCLE RITUALS OF A SEMI-NOMADIC TRIBE IN WAYANAD, KERALA

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Abstract

This essay is an introduction (with special reference to lifecycle rituals) to a little known semi-nomadic tribe whose population is extremely tiny and who faces a real threat of destruction to their cultural identity. They are inhabitants of four villages namely, Meenangadi, Puthady, Pulpally and Mullankolli in Sultan Bathery taluk of Wayanad district of Kerala. They were traditionally pastoralists and mat makers. But due to change in ecology and economy, they are mostly wage laborers today. They followed matrilineal inheritance and even today, matrilineal kin has an important role in their lifecycle rituals. Eldest male of each clan is called Mooppan and his presence is mandatory for all life-cycle rituals. Kunduvadiyan is divided into five clans Vellamkolli, Irulam, Cheeyambam Polanna and Nalapadi - each of which has their own clan deities and sacred groves where they are venerated. Karinkali is a deity that is worshipped by all members of this tribe irrespective of their clan. They have close ties with other tribes also. Presence of a member from Mullukuruman, Naikan and Urali tribes is also needed during religious ceremonies. Traditionally, Kunduvadiyan lived in close proximity of Urali and Naickan. There is also a legend which traces their origin to Mullukuruman.

Key Words

Vellamkolli, Cheeyambam, Irulam, Polunna, Nalapadi, Kolkkali, Vattakkali, Kottil, Thirandu Pattu, Taravi Auru, Adichipiri, Kaikollan, Kaikollathi

Introduction

Kunduvadiyan are seen in four grama panchayats in Sultan Battery of Wayanad district – Meenangadi, Puthady, Pulpally and Mullankolli. They presently live in colonies of Vellankolly, Irulam, Chundankolly, Veluthiri, Pankumooppan Colony,

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Palakolly Plachikuni, Kunduvadi and Polanna Pathiri. There are 135 houses with a population of 585 people. Of this, 265 are women and 320 are men.

Origin Myths

During invasion by Tip Sultan in late 18th century, Wayanad suffered terrible destruction of life and property. At that time, ancestors of this tribe fled into the forests and concealed themselves in pits (Kundu) in forests – thus the name Kunduvadiyan came into being³. There are also legends that they are descended from Nayars and Mullukurumas also.

Kinship

There are five clans (Valiyaooru) in this tribe –

- Vellamkolli
- Irulam
- Cheeyambam
- Polanna (Kunduvadi Kalakam)
- Nalapadi (believed to be adopted by god himself).

Each clan has its own deity and sacred grove. But Karinkali is worshipped by all members of the tribe. They worship their deities in form of stones which are obtained from nature. They are always consecrated under trees. Sacred rituals are conducted by Kunduvadiyans themselves.

Their sacred groves are situated within the forests. Members of Vellamkolli and Polanna clans do not marry one another, as they are considered fraternal clans. Kunduvadiyan followed matrilineal inheritance. A woman can live in her husband's house only as long as husband is alive. After his death, she will have to return to her natal house. They practice cross cousin marriage though they avoid marrying direct cousins. Due to marriage with close relatives, there are many cases of genetic defects in this tribe. In olden days, funeral rites of a man are done by his maternal nephews. But today these are done by sons. In the past, women were the owners of the matrilineal joint households.

³ Informant – Mr. Ramesan, a member of this tribe. He says that this story is prevalent among the tribe for the last two centuries. Since there are hardly any old people above the age of sixty in this tribe, I could not find any other legends related to this tribe's origin.



