

## **'CHEER' – ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS ON FUNERAL CEREMONY AMONG THE IRULAR OF ATTAPPADY, KERALA**

Thomas.K.U<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

A rite of passage is a ceremonial occasion that happens in every society and is historically known to mark the changeover from one social or religious standing to another. This article describes the most common types of funeral rites among the Irula tribe of Attappady in Kerala. The Irular constitutes predominant tribal population of Attappady. They have their own traditional ritual practices associated with their day-to-day life. The Cheer is one of the traditional customary practices of the community that is associated with one's death. The whole practice of cheer is connected with some myths. Traditionally, most of the Ooru (settlements) of the community practices 'Cheer' as part of the death ceremony. The rituals are observed for three to eleven days, depending on the economic condition of their family. In connection with this ceremony, a special feast and Oottattam (a special traditional/ritual dance) was also performed. The rituals are officiated under the leadership of Guruvan. The significance of this ritual ceremony is revealed less significant as the influence of modernity and intervention by external agencies. Furthermore, changes in their traditional culture and practices are becoming more prevalent. In this context, the current paper attempts to comprehend the Cheer and the various elements associated with this ritual from an anthropological perspective.

### **Keywords:**

Mindai-kaleike, Kaineppally, koppeppalli, Nenchu- veikal, Pasath, Vanachollal, Sappalaithinnal, , Oottattu<sup>2</sup>

### **Introduction**

Anthropologically, a rite of passage is a ceremonial event that occurs in every society to mark the transition from one social or religious group to another. Robert Hertz argues that funeral rites involve a kind of parallel process in which the decay of the dead reflects the path of grief in the bereaved. Bereavement involves both the

---

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Dr. Janaki Ammal Campus, Thalassery, Kannur University. Mobile: 7012946149.

social change and status of people. As a result of death, the deceased's status as a living parent, spouse, or coworker is no longer valid. During burial or preparation of cremation, the deceased is neither what they were nor what they will become. It is common for such transitional periods to be anxious with ambiguity and danger. Due to its inability to respond to others, the corpse is ritually impure, but it remains "present" in the daily lives of the living. Funerals honor the dead, confirming our former relationship with them, and remember the grieving. In terms of ritual, man is not unique but he is simply more communicative than other creatures. He demonstrates his exemplary role as a ritual being, communicates with others, protects himself from unseen forces of destruction, and becomes the beneficiary of benevolent powers.

### **Irula and their location**

Irula is one of the tribal communities in Attappady area of Palakkad district in Kerala. Mudugar, and Kurumbar are the other tribal groups sharing the environment of Attappady along with Irula and all are classified as Scheduled Tribes. According to 1981 census, there were 20,659 tribal people in Attappady, spread across 140 hamlets. By 1995, there were 168 Oorus, with 24,228 tribes. According to the 2011 census, the population of Attappady is 64,318 people, of which 32,956 are females and 32,283 are males (Census of India, 1981). Attappady is well known as one of the state's largest tribal areas. It is located on the crest of the Western Ghats that includes three Panchayaths such as Agali, Pudhur, and Sholayoor and covers a total area of 735 km<sup>2</sup>. Attappady got its name because the area was once infested with blood sucking leaches. In the local dialect, 'Atta' means 'leach,' and 'Pady' means 'settlement'.

**Table.1 Demographic Profile of the Tribes in Attappady**

| Community | No. of families | Male   | Female | Total  |
|-----------|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Irular    | 9,370           | 13,161 | 13,747 | 26,908 |
| Kurumbar  | 666             | 1,295  | 1,256  | 2,551  |
| Mudugar   | 1,274           | 2,225  | 2,443  | 4,668  |
| Total     | 11,310          | 16,681 | 17,446 | 34,127 |

Source: 2011 census

### **Irular in a nutshell**

The Irular make up the majority of Attappady's tribal population lives in three states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. Irular is derived from the word Irulan, which means "darkness". Irula is divided into several patrilineal exogamous units. Erullava, Iruliga, Illiga, Kasova, Urali, Kadupujari, and Velliga are some of their other names. Ettakkada Irular is another subgroup found in Attappady. They mostly live in the valley's eastern half, where they distributed in 145 settlements. Among Irular, a hamlet, or ooru, consists of 25-150 households. According to Hamlet's elder generation, they specifically mentioned the following dignitaries as to administer the social activities (oorubharanam) of their settlement.

