

BULLETIN OF THE MADRAS GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

THE TAMIL NADU TRIBES

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Compiled by

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Edited by the

DIRECTOR OF MUSEUM, MADRAS

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(Papers presented at the Seminar on "The Tamil Nadu Tribes" organized by the Government Museum, Chennai on 8th September 1973 in connection with the Silver Jubilee Celebration of Indian Independence)

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EDITORIAL NOTE

It was in 1972 that the subject of Ethnology was included as one of its disciplines in this Museum by Dr. George Bidie. Thereafter the Anthropological collections have grown gradually and steadily through the untiring efforts of the District Collectors, the succeeding Superintendents and the Curators in-charge of the Anthropology Section.

But in the last two decades, the field trips and surveys by the Section were conducted in such a way that almost all the major tribes in Tamilnadu have been covered district wise-i.e.in Madurai, the Pulayan, Paliyan and Muduvan, while in Coimbatore, the Irulas, Pulayan, Iravallar and Malasar; in North Arcot, the Maliyalis, Lambadis (B.C.), and Irulas; in Tiruchirappalli, the Pachai Malaiyalis; in Dharmapuri, the Chitteri Malaiyalis and Lambadis (B.C.); in Salem, the Kolli Malaiyalis; in Erode, the Sholagas; in Tirunelvely and Kanyakumari, the Kanis; and in Ramanasthapuram, the Kattunaickens. Further, during this period only, the largest populated hill tribe of Tamilnadu, the Malaiyalis was studied comparatively at Pachaimalai, Kollimalai, Kalvarayan, Chitteri, Yercaud, Shevaroy, Jawadhi and Yelagiri hills and their agricultural appliances were collected for the Museum.

With this enriched anthropology collection, three new galleries were thus opened during this decade - the Folk Arts, the Puppets and the Physical Anthropology galleries - and we had organised special exhibitions such as the Lambadis of Tamilnadu, the Hill dwellers of Tamilnadu, the Tamilnadu Tribes, etc.

Thus, the Madras Government Museum is the only prime Government Institution in the State, actively involved in projecting the life and culture of these tribals through their permanent displays, special exhibitions and publications.

There are 42 tribals in Tamilnadu with a total population of 5.20 lakhs as per 1981 Census. The papers presented at the seminar on the Tamilnadu tribes held in the Museum in 1973 form a part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of Indian Independence held in the Museum at that time. I hope, that these papers on Tamilnadu tribes will serve as a useful and purposeful bulletin of this Museum to numerous research students in the field of Anthropology trying to understand the life and patterns of the tribals in Tamilnadu.

MADRAS-600 008,
6th June 1989.

G. KESAVARAM,
Director of Museums,
Government Museum, Madras-8

V. RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF THE TAMILNADU TRIBES

*A Paper by Dr. M.S. Gopalakrishnan, Reader, Dept. of Anthropology,
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The primitive man attaches much importance to religion and religious conceptions which have their impact on all his activities. Unlike the modern man, who deals with things in a scientific and logical way, the primitive man is governed by dogmas based on beliefs which in turn have an emotional basis. This is why the primitive man's problems are secretive or occult whereas the modern man always approaches problems with an objective mind.

The religious life of any people is understood by manifestations of their beliefs and in doing certain rites. In fact to refer to Durkheim religion is composed of beliefs and rites-beliefs about sacred things and rites addressed to them. It is in fact rites which give life to religion. According to Max Schmidt religion can be classified into its component parts cultures and rites. Cultures refer to the acts of men, which they themselves think, brings them into contact with the powers that are the objects of their religious faith. Schmidt defines art as representation of ideas that afford an outlet for "human emotion" and brings within art the various representation of religious ideas and makes one think that worship is through art. And this is how we find dancing, music, architecture, etc., as indispensably connected with worship.

The essence of primitive religion is a belief in an impersonal power; the idea or concept of power varies from group to group. These powers which are deemed to influence human life act both favourably and unfavorably and are differentiated. Primitive man's wrong idea of reality has confused his thought and this has led to errors of action. But in the case of the modern man experience and knowledge have made him view things different and in a realistic way. This difference between them is not organic but circumstantial and should be thoroughly understood.

Magic and religion are much inter related and one can even say that much of magic is on a par with religion. Both are based on intellectual attitudes which resemble one and the same while magic explains the ways in which things happen in terms of hidden force, religion achieves this through deities, spirits and powers. Both the artistry of the magician and the rituals of religion are aimed to create an atmosphere of suggestibility and both employ the same means. Both follow a set form and traditional order the adherence to which is vital for success.

Primitive man views magic as important to understand the mystery of nature and life unlike the modern. When the element of chance in day to day life upsets his calculations he is led to believe that some evil forces control the processes of nature and in turn he wants to control this through magic. Magic is different from religion in the way in which the mystery of the work is viewed. Magic denotes an inflated notion of man's power whereas religion admits man's helplessness and his resignation to his destiny. In spite of the advance of science and general knowledge, man will continue to live adapting himself to both magic and religion. Both magic and religion are complimentary and they serve the same purpose of restoring confidence in times of danger or crises. where magic fails religion helps to tide over social and economic difficulties.