Kunduvadiyan women

Kinship Terminology

Father – Achchan

Mother – Amma

Elder Brother – Annan

Elder Sister – Akkan

Younger Brother – Tamman

Younger Sister – Tangi

Wife of Younger Brother – Nathun

Husband of Younger Sister - Aliyan

Wife of Elder Brother – Athikka

Husband of Elder Sister – Baavan

Father's Father – Chachan

Father's Mother – Chachi

Father's Elder Brother – Moothappan

Father's Elder Sister – Baliyammai

Father's Younger Brother – Aeppan/Chippiappan

Father's Younger Sister – Chippiammai

Wife of Father's Younger Brother – Aemma/Chippiyammai

Husband of Father's Younger Sister – Chippimaman

Wife of Father's Elder Brother – Baliyammai

Husband of Father's Elder Sister – Baliyammaman

Mother's Father – Moothappan

Mother's Mother - Muthiamma

Mother's Elder Brother - Moothammaman

Mother's Elder Sister - Moothamma
 Mother's Younger Brother – Chippimaman
 Mother's Younger Sister – Chippiamma
 Wife of Mother's Younger Brother - Chippiammai
 Husband of Mother's Younger Sister – Chippiappan
 Wife of Mother's Elder Brother - Baliyammai
 Husband of Mother's Elder Sister – Moothappan
 Wife's Father – Maman (Achchan)
 Wife's Mother – Mami (Amma)
 Wife's Elder Brother - Baavan
 Wife's Elder Sister - Athikka
 Wife's Younger Brother - Aliyan
 Wife's Younger Sister - Nathun
 Wife of Wife's Younger Brother – Tangi or Tammi
 Wife's of Husband's Younger Sister – Tamman (Akkiyan)
 Wife of Husband's Elder Brother - Akkan
 Wife's of Husband's Elder Sister - Annan

Clan deities of Kunduvadiyan

- Vellamkolli – Karin Kali, Paakka Theyyam, Poothaadi Theyyam
- Irulam – Ilavili, Poovili, Kuliyan, Muthappan
- Cheeyambam – Pulisha, Kuliyan
- Polanna - Karin Kali, Vakka, Kuttichathan, Kuliyan
- Nalapadi – Kuliyan

Language

They have their own unique dialect which they speak among themselves. They also speak Malayalam if they want to communicate with outsiders.

Traditional Occupation

Cattle rearing and making grass mat were their traditional jobs. They made mats with Pandanus, a riverine grass. Mat making was done by men as well as women. Today, only a few rear cattle. Most of the tribe works as wage laborers.

Arts

Men perform ***Kolkkali*** and songs related to Mahabharata and Pandavas are sung. Women perform ***Chappolamkali*** and men perform ***Vattakkali***. They are performed

on days of festivals. Many of the traditional songs have been lost. But songs of Five Pandavas are sung even today during special occasions like marriage. Dances are done throughout the nights on these days.

Marriage

They marry outside the tribe (due to shortage of women) in OEC castes like Pathiyan, Kalanaadi and Kalladi. Mooppans (eldest men) of five clans must be invited for marriage compulsorily. Marriage and puberty marriage customs of Pathiyan and Kalanaadi are rather similar to Kunduvadiyan – which is why Kunduvadiyan prefers to marry them. But in earlier times, those who married outside tribes were taken to a place called Kolli and excommunicated.



Kunduvadiyan women in traditional dress

Dignitaries

Members of each of the five clans are chosen as Mooppan or headman. Seniority order goes like this – first rank to member of Irulam clan, second to Polanna, third to Vellamkolli, fourth to Cheeyambam and fifth to Nalapadi⁴. Mooppan of Nalapadi must be present in rituals of all other four clans. They also have the duty to settle disputes which involve the other four clans. When these dignitaries arrive at a house, woman of the household must receive them with a grass-mat woven by her and water (both of which should be placed at his feet while receiving).

⁴ Head of family and head of clan – both are known as Mooppan.

Relationship with other Tribes

Presence of Mullukuruman, Kattunaickan and Urali is also needed during religious ceremonies. Originally, Kunduvadiyans lived as neighbors of Urali and Naickan. They interact well with their neighbors including the non tribes.

Status by Government

They currently get benefits in State owned educational institutions as members of OEC-ST category.