Moopan - The Chief of Ooru (hamlet)

Vandari - Treasurer of Ooru - similar to the chief's attendant. He transports outsiders to chief and looks after Moopan.

Mannukkaran-Mannukkaran literally means "Person of the Mud, "and he occasionally performs agricultural rituals.

Guruvan/Guruvathi – A special person who performs religious rituals.

### **Death rites**

When a member of an Irular tribe dies, the death must first be reported to Oorumooppan, the tribal leader of the Ooru (settlement). Vandaari will be informed of a death shortly. Whenever vandaari receives death news immediately after everyone has been notified, the entire community gathers in the deceased person's house. The body will be kept for one night and two days to allow distant relatives to put their last offerings. When someone dies, the next of kin will be the first to cry. The Mooppan will instruct the closest kins (male and female relatives) to begin the mourning ceremony called '*Vanachollal*'. Only women are permitted to perform the *vanachollal* in the Irula community. They begin to elicit the qualities and brave actions of the deceased. When all the relatives reached, the gravity of their relationship is determined based on their intensity of their grief near the body. The corpse is placed on the bed after it has been washed. The *Sapra* (bamboo-made coffin) is also filled with bananas and bamboo, and the legs are folded and laid on it. *Paada* is another name for *Sapra*. The funeral will takes place within two or three days. Simultaneously, the hamlet/neighboring settlements begin to perform an *aattam* with both males and females. When performing the *aattam*, they make no gender discrepancies. The males of the settlements, however, begin this *aattam* first,

which is known as *Oottattam*. The performance has begun, and the ladies begin to participate, accompanied by their traditional music instruments such as *Jalra*, *Dhavil*, *Pere*, and *Kogal*. Their *aattam* begins with the drumming of percussion instruments. These instruments are specially designed for special occasions.

**Fig.1 Oottattam-recitation of music near the dead body**



Source: <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/98333>

Here, the ritual ceremony is turned as a social context is characterized by musical socialization where collective ownership of musical instruments and non-differentiation of audience and performers are significant. The tribal aesthetic performances serve as a bridge between the secular and the sacred, between the visible world of man and the invisible world of god (Onkar Prasad, 1991). There are variations in the ritual practices among the Irula tribe's seven *kulams* (Clans/sects). Some sects/kula ties the upper portion of a banana plantain in the locality of a deceased person's house to provide information to neighbouring communities. Traditionally, they believe that if the leaves dry up before the body is buried; there will be news of another death nearby, which is a sign of bad things to come. The *aattam* is not attended by the closest relatives. The drummers will decide which dance to perform. At the same time, the other members of the *Oooru* (hamlet) dance around the deceased person's body and arrange some materials such as *pori* (puffed rice), which represents the converted form from life to the soul, betel leaves, and coins in a bowl nearer the deceased body. The *Guruvan* (who perform the

rituals) has the authority to perform funeral functions among the Irular. He is in charge of all types of subsequent rituals.

*Cheeru* acts differ slightly between tribes, but the ritual is performed in the same way. *Guruvan* starts cutting down the tree to make *sapram* (wooden coffin-bamboo or any other types of wood) by chanting the mantra in the event of death in the ooru. The logging is then completed by *Jatheeyan* and his assistants. Meanwhile, the *Guruvan* will begin digging the grave by chanting the mantra.



