

Survival Of Megalithic Tradition: A Panoramic View of Primitive Tribal Burial Practices in Northern Kerala

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Abstract

Kerala is a homeland of 36 (Census of India, 2021) diverse tribal communities better to call as ethnic communities inhabited chiefly on the foothills of the Western Ghats, and their material cultures vary from community to community, among these 36 communities 18 tribal Communities inhabited the Northern portions of Kerala. Though each ethnic community had its own life and culture, they followed the ways of their ancestors in their burial practices. Among this ethnic group, a few communities have been classified as primitive tribal due to their isolation from the rest of the communities and their old way of living especially in interment ritual observances and progenitor veneration. Here the evolution of the burial practices and ancestor-worship of the 'primitive tribal group' were analyzed against the backdrop of the early literary, oral tradition, and archaeological exploration conducted among these ethnic communities.

Keywords: Ethnic Community, Kerala, Burial, Ancestor Worship, Literature, Oral Tradition, Archaeology

INTRODUCTION

Death and burial are universal, but responses toward these events vary from time to time, from context to context, and locality to locality. However drastic changes have befallen the death and burial practices of major ethnic communities of Kerala till the 1990s (Manjula Poyil, 2012) due to acculturation, migration in ethnic areas, encroachment in ethnic lands, and economic instability. Even today the so-called Primitive Tribal Community maintains a delicate balance in funeral practices though they are compelled to fight to protect their old ways of living. Burial and ancestor worship are visual and ritual manifestations and cultural vestiges of the Primitive Tribal Community. Until recently, the death and burial of Ethnic lore as subjects of research were largely ignored by anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, and Historians of Kerala.

The current paper centers on the ethnic communities covering the four districts of Northern Kerala – Palakkad, Malappuram, Wayanad, and Kasargod. This area is vibrant with ethnic inhabitants each having its unique self. The communities designated as Primitive Tribal Community are the Kurumbas of Attappady Valley, the Cholanāikkans of Nilambur Valley, the Kattunayikans or Tenkuruman of Wayanad, and the Koragas of Kasargod districts are selected for study. These communities are renowned for keeping their old traditions and ways of living and choosing a harmonious natural life without causing any harm to their living environment i.e. the Western and Eastern slope of the high ranges or the adjoining forests and plains of the Western Ghats. One among the prominent primitive tribal communities, the Kuṛumba inhabited 14 settlements and were strict followers of traditional burial practices and elaborate secondary burial practices. The Nilambur region of Malappuram district is noted for its perennial rainforests. The Chōlanāikkans are popularly known as *Cavemen of Kerala* because they inhabit natural caves called Kallu Alai inside the reserve forests of the Karuḷāyi, and Chunkathara ranges of Nilambur. Wayanad, geographically a part of the Mysore plateau, is inhabited by the Kattunaikans or Tenkurumar or Jēnu-Kuṛumbas and expert honey collectors. Koṛagas, a very primitive tribe in deplorable economic conditions, live in the South Canara district of Karnataka and the adjoining parts of the Kasargod district of Kerala. These aforesaid tribes due to their insular life and traditional ways of living strictly followed their forefathers in practicing burial rituals and ancestor worship.

Among various far-flung tribes and peoples, of a double burial ceremony where the body is temporarily interred for some months until decomposition is complete and then burial again, with further and more elaborate funeral rituals. (Robert Hertz, 1960) The existence of elaborate secondary burial especially in the case of the Kurumbas

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of Attappady Valley, the deposition of grave goods, archaic rituals, and the construction of memorials are the highlights of their burial rituals. For these communities death and burial are events of emotions and social significance. Death marks a waiting or liminal Period as Van Gene up said for elaborate rituals and sending off the soul or spirit to the other world. The *Primitive Tribal* community also strictly believed that the relatives of the dead have to perform certain responsible duties till the last burial ceremony takes place. Among them living and dead are two different entities and it is customary to separate dead from his/her relatives as soon as possible.

EARLY LITERARY TRADITION AND BURIAL PRACTICES

The earliest literary references on interment practices are the ancient Tamil Anthologies as we call it *Sangam Literature*. (Kamil Zvelebil, 1997) Some important Sangam Anthologies furnish comprehensive information about different types of burial practices that existed in the early days of Kerala which was the core region under ancient Tamilakam. Three prominent Sangam Anthologies called *Pathittipathu**, *Purananuru**, *Tolkappiyam**, *Akananuru**, and *Manimekhalai** elaborately mentioned the modes of interment that existed in Ancient Tamilakam and some types of interment in early phases.