Magic assumes a uniformity of nature which brings it in line with science. To say with Frazer "the magic man does not doubt that some cases will always produce the same effects that the performance of the proper ceremony, accompanied by the appropriate spell, will inevitably be attended by the desired results unless indeed his incantations should chance to be thwarted and foiled by the more potent charm of another sorcerer. The magician strictly follows what he considers to be the laws of nature, so also the scientist and both assume a regular course of events in a well planned way, which in their opinions are determined by those unchangeable laws which according to them they can calculate and determine correctly. Magic assumes occult causes while science deals with matter of fact causes. This is the reason why as Frazer says, all magic is barren and false, for were it otherwise, it would not longer remain magic but would be science. While magic tells us the ways by which things happen in the background of hidden forces, religion explains and interprets things in terms of spirits and gods.

The word animism has been used to describe the tribal religions in India. Animism is that exceedingly crude form of religion in which magic is the predominant element. According to this form, man's life is supposed to consist of powers, elements, ghosts, etc., which are impersonal in character and also shapeless phantoms of which no image can be made and no definite idea can be formed. These are thought of to preside over various spheres of life and in this sense we have a spirit presiding over cholera, another over small pox, etc., and spirits existing in rocks and mountains and those associated with rivers. The primitive man diligently offers prayers and propitiates these to ward off the dangers associated with their influence. In this place we should bear in the mind the fact that the primitive man not only cares for malevolent spirits but worships also such things as stones, feathers and symbols as also plants, trees, the sun, the moon and the stars. The sun god is considered to be benign

and expected not to do any wrong. Viewed from this point, we can say that animism has been replaced by tribal religion as such. In fact tribal religions are considered to come in line with popular Hinduism in the near future. Dr. Hutton has remarked that tribal religions represent, as it were, surplus material not yet built into the temple of Hinduism. We can also refer to Elwin who is of the view that distinction between tribal religions and Hinduism or the previous classification into animism and Hinduism is meaningless. We can conclude that tribal people have no objection to worship Hindu Gods provided it will benefit them.

II

We can now study the four tribes of Tamil Nadu viz., the Kotas, the Todas, the Kanikkars and the Kadars from the point of view of religious aspects.

The villages where the Kotas live, lie on a plateau in the South India, the area which is now the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. The town of the people called Kokal is a little away from the city and near the forest. In the town there are two temples at the eastern corner of the place dedicated to the father god and the mother goddess. There is one chief priest and two assistants to help him. These priests also conduct the main festival of the Kotas called Kambatrayan Theru. The Kotas have no particular figures of their god. At the end of the year the Kotas celebrate a festival called Varidav which has a bearing on the performance of funeral rites. At this time the people make small cots which are used for carrying dead people depending on the number of the dead in the year. Those things which were used by the dead are put in small baskets and placed in the cots. In the evening these cots with the things are taken to a place called Davnat. Here the bones of the dead which are kept hidden some where are brought out and put in the cots and then the people start weeping. Finally all the cots are burnt. Thereafter food is prepared in the same place and distributed to those who have come there. During the night two relatives of the deceased will stay in the same place Davnat and return to their home the next morning. The belief underlying the whole ritual is that only if this is done the dead will go to heaven and also only after the performance of this, a man or woman can remarry.

After the performance of this death ceremony, the Kotas celebrate their famous festival Kambatrayan Theru, the biggest ceremony for them for a period of twenty one days. Even women participate and those take part in the function are being kept out in seclusion. However, as a rule women never appear before the priests nor they approach anywhere near any of the sacred things. People prepare different varieties of food and these are offered to God. The chief priest will participate in the eating and then only others take their

food. After the celebration of the function some kind of sports takes place in which all men and women should participate without fail. Otherwise they are fined by the local panchayat the next day. The priests who perform the ceremony get possessed and make certain utterance about coming events. Because of mixing with Hindus to a certain extent, the people now celebrate Hindu festivals like Sivarathri and Krishna Puja.

The Todas who inhabit the areas in Nilgiris district along with other tribes are said to live there for a number of centuries. The Todas have great importance for the buffaloes which are part and parcel of their life in every sphere of activity. There are different theories with regard to their origin. According to Dr. Rivers, Todas should have come from Malabar, the present Kerala. It can definitely be said that the Todas have been brought up in the Nilgiris. The Todas have great respect for their elders. The Todas believe in a large number of spirits, gods and goddesses particular among them being Teikirzi and so on. Teikirzi is the supreme goddess which rules the people on the earth, and the youngest brother of the goddess rules over the world of the dead. We have also to note that the Todas have various river gods and also hill deities each being associated with a special hilltop. The places where the buffaloes are kept are considered very sacred by the Todas and the people who manage the cattle yards are the priests for them. In these sacred places special vessels, bells, lamps, etc., are used and kept separate from other ordinary things. Prayers are offered here but the words used are unintelligible. Though the Todas do not care much for omens they believe in divination. The diviners who perform a class by themselves always work in pairs. They always give the decision on a particular matter when they are in a semihypnotic state. The Todas also have importance for sacred days and sacred numbers and three and seven are considered very important.