Pere



Dhavil



Kogal



Jaira

Source: <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/98333>

### **"Mindae-kaleikke".**

They perform another ritual known as "Mindai-kaleikke" after the body has been buried. When a man dies, his wife becomes a widow, and a few ladies attempt to remove/cut her *tali* (sacred thread), bangles, and floral head decoration. They arranged for bridal makeup for the deceased's wife, who was dressed in a *pattu chela* (silk saree), bangles, and ornaments, prior to the cremation of the deceased's body. In addition, the deceased's cousins will cut a small piece of hair from above her right ear and wrap it around the deceased man's big toe.

**Nenjuveikkal.**

After the *mindae kaleikke*, there is another function called *nenjuveikkal*. As part of this ritual, the dead body's big toe is tied together with a thread. It should be taken out before burial. In this ritual, the "wife like a person" (if the deceased is a man) or the "husband like person" (if the deceased is a woman), have the right to marry that person while he was alive (may be cousins or nieces), will put coconut oil or castor oil on the top of their hand without looking the deceased in the face and smear the oil on the deceased's chest, while turning their face against the dead body.

***Kaineppalli, koppepalli***

This is the final location of the burial site, and ladies are allowed to view the deceased up to this point. When the dead body is brought here, the males lead the body on a bamboo stretcher in a procession from *Kaineppally* (where the dead body is buried) to the burial ground, known as *koppepalli* (burial area), and place it to the south. The deceased's body is then transported to the crematorium, where banana and bamboo shoots of the sapra are left behind.

**Photo 2 Way to the burial place**

Source: <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/98333>

During this time, relatives rub oil on the corpse's chest. When they're done, the women return to the corpse. The deceased will be buried in the crematorium by the men. The legs of the corpse are placed in the pit in the shape of a Siddhasana. The head of the corpse is inserted into the hole in the bottom of the pit. When a dead body is removed from *kaineppalli* or brought to *koppepalli*, the person is no longer considered a relative due to the fact that it is only a dead body. This is known as *Nenchuveikel*. After they will then return to their home.

### ***Purification***

When the burial is finished, the procession returns down the road, and Guruvan cleans himself. The procession continues to a stream or river, where Guruvan bathes and cleans himself. After he finishes bath, everyone else take bathe and washes all of the digging tools, as well as any other tools associated with the burial. This is a method of purification from the deceased's pollution.

### **Photo: 3 Burial place of the Irular**



Source: <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/98333>

### **Food**

On these days, there is no food in the *ooru* (Settlement). Except for the next of kin, the food is prepared from outside the *ooru* and eaten by all. Their cooked food contains no salt, chilies, or turmeric on these occasions. Cooked rice is regarded as a 'cool' food, whereas raw rice is regarded as a 'hot' food. Cooked rice is mentioned in the first mourning period rituals. Cooked rice is eaten and offered to the deceased to calm him down so that he can easily transition from ghostly to ancestral status. Rice

is not cooked in the deceased's home on the day of death, but it may be cooked there three days later. Only family members are permitted to consume this rice. Then there is a *cheeru* ceremony to determine the length of the pollution period. The length of the pollution period, which is usually about six months, is determined by the amount of money that the people have to hold the ceremony. As part of the death ceremony, the community performs '*Cheeru*.'

### **Cheeru/ Chee:ru- performance**

Cheeru is the posthumous ceremonial which is observed six months after the death of a deceased person. On the first day of the *cheeru* ceremony, there are no more ceremonial observances. Relatives pay for posthumous expenses. The exhibition will take place three months after the burial. Purchase new utensils for preparing food for the Cheeru (Kanji cheeru). A goat is slaughtered, and curry is prepared and served to all. Simultaneously, the clan's guru will worship God with three handfuls of Chama rice and a meat curry. Following that, everyone will be served chama rice and meat curry.

