

## **MONEY AS A GIFT: ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS ON *PANAPPAYATTU* SYSTEM IN NORTH KERALA**

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### **Abstract**

The study of gift exchanges has been a subject of anthropological research since the early days. This article delves into the details of a unique gift giving practice known as Panappayattu in the northern part of Kerala which involves the exchange of money as a gift. Building upon existing anthropological and sociological research on gift exchange practices in general and the Panappayattu system in Kerala in particular, this study seeks to investigate the discursive practices of Panappayattu system of exchanging money as a gift. The study was conducted in the Kuttiady and Velom Grama Panchayaths of Kozhikode District. The data was collected using a variety of methods, including case studies, participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, discussions, and narrative analysis. The study has also explored the social life of money as a gift and the interplay of history, politics and power dynamics in the origin and evolution of Panappayattu system in the region.

**Key Words:** Anthropology, Gift economy, Panayyattu, Political economy, Social life of money.

### **Introduction**

The study of gift exchanges has been a subject of anthropological research since the early days. The book 'The Argonauts of the Western Pacific' by Bronislaw Malinowski, published in 1922, is well known for its descriptions of a form of exchange called Kula. In his work 'The Gift: Forms of exchange in Archaic Societies' (1925) Marcel Mauss was trying to look into the principle which urges an individual to repay a gift. Later on, a wide variety of literature on gift exchange has been produced within the anthropological studies (Firth, 1967, Sahlins, 1972, Malinowski, 1922, Annette Weiner, 1976 & 1992, Paul Bohannan, 1955), Jonathan Parry, 1986).

Although gift-giving is a common practice in almost all societies worldwide, the exchange of money as a gift is relatively unacceptable (Webley et al., 1983). However, in the northern part of Kerala, there is a unique practice known as Panapayattu, which involves the exchange of money as a gift. This system of gift-giving practice involves the person in need of money inviting close friends,

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relatives, and neighbors to attend the event by placing an invitation letter that specifies the intention to conduct the Payattu, along with the date and place of the event.

Building upon existing anthropological and sociological research on the Panappayattu system in Kerala (Kumar, S. 2020, Rao, A.C 2018), this study seeks to investigate the discursive practices of Panappayattu system of exchanging money as a gift. By adopting an anthropological perspective, this research aims to uncover the symbolic meanings, social norms, and power dynamics that shape the Panappayattu system, and explore how it reflects and reinforces broader cultural values and economic practices in South Asia.

The study was conducted in the Kuttiady and Velom Grama Panchayaths of Kozhikode District. The data was collected using a variety of methods, including case studies, participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, discussions, and narrative analysis.

### ***Panappayattu: A brief Account***

Panappayattu is a type of money exchange practice which is prevalent in the northern part of Kerala. This unique practice of exchanging money as a gift is practiced in the districts of Kozhikkide and Kannur. *Panam* and *Payattu* are the two Malayalam terms from which the word 'Panappayattu' is derived. The word *Panam* means money, and *Payattu* means fighting. Together, the word '*Panappayattu*' means 'fighting out for money'. While this practice is commonly referred to as Panappayattu, various names are also used in different localities. Terms such as 'Theyila Salkaram', 'Suhruth Salkaram' and 'Panam Payattu' are also used in various places to refer to this kind of event. The word 'Sadire' was also used in some areas to denote Panappayattu, but today the word is not used because of the colloquial meaning of the word has changed. Today, the word 'Payyattu' itself is being used to denote the practice and various forms of Payattu like 'Sahayakkuri' are getting more social attentions in North Malabar regions.