Puranauru, elucidates the type of burial grounds chosen for interment, the large pyre form urns and cremation. The terms used for burial grounds are *kadu* (Purananuru, 2022) *purangadu* or wasteland adjoining the forest, and *mudukadu* or *mudur* for cremation or burial of the aged or prominent personalities. This work describes the features of a graveyard or burial ground elaborately. The burial ground, the resting place of the ancestors set up at the peripheries of the city or the hilly terrain with alkaline soil where Euphorbia, xerophytes, and wild varieties of thorny shrubs are found in abundance. The cemetery is poetically described as full of buried urns, the hooting sound of owls sitting inside the hole of an old tree in the ground, a red-eared cock and *Poguvai* bird sitting on the lid of the burial urn without fear, Vultures wandering throughout the ground, strong-billed crows flies and grasp the carcasses of the dead and eat mouth full of white flesh and fragments of bones are lying hither and there. Puranauru verses explain about cremation opted for chiefs, and prominent personalities and we have references from poets like Auvaiyar's mentions about the death of the chief Nedumanji (Puranauru, 2022) Kuttuvan Keernar's mention about the death of Ay Chief Vel (Purananuru, 2022), Periyar Muruvalar in his verses describes various forms of burials like *Iduka-venro* or exposure or burial, *Suduka-Venro* or cremation and *Padu-kuli-p-paduka* or inhumation and ruler's like Cheraman Makotai about his queen's death. (Sreenivasan, 1946). When we go through this evidence found that Primitive Tribal Communities follow communities that follow the same type of grave-digging practices and modes of burial even today.

The popular Sangam Epic Manimekhalai describes five modes of disposal of the dead. In the context of the description of the burial ground at the Chola capital, Kaveripattanam Manimekhalai points out that the following modes of burial varieties are noted *Suduvor* or those who opt for cremation, *Iduvor* or those who choose to cast away, *Todu Kulippaduppor* or those who buried the dead in the pit, *Tal-Vayin-Adaippor* or buried in sarcophagus urn with lid *Taliyirkavippor* or those who buried in subterranean cellars or vaults (Manimekhalai, 1989). The first, third, and fourth modes of burial practices existed among the Primitive Tribal of Kerala.

The *Pathtritupattu* is the most prominent Sangam work that speaks about burial practices – *Mannar–Maraitta Tali Vanni Manarattu- Vilangiya- Kade* (A.M.Parimanam, 2023). This means that the *kadu* or graveyard where the *tali* or burial urn of the king lay was the vast region below the Vannim (Prosopis Spicigera) tree. Regarding burial marking, we have a few references from *Tolkappium* (Tolkappium, 2000), *Purananuru* (Purananuru, 2022), and *Akananuru* (Akananuru, 1999). Verses from these Sangam Works explained burial markings or cenotaphs called *natural* over the burial pit of the dead. The primitive tribal communities practiced this type of erection or burial marking over the burial pit.

Primitive Tribal Groups and Their Burial Practices

Among the ethnic communities as we call it as a 'primitive tribal group' burial practice is a stable cultural trait even today though acculturation is affected in every walk of their life. They are not ready to change the traditional burial practices and ancestor worship because of their closeness and respect for their ancestors or their souls. Based on archaeological evidence and field surveys three types of burial existed among the above-

mentioned ethnic groups-inhumation, cremation, and post-burial or secondary burial. Inhumation is the common mode of burial and two prominent practices related to this process are the construction of a grave and the deposition of grave goods. Inhumation is passed through various stages of ritual ceremonies and varies from individual to individual according to age, sex, status, etc. In the case of an infant, burial rituals are minimal and they are buried not in the burial ground or cemetery but in the premises of his/her house or house floors or sometimes in the courtyard of their house. The eldest or prominent personalities like headman/head women are buried along with elaborate rituals and ceremonies.

The common practice related to inhumation is digging the grave and many ritualistic traditions are existed for grave digging. The grave is the abode of the deceased and all ethnic communities have their private burial ground and expert grave-diggers. Each hamlet owned a burial ground near forest areas. Only expert grave diggers are utilized for making graves and such grave diggers follow the traditional ways of digging. The 'primitive tribal group' like Kurumbas of Attappady Valley, Cholanaikkans of Nilambur Valley, Kattunayikans or Tenkuruman of Wayanad, and Koragas of Kasargod constructed a peculiar type of grave. They scooped out an L-shaped side cavity, or an inner chamber after digging a grave to insert the whole body into the side cavity.