The Todas believe in the concept of spirit. After the death of a person, the spirit is supposed to travel to the other world. And according to them this other world is in the west and below the earth. Here the sun shines while it is night on this earth. The concept of incarnation is also in vogue among the Todas and according to them after a considerable period of stay in the other world the spirit is reborn in this world as new individual. Magic and sorcery are also practised by the Todas and they practised two types of magic viz., homeopathic magic and contagious magic. As regards Toda religion, Rivers has observed that worship has been transferred from gods not to stocks and stones but to bells and dairy vessels. Thus we find that the religion of the Todas is moving far away from reality because there is more of rituals than religion and in fact religion is overshadowed by ritualism.

The tribal people known as Kanikkars are to be found in the Kanyakumari District in Tamil Nadu in forest areas like Keeripparai, Pechiparai, Kothayaru, etc. They are also found in the Kerala border particularly in the Neyyatankara forests. They are about 4,000 in Tamil Nadu alone.

We cannot say with certainty what religion the Kani follow. There is evidence to show that they worship Lord Siva, Parvathi, Vishnu and Satan. The Kani worship this Satan as a hill god. The stories prevalent among these tribal people bear testimony to these. They also believe in animism, magic, sorcery etc. Apart from the deities mentioned above the Kani worship many other deities also. The watch god of the area is worshipped first. This is supposed to guard the land of the tribals. Then comes Satan, the hill god. Among the other deities come also the forest deities which are expected to protect the people when they go for hunting. Another particular deity worshipped, by the Kani is Madan. The figure of this deity is prepared in mud. The deity is worshipped on all occasions. The sun god is also worshipped as an important deity and in all ritual practices first worship is offered to the sun god. Food is offered after prayers. In an open space, the food is prepared and placed in a plantain leaf. The whole thing is then offered to god.

The festivals celebrated by the Kani are many. On these occasions prayers are offered for particular deities. Thus before sowing and starting the agricultural operations the Kani clear the land destroying the forest. In order not to offend the god of the land, they make offerings to the forest deity. After the harvest also they make offerings to the deities and celebrate the same in an elaborate fashion. This function starting in the early hours of the morning goes on till midday. Rice is then offered. Music and dancing also take place. Finally the offering of fruits, coconuts and other things is made. After the offering the things are distributed among the members. In order to avoid harms while going out for hunting, the Kani worship certain forest deities. Worship of the Sun god takes place first in the morning. The actual prayers for the forest deities take place in the forest itself where a big pit is made and fire lit in it. The instruments of hunting are then placed before the fire and certain words are said in prayer. After this the hunting takes place.

Lastly the Kanis make special prayers on occasions when there is no rain and when disasters come to them in their place. This is also an elaborate ritual starting in the morning and going till the end of the day. In an open place prominent among the tribal people assemble and put a pandal with coconut leaves and plantain leaves and also flowers. Then they improvise the deity by making a small dwelling place inside the pandal and placing there the dress, the weapons, etc., supposed to belong to the gods. Then elaborate offerings of rice, paddy, tender coconuts, fruits, etc., are placed in a number leaves. Songs praising the deity are then sung. At about twelve the puja takes place. A prominent member among those assembled gets hypnotized and utters some words supposed to come from god himself. This man later dances on a platform of fire and drinks the blood of a fowl after its head is cut. Then the man falls down. The functions now comes to an end and everybody assembled shares the offerings placed there.

The Kadars are a food gathering jungle tribe of South India spread in the Nelliampathy and Kadacheri mountains situated in the erstwhile Cochin State, now parts of Kerala. They are also to be found in Anamalai hills of Coimbatore District of Tamilnadu, Kollegal taluk of South Kanara forming part of Karnataka State. The Kadar religion is basically primitive polytheism. However, Hindu religion has crept in here also as in the case of other tribes to bring about notable changes in the traditional religion of the Kadars. The important deities of the Kadar are Ayyappan, Goddess Kali, Maruti, and Malavashi. The Kadar have faith in the existence of spirits particularly nature spirits. Rising sun is worshipped among the Kadars and there are small temples also in the area for worship. The Kadar attach much importance in the matter of being blessed by spirits, demons and deities and also ancestral spirits. This can be seen during celebrations of festivals and ritual and social undertaking. On all occasions considered important, the Kadars too invoke the blessings of deities and ancestral spirits. Usually the village headman is the priest. From all this we find that Kadar religion has become more intermixed with Hindu forms of worship and other things.

III

Our analysis of the beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural being among the tribals in general reveal that whatever the way of life, whether gathering or hunting or cattle herding, the tribal enacted his myths through rites and rituals, dances, and songs, fear and taboos, thus confirming his belief in the supernatural invisible, imperceptible force, not individually but collectively what matters to him is social survival