### **First day of the Cheeru**

On the first day of the Cheeru, the deceased's father (rarely) or cousins or nieces will buy three earthen pots for cooking. One for rice, one for curry (without salt or chilly), and one for keeping the *moogae* (spoon made with coconut shell) in the water, which is used for stirring. The third pot is known as *unchi* because it is smaller than the other two. Guruvan and Guruvathi eat their cooked food only from pots on these occasions. Each clan will be led by a Guruvan in charge of the cheer. Although the cheer rituals are the same for all seven clans, there are minor differences in how they are carried out. They make *raagiputtu* (steam cake) in the night with the ragi powder floured in their grinding stone. To make a curry, tuvara (split pigeon peas), Amara (Butter beans), lentils, or muthira (horse gram) are used. There is no added salt or curry powder. Without the addition of any other ingredients, mustard and onion are boiled in plain water. They never cook with oil, mustard, onion, salt, or chilies. Ragi that has been boiled in water and eaten is referred to as *sappalaithinnal* (eating).

On the second day, all of the deceased's daughters or blood relatives in the village will bring ragi to their homes. Then, in the yard they make a small space, clean it, and fill it with ragi and everything. It was split into two sections, one for the

daughters and one for the function. Take three steps back and set aside the Ragi, the daughters will acquire the rest. The rice is turned to flour by the husbands of the daughters and given to the Guruvathis. Husbands of the deceased's daughters have the authority to prepare rice for Guruvathi's food as it travels through *ulakka* (pestle) and *ural* (mortar). Simultaneously, they arrange the butchering of a goat as an offer to the deceased.

**Photo.4 Dance with the deceased body**



Source: <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/98333>

On the third day of the Cheer, Irular buy a male goat for the cheer to sacrifice. The goat is sacrificed in front of the house's front door. The Guruvan and the elders of the house would then accompany it to the morgue as its head swelled upwards against the house's door, and the blood would be poured into a vessel. Ragipittu was prepared by the daughters and transported in a bamboo basket. Rice is taken in a white *mund* (dhoti) is taken, and curry is made and given to those who go to the morgue, along with a little home-made castor oil. By this time, the Guruvan would have thrown three steps of ragi, made millet rice, and placed mutton curry in a small bowl. After visiting the burial ground and worshipping in the grave with rice and curry, the deceased's head portion is poured with oil, and the stone is turned upside down and placed on the burial time. The stone is always placed on top. The stone is also treated with castor oil. Those who have left will be given boiled rice to

rub on their heads, and Ragi will be formed into small balls and served with curry. The Guruvan will eat rest of the *Puttu* (three-piece steam cake) after placing them for Guruvathi and *Pasath*. *Pasath*, the ancestor's spirit, chants small mantras (hymns) that are found inherited from generation to generation. Rice and mutton curry will be prepared in another bowl and served to all the relatives who attended the ceremony. They will spend the evenings with singing and dancing with traditional songs. Everyone, except close relatives who live far away, returns home once the ceremonies are completed.

When Irular returns from the burial ground, they warm their feet by lighting a fire grass (straw) pulled from the roof. A full pot of water is kept at the front door. With a thin stick, castor oil or gingely oil is dropped into this water. The first drop is dripped by saying the name of the deceased person, and the second drop is dripped by saying the name of the father. When the two drops come together, the family's head touches it and applies it to his brow. Residents must take bath before entering the house. Nizhalkoothu is the name given to this ceremony. In appearance, the widow or widower must live as they last saw each other before one's death. This is done so that they can recognize each other after the other has died. This demonstrates the Irular's faith in life after death. Irular believe that the ancestors do not accept a recently deceased person into their group on the spot, but rather accept the soul only after the conduct of cheeru for the deceased person. As a result they conduct the cheeru function.

Following these rites, they take a dip in the river and return home after inspecting the lamp. It is believed that when he dies, his soul is not accepted by his deceased family members until after the ceremony. As a result, posthumous ceremonies are held. Velliga, one of the seven clans of Irula, began practicing cheeru after three months of death. However, other clans began practicing cheeru after a year. The cheeru- demonstrates that the Irular believe in afterlife.

## Discussions

- Cheer was previously held for seven days. It was a celebration of the entire performance, including *Koothu* and traditional dance, as well as a large celebration to bring joy to the family without feeling hatred for the soul. Everything has now become a three-day routine. The form of religious unity evolves in lockstep with structural functional transformations, each stage contributing to the stage's uniqueness. The

reduction and generalization of primitive religious culture characterizes development.