The local terms and idioms pertaining to Panappayattu are very much helpful in understanding the social and cultural aspects that govern this system of reciprocal exchange of money. Hence, certain native proverbs and expressions that are specific to the region offer valuable insights into the mechanisms that regulate the Panappayattu. For instance, the saying "*Payattu panavum, eetu panavum kodukathavan purushane alla*" highlights the importance of engaging in multiple institutions, such as Panappayattu networks and marriage, in order to cultivate responsibility and encourage a more serious demeanor in young men. The proverb "*Nalla Paytukkaran Nalla Maryadakaran ane...*" further emphasizes the positive

individual and social outcomes that can result from such practices. The elders in the community frequently express their belief in the benefits of engaging in multiple institutions like Panappayattu as a means of fostering responsibility and maturity in young individuals.

Panappayattu is typically conducted on occasions of financial urgency. In most cases, this is conducted during events of marriage or house warming. People are also conducting Panappattu to meet their immediate needs, such as medical treatment, paying debts, construction of new houses, for the sake of money for gulf visas, purchase new vehicles, collection of money for joining jobs like that of teacher posts in management schools, starting new business ventures, and sometimes collecting the money they have paid in Payattu.

The Panappayattu event is usually conducted at the host's house or local teashops. In some regions, there will be separate places for conducting the event as '*Payaattu halls*'. The place for conducting Payattu is decorated with '*Entholappatta*'<sup>2</sup>, and there will be a board bearing the details of the person conducting Payattu along with the date and time of the event.

The Panappayattu System operates on principles of reciprocity. This system involves the exchange of money in the form of gifts. The process can be described as follows: an individual in need of financial assistance extends invitations to close friends, relatives, and neighbors. Normally, an invitation letter bearing intent of conducting panappayattu event, along with the date and location of the gathering will be distributed. On the designated date, the invitees attend the event, where they will be treated with snacks by the host. In return, each guest contributes a monetary gift according to their capacity. The amount of money as a beginner will be according to the financial status of the guest and his relationship with the host. The money given by each guest was carefully noted in an account book (see Tabale.1).

### **Operational Definition**

The Panappayattu System operates on a reciprocal basis. Essentially, it involves a person in need of financial assistance extending an invitation to close friends, relatives, and neighbors, outlining their intention to hold the Payattu event, along with the date and location. On the specified date, the invited guests attend the function and are treated with snacks by the host. As a gesture of appreciation, the guests then provide a monetary gift to the invitee and the amount of which is determined by their financial status and relationship with the host.

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<sup>2</sup> Entholappatta refers to the leaves of the *Cycas circinalis* tree, commonly known as the Queen Sago or Sago Palm. These leaves have been traditionally used in Kerala for various purposes like making decorations for weddings and Panappayattu events.

The money transaction in Pannayattu occurs in a systematic manner, where the fundamental idea of Pannayattu is that each participant should pay back the contributor with an equal or greater amount when he conducts his Payattu. Usually, people pay twice or more than the principle amount. The amount of money received is recorded in an account book, and the transaction is carried out in a systematic manner in accordance with the principle that the contributor should receive the same or more when it is their turn to hold the Payattu. People often opt to pay double or more than the principle amount, for instance, if individual A conducts the Payattu, individual B will contribute a principle amount of Rs. 100. However, when B holds the Payattu, individual A will contribute more than their original contribution or even double that amount. Hence, the exchange of money as a gift in a Panappayattu system persists as a reciprocal continuum.