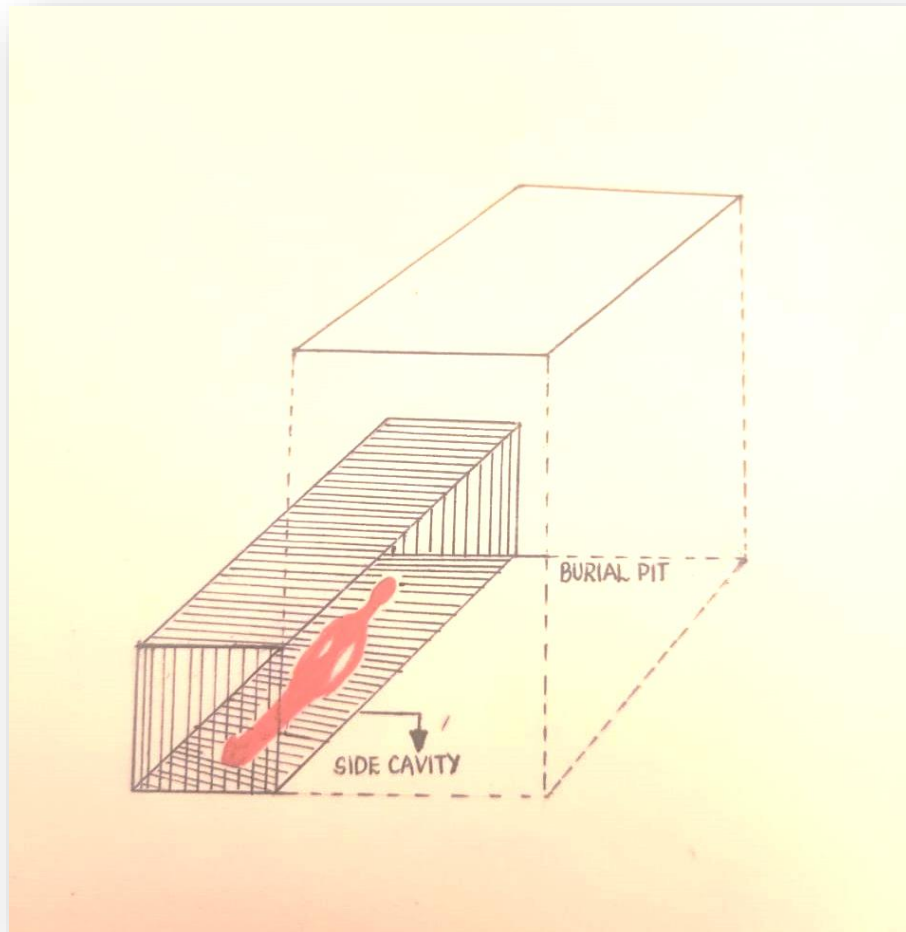


Fig.1

Model of Primitive Tribe's Burial Pit

Ethnic Traditions

The primitive tribal communities in North Malabar have rich oral traditions and they are not ready to disclose their oral memories related to burial and burial rituals to an outsider. Each community has its oral memories, burial songs, grave-digging songs, wailing songs, and funeral dance songs.

Survival of Megalithic Tradition, Grave Goods and Memorials-Archaeological Evidences

Megaliths are massive sepulchral stone cenotaphs to spot the site of a burial and it is a universally adopted practice. Normally talking, *megaliths* are giant stone edifices or funeral homes erected up of huge, dressed stones raised to safeguard the remnants of the departed intimates. This practice is reported from the Neolithic period onwards but in India, it appeared in Iron Age Cultures. The usual Kerala variety of megaliths is *Kodakkallu*, *Thoppikkals*, Urn burials, or *Muthumakkal Thāzhi*, *menhirs*, *rock-cut caves*, *stone circles*, *dolmens*, etc. The grave goods deposited along with the dead body are megalithic pottery called Black-and-Red ware, household utensils, agriculture implements, defensive and offensive weapons, ornaments in gold and semi-precious stones, beads made of semi-precious stones, terracotta, and metal. The megalithic burial personae are found among the ethnic communities of Kerala, especially among the *primitive tribal group*. Instead of erecting huge memorials ethnic communities at present constructed tiny cenotaphs in stones after performing an elaborate secondary burial. After the completion of the first burial few months or years later relics of the dead are collected from the grave and reburied and erected memorials over it. The *Primitive Tribal Group* at present worships miniature megalithic-type memorials and the deposition of grave goods is a common trait of their burial practices.