Health Issues

Sickle cell anemia is widespread among them. It is reported by the health department that 60 out of 585 people have identified with this disease. Alcohol consumption is high among them because of its availability in their area and the occurrence of cancer is also on the rise among Kunduvadiyans.

LIFE CYCLE RITUALS

Thirandu Kalyanam (Puberty ceremony)

When girls attain puberty, their elders go to Valiyaooru and inform Mooppans (eldest man of the family) about it and ask what they should do next (this is known as Tharavadinu Kunduvadiya /**Taravi Auru**). It is parents of the girl who usually visit Valiyaooru to inform the news to Mooppan. After Mooppan is informed, Mooppans of another five Valiyaoorus are also informed along with all relatives. Puberty related rituals are performed on the next day after girl's first menstruation. A traditional feast will be prepared in the house. The girl cannot stay in the house – instead she will have to stay in a one room hut called **Kottil** made of palm leaves.

The girl is made to sit on a four legged plank called Thirandu Palaka. When she enters the hut, she will be given an arrow in one hand and rice in another hand by her maternal uncle's wife. When she is made to sit on the plank, a white cloth is tied around her breasts (**Mulakachcha**). Then she is made to wear ornaments of copper and brass. Ornaments worn include hand ornaments like **Thanda Vala**. That night girl will go to sleep in the hut fully decorated with ornaments, makeup and fine dress. That night, **Thirandu Pattu** will be sung for the girl. Thirandu Kalyanam is conducted seven days this day. During these seven days, no man should see the girl. She should eat inside the hut only. On seventh day, the girl is bathed in water that moves (like stream or river).

She will be taken to a stream and the clothes she wore will be washed. Clothes are washed in ash and boiled. Then girl has to go for the bath in stream with the clothes and arrow in left hand. (Arrow is supposedly given for safety). While girl is bathed by elderly female kin, traditional Thirandu songs are sung. After the bath, wife of maternal uncles rotates around girl's head arecanut, betel leaves and herbal leaf and then puts them in the stream. She then takes the arrows back from girl's hand.

Following this, they party with the girl turns east and put a de-husked coconut and raw rice on a plantain leaf (*Nakkila*) on ground. Coconut is then circled three times and then it is broken with a single stroke. Then based on how the coconut broke, time for marriage is decided. If coconut breaks with mouth of two halves upwards, belief is that it indicates early marriage. If coconut halves fall with mouth downwards, belief is that it indicates late marriage.

After this a pot of water is drawn by the girl and once she and her accompaniment reach home, a sacred mark is put on her forehead. Then the pot of water is brought inside the house. Then the girl is made to sit on the verandah of the house. Mooppans arranges betel leaves, raw rice, and arecanut in front of her and then gifts her with 4 Ana and 8 Ana coins and blesses her. Relatives prepare sweets like *appam* for the girl and present her with them. After this, Kunduvadiya dance called ***Kolkali*** is performed. Then holy water is brought from Valiyaooru sacred grove and sprinkled in the house. Often those who came to attend the function seek the girl's hand as wife.

Funeral Ceremonies

If a person dies, a funeral stretcher is made. A mat of *kaitha* (*Pandanus*) plant is made and put on the stretcher. Dead body is given a bath and put on the stretcher over which mat is spread. Then it is taken to the funeral ground. Dead body is not cremated, but buried. First a pit is excavated. Then a chamber is excavated on the right wall of the burial pit named *allappu* and corpse is put there. Then the chamber is sealed with wood. Inside the pit, essential goods along with dagger and arrows are kept.

Mustard, ragi and paddy are tied in cloth and tied to four ends of funeral stretcher as dead body is taken for funeral. Once burial is completed, these bundles of mustard and grains are given to the one who performs the funeral ceremony. Performer does the rites after covering his head with a *torthu* or long towel. Grain

and mustard is thrown around the grave for three times and water is sprinkled. This is an offering of food for the deceased.