Table.1 Panappayattu Account Book

| Money given to the Kutti |                                 |                   |              | Money received from the Kutti |         |                   |               |             |              |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|---------|-------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| SL.N                     | Date                            | Name of the Kutti | Amount given | SL. No:                       | Date    | Name of the Kutti | Payatt amount |             |              |
|                          |                                 |                   |              |                               |         |                   | Additional    | Actual      | Total amount |
| 1                        | 12.10.2014                      | Nanu Meethal      | 200          | 1                             | 2.2.'24 | Nanu Meethal      | 200           | 200         | 400          |
| 2                        | 10.11.2014                      | Kumaran           | 250          | 2                             | 2.2.'24 | Kumaran           | 250           | 250         | 500          |
| 3                        | 5.1.05                          | Parmbath Muhammed | 200          | 3                             | 2.2.'24 | Parmbath Muhammed | 200           | 200         | 400          |
| 4                        | Discontinue the payatt relation |                   | 100          | 4                             | 2.2.'24 | Chandran          | -             | 100         | 100          |
| 5                        | 4.2.2015                        | Sreedharan        | 200          | 5                             | 2.2.'24 | Sreedharan        | 300           | 200         | 500          |
| 6                        | 3.4.2016                        | Rasheed           | 500          | 6                             | 2.2.'24 | Rasheed           | 250           | 500         | 750          |
| 7                        | 8.4.2018                        | Sajeevan          | 500          | 7                             | 2.2.'24 | Sajeevan          | 250           | 500         | 750          |
| 8                        | 2.5.2019                        |                   |              | 8                             | 2.2.'24 | Ashraf            | 400           |             | 400          |
| <b>Total</b>             |                                 |                   | <b>1950</b>  | <b>Total</b>                  |         |                   | <b>1850</b>   | <b>1950</b> | <b>3800</b>  |

Source: Field data

Table.1 shows the details of money transactions happened between the Kutti<sup>3</sup> and the by Mr. Sudheer<sup>4</sup> who conducted Panappayattu in Nittoor, Kuttiady Panchayath on 02-02-2024. The table shows that in serial numbers one, two and three the Kutti has given double amount to that of given to him, which means they want to continue the Panappayattu relation. In serial number four, the Kutti has paid

<sup>3</sup> Kutti is the local term for the invited persons to Panappayattu with whom the person who conducts the event has payattu relations (kutti relation) or he likes to make payattu relations.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymised to protect the individual privacy

the equal amount to that of he received from the person who conducts the Panappayattu. It means he wants to discontinue the Panappayattu as there is no additional amount, which is necessary for the continuation of the Payattu relation. In serial number five, the additional amount is larger than that of actual amount and it clearly indicates that the Kutti wants to increase the amount of transaction. Meanwhile, the serial numbers six and seven has paid less than the actual amount, which means they want to decrease the amount of transaction. In serial number 8, there is no actual amount which indicates that there was no early Payaattu relation with the host and he is a new Kutti. The given table reveals that the person who conducted the Panappayattu has received a total amount of Rs.3800 in which Rs. 1950 is actual amount which he has given to the Kutti in earlier days and Rs. 1850 is the additional amount.

### **Linking Money with social life**

Money is not just a neutral medium of exchange but is imbued with social and cultural significance (Zelizer, 1994, Appadurai, 1996). The Panappayattu system along with its economic function provides a platform for social gathering irrespective of caste, class and creed. It makes the entire members of the society to engage in some sort of social interaction with each other through this gift-giving activity. Hence, to have gift-giving relationship with one another indicates some sort of close relationship with each other, as any economic relation often provides a base for a close and durable social relationship among persons (Das and Das 2010).

The social institutions like Panappayattu have greater significance in a multicultural society like Kerala as it cut across religious and political boundaries in bringing people to a common public space. Moreover it also reveals the group solidarity among the members of the society, i.e., through gift-giving each other.

### **Political economy of the Panappayattu**

Panappayattu system has been described as a prevalent practice of reciprocal exchange of money among in the North Kerala villagers in Calicut and Kannur districts for centuries. It is taking place mainly in a cultural area called Kadathanadu which is best known for its Kalari tradition, Panapayattu and hero worship (Raghavan Payyanad 2000). While exploring the political economy of Panappayattu system in Kerala, it gives more insights into the nuanced understanding on interplay of the region's history, politics and economy (Dalley, 2015). The changing patterns of the system are also instrumental in analyzing how a traditional system of money exchange practice sustains in a globalized, neoliberal world order.