Idols: Kurumbar, Anavay

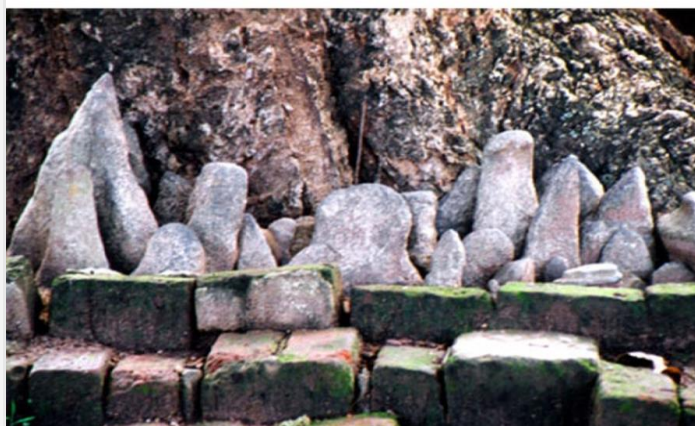


Fig.2&3

Goods being deposited by the tribal people in the graves now include their favourite items, cooking utensils, agriculture implements, foodstuff, etc. Gender disparity can also be noticed in the grave goods and materials such as ornaments, daily utensils, and sickles predominating over the graves of women. In recent times a change has been brought about chiefly by the process of advancing acculturation and deteriorating material conditions. Mortuary ceremonies and the types of grave goods are evident signifiers of social differentiation within the tribe. The children are buried without grave goods. Based on the roles played by them in the production process, the grave goods of men and women vary. For prominent person special types of memorials are constructed over their relics.



Fig.4

Burial Monument of Kurumba Headman, Mudda Mooppan

Deposing the grave goods is the age-old tradition “There is no simple formula which explains the occurrence of objects in graves: in some societies grave goods reveal the perception of the afterlife, in others they have to do with the social persona of the dead, in at another context they have to do with ritual contamination associated with death”. The food items –cooked and non-cooked, water, apparel, adornments, apparatuses, and working tools of men/women are deposited in the grave. The Koṛagas placed a gruel jar and a penknife exterior of the grave. Kāṭṭunāikkans placed chewing items for the chief near the head of the deceased inside the grave. The Chōlanāikkans kept cleavers, digging poles, pocket knives, pitchers, and copper finger rings inside the graves. The Kāṭṭunāikkans buried their possessions such as pots and tools, along with a walking staff, at the head of the grave, and ornamentations of a departed woman kept near her body. Kuṛumbas also follow the same tradition of grave good deposition.

CONCLUSION

A historical study of burial practices is extremely important for several reasons. Past ways of religious traditions of the ethnic communities helped historians and archaeologists to find out the shrouded mysteries around the religious practices of pre-historic and Megalithic Communities. A steady practice of acculturation or

'Sanskritization' (MN Sreenivasan,1963) has emerged among them in contemporary times and followed Hindu customs and practices. *Primitive tribes* follow the megalithic tradition to some extent. The origin, identity, and social and political organizations of the megalithic community are still an enigma. But megalithic folk were known to us for their sepulchral monuments, ancestor-worshipping practices, agricultural techniques, economy, ornaments, pottery, and iron implements which are unearthened and excavation reports are published by the archaeologists. Thus study of primitive tribal communities is a stepping stone to the study of the unknown aspects of megalithism. These little ethnic communities are facing extortions of physical elimination. Intrusions from the plains, forest policies, growing deforestation, and the speedily lessening tribal ecosystem have brought the tribal people to fight for their existence. Growing acculturation and extortions of physical elimination form anxiety among social scientists because, with the vanishing of ethnic communities, their gorgeous folk legacy also would expire. The unique structures of their cultural ethos have to be studied and documented for the benefit of forthcoming generations.

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The Sangam Age, which lasted roughly from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, is also known as the period of Tamil Literature. It was a period of gatherings of poets and scholars focused on various aspects of life, including love, war, ethics, politics, and nature. According to historical references, there are three Sangams or assemblies of poets in early Tamilnadu also known as Muchchangam

For more details see Kamil, Zvelebil., (1997), *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India*, Brill Academic Publication, Leiden.

Pathritupattu is one of the genres of the Eight Anthologies with 10 poems and contains Puram or war and public affairs. The poems are dedicated to Chera rulers who ruled Tamil Nadu and Kerala and are one of the prominent literary sources for the 10 Early Chera rulers of the ancient Tamilakam

Purananuru which is also part of the Eight Anthologies is a collection of 400 heroic poems dedicated to early kings of South India, Chola, and Pandyas

Tolkappiyam is the authoritative text on Tamil Grammar

Akananuru is one of the Eight Anthology and contains love, Dolores

Manimekhalai is the first Buddhist Epic in the Tamil language

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