- Deer (Cervidae) flesh was mandatory for the funeral rites of the Irula tribe. At the tomb, prayers were offered with deer flesh and Kottenna (castor oil). But now deer meat is found replaced by goat's meat because slaughtering of deer is an offensive activity which may even lead to imprisonment. Here we can see the change in the cultural trait due to environmental change. Today, the forest is alien to the Adivasis. Its products are now in the hands of the government due to which the local communities are in a crisis today.
- Positions of authority such as Oorumooppan, Kuruthala, Vandari, and Mannukkaran have now become nominal. The power of these positions, which were traditionally transferred, is found powerless today.
- The tribal community must have to maintain common political and cultural environment to certain extent. The political system must be suitable for dealing the social and cultural problems of the time.
- Today, the tribal people of Attappady are in a crisis of survival because of their struggling between traditional and modern culture. Dances, songs, rituals, etc., are based on knowledge, and knowledge is based on material resources. Having lived in an ecological culture for hundreds of years, this aboriginal community is now subjected to alienation.

## Conclusion

Every community exists and survives by adhering to their own set of resolutions and cultural practices. Then only they will be stable for certain period of time. With the influence of modern elements, traditional customs are found vanishing from the tribal societies. It is disturbing to believe that our tribal traditions have lost its meanings when we consider the violation old-fashioned. Today, the tribal people are found dissatisfied with the traditional allure and importance of cheer rituals. Today, a section of the population in many communities in Attappady is seeking to terminate these ceremonies. It is only a retrospective ceremony for some, but for others it's a sign that something horrible has happened to their community. The fundamental reason for this is other societies' impact and penetration. It's an issue of courtesy for some, but it's a matter of modernity and an uncontrolled approach to mainstream life for others. There is also an old, mediaeval style of life in which religious events such

as cheer are still regarded sacred. This is not just a ritual for them; it is a sacred ceremonial passed down from generation to generation, honoring the ancestors and granting revitalization to their souls. It's the pulse of tribal life and vitality of a culture. The identity of a tribe can only exist if their rituals are preserved systematically.

## References

AHADS,2007.StatusReport.<http://103.251.43.137/greenstone/collect/nimgmater/index/assoc/HASH7875.dir/doc.pdf>

Baidyanath Saraswati, 1991, (Ed.) "Tribal thought and culture-essays in honor of Surajit Chandra Sinha , concept publishing company, New Delhi ,110 059.

"Culutre and Living.Tribes folk of Attappady", Attappady Culture and Nature  
[.http://attappadycalling 20m.com/custom.html](http://attappadycalling20m.com/custom.html)

Das,Pauline. "The Irula Language and Literature". The Criterion, An International Journal in English. Volume 4, Issue 2. Page 4.(2013).<http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n2/Das.pdf>

Dirar, V.H, 2017, Adivasi jeevitham oru Samskarika padanam, Green Books, Thrissur.Gennep, Arnold Van, 1960, "*Rites of Passage*", The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

KIRTADS. 1982. Evaluation Report on Integrated Tribal Development Project, Attappady: Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Kozhikode, Kerala.

Luiz, A.A.D. 1962. Tribes of Kerala. New Delhi: BharatiyaAdimjatiSevakSangh

Mathur, P.R.G. 1977.Tribal situation in Kerala: Kerala historical society, TVM

Onkar Prasad, 1991, "Tribal music: its proper context" "Tribal thought and culture-essays in honour of Surajit Chandra sinha , concept publishing company, New Delhi ,110 059.

Thulaseedharan,Santha, Keralathile Adivasikal,Jeevithavum, Samskaravum.2015, Mathrubhumi Publications, Kozhikode.

Wallwork, Earnest, 1998. Religion and Social structure in the division of labour, (Ed.) Religious Beliefs and Rituals- Cross cultural Studies, Cosmo Publications.