Mooppans then show where the body had to be buried. The he takes spade and knife and goes to the dead body and asks for its permission to bury it. On 16th day since death, performers of funeral rites goes to the grave site and prepares rice balls of white, red and black colors after preparing rice soup. This is prepared by the performer of the rite who is usually a maternal nephew of the deceased. Rice ball of black color get that color by addition of rice husk and while rice ball of red color gets its color by addition of lime and turmeric.

A human figurine is made of earth on the grave. Black rice is put on its head, red rice on its chest and white rice on its feet. Three wicks are burnt at the head, chest and feet of the figurine. Sticks are hung on three sides and wicks are kept in it. Then a pot is filled with water and the performer circumambulates the grave and then pot is thrown backwards. Then they return home and feed the crows with rice as a part of funeral rites – this is called **Bali Idel**.

On 16th day, a feast is prepared which has rice, sambhar and pappadam. Payasam, jaggery and puffed rice is also made separately on the same day. Fried mustard is used in preparation of the food. Lamp, Kindi⁵, and Karuka grass (put in the Kindi) and food prepared is put on *Nakkila*. Then those gathered will clap to attract crows (so that they will eat it). If crows do not feed on it, performer will put that food in the flowing water and take a dip in it. This ceremony is previously repeated on 3rd, 5th and 15th days following the death.

Marriage

It is parents of the boy who goes to girl's house and seeks her hand for their son. They are accompanied by a party of another five persons. They arrive at girl's house at time of mid-day meal and ask the household members as to whether rice soup is for guests or whether rice soup is for the girl (marriage) (***Virunnu Kanji Aano/Pennu Kanji Aano***). If girl's family members say that rice soup is ready for marriage (***Pennu Kanji Aanu***), then marriage is fixed or if they say rice soup is ready for guests (***Virunnu Kanji Aanu***), it means they are not interested in the marriage. If they agree for the proposal, date for marriage is also fixed the same day.

Marriage is conducted at Valiyaooru. Men wear ear-rings (***Kadukkan***), shawl (***Tholvala***) and waist band (***Arayil Kettu***) for marriage. Marriage conducted inside

⁵ Watering pot made of brass used in ritual purposes or for washing feet.

Valiyaooru of the groom. Inside Valiyaooru, a covering is made of mat and bride is concealed inside it. The groom, then take a look at the girl inside and then announce that “*they has seen the girl*” (**Nammal Pennine Kande**) and *Girl is gold for us and you* (**Pennu Nammalkkum Ponnu Ningalkkum**).

Thaali⁶ is tied on a thread. After that, they come out of Valiyaooru and touch the feet of Mooppan of five Valiyaoorus. Man who accompanies groom as his assistant is called **Kaikollan** whole woman who accompanies the bride is called **Kaikollathi**. After marriage, the party proceeds to groom’s house. Then **Kolkali** and **Vattakkali** are performed there. The next day, the bride must bring a pot of water to the house. After dinner that night, another ceremony called **Adichipiri** is done.

A broom and mat is given to the girl when she is about to sleep. She then sweeps the floor and spreads the mat to sleep. At that time Mooppan of five Valiyaoorus will be there. Bride and groom are then made to sit on the mat by groom’s brother in laws. Kaikollathi then gives betel leaf, arecanut and lime (all three rolled into one). **Karyaav** (Kaikollan) gives the bride betel leaf, arecanut and lime rolled into one. Groom and bride then exchange their betel-arecanut-lime preparation with one another and then start to chew them. Relatives will smile at them if they make noise while chewing (noise while chewing is considered a good omen). The five Mooppans are then given betel leaves, arecanut and liquor.