The political economy of the northern regions of Kerala, also known as Malabar, has undergone significant changes throughout history. The Malabar was ruled by various dynasties and rulers like Cheras (300 BCE- 300 CE), Kulasekhara Dynasty (800- 1102 CE), Kolathiri Dynasty (1102-1766 CE), Zamorins of Calicut (1200- 1766 CE) and Mysore Kingdom (1766-1799 CE) during the pre-modern period (Sastri, 1955, Rao, 1930, Ayyar, 1938). The region has also been subjected to major shifts in its socio- political and economic life of the people under the Colonial rule (1500s- 1947), Post-independence period and particularly after 1990s when India's neoliberal economic policies resulted in increased privatization and globalization process in the region (Sastri, 1955, Panikkar, 1929, Narayana, 1996, Kannan, K. P. 2000).

The Panappayattu system closely connected to the social structure of North Kerala and it has been subjected to the changes in the political economy of the region. As one of the respondents named Kunjammed, aged 90 years old from Nittoor in Kuttiady Panchayath shared his experience of conducting Panappayattu. To him, "the financial stringencies were the main motive for conducting Panappayattu in early days. Hence, conducting Panappayattu was very much helpful in meeting the financial urgencies. It was the situation until the Gulf migration and subsequent financial independence in the region". As Mr. Kunjammed described, he started the Panappayattu from his very young age because of his family responsibilities. He received a total amount of Rs. 500 rupees in the first Payattu and to him such an amount was worth more than fifty thousand rupees in today's monetary value. Altogether he has conducted around 9 Panappatts and the last Payattu was conducted before 10 years and he received around one and half lack rupees.

Mr. Kunjammed says, "the Panappayattu in early days was conducted with the approval and presence of Nattu Moopan<sup>5</sup>. The person who decides to conduct the Panappayattu will inform the Nattu Mooppan first and with his approval and blessings the event was conducted. He will be present at the function and the monetary transactions were conducted in his presence. Hence, if there are any problems or disputes over the Panappayattu, the problem was dissolved under his leadership". Such traditional political and power dynamics in the region has made the Panappayattu system a more prevalent system of reciprocal exchange of money in the form gift. But the changes in socio- economic conditions of the people have posed new challenges to the existing practice of Panappayattu system.

As one of the interlocutors opines, "the Panappayattu system began to decline in the region, when some new comers conducted the event and didn't return

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<sup>5</sup> Nattu Mooppan, can be translated as 'Chief of the land'. It is a traditional title given to a respected leader or chieftain of a region or community in Pre- modern Kerala society.

the received money to the donors properly. He also considers the new generation's hesitance towards the risk of indebtedness for a long time as another reason for declining the Panappayattu system in the region. Such a sudden change in the attitude of the people towards the traditional socio-economic system reached was increased due to the liberalization policies the country has adapted in a globalizing world order.

Although the neoliberal economic policies of the country have badly affected the traditional economic system and weakened the traditional gift exchange practices like Panappayattu system in the region, it is also observed that there is an emerging trend of going back to the traditional system of Panappayattu among the younger generation. As some interlocutors whom I met sitting nearby a Panappayattu venue in Kakkuni, Velom Panchayat replied to my question on younger generation's participation in Panappayattu events today. According to them, "there was situation when the younger generation was lacking interest towards the Panappayattu system, but when the people began to excessively depend upon banks and money lending agencies. But, when the exorbitant interest rates and exploitation of banks and these money lending agencies become unbearable now a days there is a trend among the new generation of returning to the Panappayattu system".

### **Case Study: 1**

#### **ORUMA- 2023 Pnappayattu, Rules and Regulations**

Oruma-2023 is an organized form of Panappayattu system among the youths of Kakkunui, Velom Panchayat in Kozhikode district. It is a long-term Payattu based on values of mutual help, unity, and mutual trust. The Payattu is regulated through a WhatsApp group. The group consists of 100 people in which the financial transaction is supposed to complete in 50 months. As per the bylaw of the organization, it describes the event as Kuri or Payattu. I contacted the coordinator Oruma-2023. Mr.Shahid, the coordinator hopefully replied that they have successfully completed more than 10 Payattu or Kuris till today and he was very much optimistic that his team can complete all the monetary transactions within the group accurately. He also sent me the rules and regulations of the Oruma-2023 as WhatsApp message. As per my request, Mr. Shahid shared with me the rules and regulations (Malayalam) of the Payattu through Watsapp. The details of ORUMA-2023 are as follows;

#### **1. Name: Oruma Karakunnu**

The duration of the scheme is 50 months and 2 times each month (one is a draw of lots and the other is for those who are convinced by the committee that they are necessary) without a draw of lots.