Presentation of two Kolkali songs

Song 1 - തന്നം തിന്നം തിന്നം താനാം തിന്നതിന്നം

മെല്ലെതെ കാരക്കുറുക്കണ കൊയ്ത്ത് തിന്നു
 പിന്നെ മലയിൽ പുലിനാ പുച്ചു തിന്ന് (തന്നം)
 മാൻ കിടപ്പതും ചോലയിലേ പിന്നെ
 മയിൽ ഇരിപ്പതും കോമ്പത്തോ (തന്നം)
 കാലിമേയ്പ്പതം കാട്ടിലോ പിന്നെ
 പോത്തിരിലാതം ചേറ്റിയിലോ (തന്നം)
 പാറക്കാനാലിയും പാത്തുമ്മയും കൂടി
 പാറകിളച്ചപ്പം ചേന കിട്ടി
 അക്കാലം ചേന കളി കളിച്ചു പിന്നെ
 പത്തുമുക്ക് അഞ്ച് അറ്റ് ചേന കിട്ടി (തന്നം)
 അത്തന്നം മുത്തന്നം അറുകണ്ണ കോക്കയും
 പാലത്തിന്റെ അക്കരെ ചക്ക കാട്ടു

⁶ Mangalsutra

ചക്ക കാട്ടുത്തണ ചേരും കിട്ടി പിന്നെ
 മമ്മിക്ക് തുറുവോളം തല്ലു കിട്ടി
 ഇത്തിരി ചക്ക മുരട്ടിലും വെച്ച്
 മോളിലെ ചക്കക്ക് പോയതെന്ത്
 ചക്കയും ഉത്തണം അറുകണ്ണി കോക്കയും
 കൊമ്പത് ഉരുണ്ടിത താഴെ വീണു.

Translation of the song

Fowl ate the fox up in the hill
 Then cat ate the leopard in the mountain
 Then deer lay relaxed in the woods
 Peacock is on the branch
 Cattle is grazed in the woods
 Light burns in the hit
 Parakkanali and Pathumma⁷ together
 Dug the rock and got the yam
 Yam plays the game that year
 Pathumma got a five to six yams
 Athan, Muthan⁸ goes with a long stick
 And pulls down a jackfruit, across the bridge
 Pulling the jackfruit, they dirtied themselves
 They got beaten badly
 For why they went there
 When there is jackfruit down here
 They fall rolling down with their stick

Song 2 - വേലി മെടയിൽ

ചെന്തമാര തന്നിൽ മേനിയിൽ ഉള്ള വെള്ളം
 മേനിയെല്ലാം തിരു വിവിഷനുള്ളിൽ (തെയ്)
 അന്ത ലെന്തു മാറിവാനുള്ളടം കരുതുക മെല്ലെ
 ഇരുൾമാറാവോടെ കെട്ടിയ കന്നിനെ കാണാഞ്ഞിട്ട്
 വേദം പുണ്ടാരൂ നരിയുമപ്പോൾ
 അപ്പാട് ഇപ്പാട് ഓക്കേ നടന്നു

⁷ Name of two women

⁸ Name of two men

കട്ടൽ കള്ളൻ നീയാണെന്നും ഞാനാണെന്നും
 നീയെന്നും തലമുടി ഇടിപൊട്ടി അടിപിടിയിായി എല്ലുനൂറുങ്ങ
 തല്ലുകൊടുത്തു

Translation of the song

Red lotus is proud of the water it is in
 Pride will end soon
 Be cautious for the change will come
 Night is over, the tied cow is missing
 Tiger is deeply regretful, Owner goes looking around
 Tiger and owner accuses one another of theft
 And soon it a brawl broke out.

Conclusion

To sum up, traditional identity of Kunduvadiyan is facing the risk of extinction. This is because of their tiny number and excessive exposure to mainstream culture. It is also pointed out that they marry with their neighboring tribes due to shortage of spouses within their tribe. Neither small number nor inter-marriage nor presence of an overwhelming mainstream culture in itself would have caused the risk of cultural loss if the original environment in which their cultural identity developed, remained intact. But the economic and ecological milieu, in which identities of all tribes in Wayanad developed, was entirely destroyed in last eighty years due to massive influx of immigrants who radically altered the ecology and economy of this region. This has affected all tribes native to Wayanad – Kunduvadiyan included. Positive news is that there is an increasing awareness amongst Kunduvadiyan themselves about the need to preserve their culture.

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