2. The first Kuri amount is Rs 3000.

It will be deposited in the joint account of three persons and any member of the kuri will be granted a loan up to a maximum of Rs 25,000 in case of an emergency for a period of 3 months. The loan is not available to the member who received his Kuri.

3. For each subsequent Kuri, the members can pay either 3000/4000/5000.

Only the actual amount has to be returned.

4. Payattu (Kuri) will be conducted both on 5th and 20th of every month from 7.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. at the Shop/Karakkunnu near Karakunnu Mosque or at a place convenient for the host.

5. In the case of unusual events (excluding normal deaths and marriage functions), it will be performed the next day. The rest will continue the next day if there is a need to stop abruptly.

6. It is the responsibility of the host to arrange and distribute a snack on the day.

7. The date on which the event will be conducted will be communicated through the WhatsApp group.

8. WhatsApp is mandatory for members. All communications will be through WhatsApp and those who do not have WhatsApp will have to provide the number of someone close to them.

9. Google Pay or Phone Pay is essential while running the systems.

10. It is mandatory to take a bank account if the recipients do not have a bank account.

11. No one should leave the WhatsApp group.

12. It is everyone's responsibility to deliver the money on time.

13. A member of the committee shall take responsibility for every 10 persons and all communications should be made through this member alone. It is enough to inform this member of all the requirements related to Payattu (Kuri).

14. If any member has withdrawn before the expiry date of the scheme without a valid reason, his actual amount will be given only after the remaining members completed their turn.

15. Precautionary measures will be taken without warning in case of 3 defaults in a financial transaction.

16. No one needs to ask through the group for the opportunity to conduct a Payattu, The committee members who have taken up their responsibility will be informed after they have discussed it in the committee. The decision of the committee will be final.

17. Its members shall write down the names of all those in the kuri in a book and record the amount they have paid along with the date. On the same day, you can also write down the number that will be re-used in the next column in the same book.

18. A copy of the Payattu account will also be kept in the committee.

19. Every night at 9 p.m., the person next to you is announced. (One in the draw and the other by committee's decision). The names of those who did not participate in the day's draw will be excluded from the draw. Those who don't have that desire for money immediately can be asked to postpone the draw.

20. Those who send money online (Google pay, Phone Pay, etc.) should send it before 5 pm on a daily basis. A screenshot of the same should be sent to the admin mark.

21. Kuri will start on August 5, 2023.

Everyone should think that no harm should be done to this project because of my laziness or carelessness. The success of this is honesty and accountability

The traditional gift exchange system in north Kerala has resulted in innovative forms, including sahayakuri, WhatsApp Payattu, Biryani challenges etc. However, these emerging forms deviate significantly from the traditional practice, reflecting a paradigm shift in gift exchange. Unlike the original Panappayattu, which is characteristic of social reciprocity and community connections, these new forms are marked by techniques of modernity such as organizations, digital mediation, charitable enterprises that are part of the nation-state, and neo-liberal economic approaches. This transformation requires further examination to understand the evolving dynamics of gift exchange in contemporary Kerala society.

## Conclusion

The study of gift exchanges has been a subject of anthropological research since the early days. Panappayattu is a unique practice of exchanging money as a gift which is prevalent in the northern part of Kerala particularly in the districts of

Kozhikode and Kannur. This study has investigated the discursive practices of Panappayattu system in Kerala by adopting an anthropological perspective. While exploring the broader cultural values and economic practices in South Asia, the study has uncovered the interplay of history, politics and power dynamics in the origin and evolution of Panappayattu system the region.

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