

# **LIFE CYCLE RITUALS OF MULLUKKURUMBAR TRIBE OF NILGIRIS DISTRICT**

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## **Abstract**

Broadly speaking, ritual is any prescribed way of performing some act. Ritual is regarded as being symbolically more complex and involving deeper social and socio – psychological concerns. Ritual also means a single act of a religious performance i.e., ceremony with ritual is often used interchangeably. It is usually regarded by some anthropologists as a category of behavior on which case it may be defined as a form of ceremony characterized by its reference to mystical or religious notions, lands or agencies.

These rituals are deeply rooted in the tribe's cosmology and are performed with great fervor and dedication. The rituals are accompanied by unique customs, traditions, and beliefs, which are passed down through generations. The study highlights the importance of these rituals in maintaining social harmony, spiritual balance, and cultural continuity. They have peculiar kinds of cultural traits on dressing, occupation, ornaments, foods, kinship relations, myths, beliefs, attitudes, values, etc. Those cultural traits of manifested in their language. Since, their community is exposed surrounding dominate community, the age old indigenous cultural traits and the linguistic elements which depict those cultural concepts / notions are gradually missing in air and acculturation, assimilation hybrid. Culture or intermediate culture emerged among those Mullkkurumba tribes. So, it is necessary to stop the extinction or endangerment of linguistic culture and linguistic system of this tribal community can be conserved.

**Keywords:** Life cycle, Rituals, Cultural identity, Spiritual beliefs, Indigenous cultures.

## **Introduction**

The Nilgiris is an abode of many minor linguistic communities such as Toda, Kota Badaga, Irula, Kurumba, Kattunayakar, Kasaba etc. They live, in harmony, along with the people of regional language called Tamil. The indigenous linguistic communities protecting their age old identity from the external impact, lead their domestic and public life; being mostly as bilinguals and in some cases as multilingual (mother tongue, Tamil, and other indigenous languages.) Their communication pattern is something unique which opens up avenue for academic research of social relevance.

A tribe is a distinctly structured community with a distinct language, culture, habitat, lifestyle, religion etc. Mullukkurumba are the people who are based in this area. The tribal people are a total of 37 ethnic groups living widely in 19 districts of Tamil Nadu. Among these tribes, there are six groups in particular: Toda, Kota, Kasaba, Kurumbar, Kattunayakar, Paniyar, Irular who have been declared as ancient tribal people by the central government. These ancient tribal people are distinguished by their unique cultural traditions and rituals. Among them, except the Irula race, the other five races are living under the shadow of the Nilgiris Mountain as their abode. They have their own rules and regulations.

To the Nilgiris Hills, tribal people are adding innovation with innovative culture. Especially the beauty, appearance, softness and elegance of the Toda, Kota and Kurumbar people are an example of the uniqueness of the Nilgiris tribal people.

## **Literature review**

Labov (1972) has introduced the variable as a unit in a language, which is most subject to social or stylistic variation. He has proposed a few distinctions in connection with study of the problem of variation in language. He is of the view that linguistic description could be an accurate description of all the varieties of language spoken in the particular area. The methods developed by Labov have proved to be very significant for the study of social-class, dialects and accents.

Fishman (1972) views that language is not merely a means of interpersonal communication and influence. It is not merely a carrier of content, whether latent or manifest. Language itself is content, a referent for loyalties, an indicator of social status and personal

relationships, and a maker of situation and topics as well as of the social goals that typify every speech community. The term 'culture' is essentially a political-social and intellectual world emanating from the individual, which is itself dependent on man's understanding of his own position within the concrete cultural frame work of the course of his existence.

Loh and Harmon (2014) and Salaliet.al., (2020) say that most indigenous people living in traditional ways on their ancestral lands speak endangered languages. If their native language is not already extinct, along with the language, their traditional knowledge of means of livelihood land use, natural resource management, and various cultural beliefs are also being lost. Cultural extinction can include loss of language, loss of tradition, habit, etc.,

Dominant languages spread widely and lead to the gradual extinction of other language. Language, like a species, when once extinct, never reappears. (Charles Darwin, The Descent of man (1871)

However following linguists and anthropologists had done some work on the Kurumbas R. Periyalwar (1978) M.A. sivaraman (2011) Harings (1975) Rackles (1961) Raghavan (1929) Francis (1984) Briks (1983) Sherinks (1975).

### **Customs and practices**

"Life cycle rituals play an important role in an individual's life. It is the transition rites celebrated to mark the passing of a person, group of persons, from one social status to another such as pregnancy, birth, puberty, marriage, death". (Anandha Bhanu, 2007:62)

Mullukkurumbas to observe ceremonies right from the birth of an individual to his/her death. Significant changes are noticed in the customs and practices due to their cultural contact with the migrants. Below given are the customs and practices observed by Mullukkrumbas viz., child birth, puberty, marriage and death.

### **Child Birth**

The delivery normally takes place at the husband's pera. Birth of a male child is declared by beating bow and arrow and the birth of a female child is declared by beating utensils. After the childbirth, the woman is considered polluted until she is bathed and taken to deivapera. The

pollution relating to childbirth lasts for 15 days. They conduct a main pollution breaking ceremony on the third day which is known as bavili. The mother and child enter the deivapera.



The purification ceremony takes place here and is followed by feast. After the feast, mother and child enter their house. The mother is not allowed to touch household utensils or enter the kitchen for 15 days. On the 15th day she takes all the things she used during the pollution period and goes to the nearby river to have bathed. After the bath she enters the deivapera with the child and

punyaham (holy water brought from nearby temple) is sprinkled on them by poruNatti (head man's wife). Punyaham is sprinkled on all the household utensils too symbolizing purification. The mother resumes normal life after this. The first rice feeding takes place in the 6th month in deivapera.

### **Puberty**

The girl who attains puberty is separated and has to stay in an isolation shed called ku:cciakam . This practice is not observed now. A food item called 'puTu' made with jaggery and rice flour is given to the girl. On the seventh day, 'teraNDakeniyaNam' (puberty ceremony) takes place. The girl is given oil bath and taken to her house. Food is cooked and served in deivapera for all the members of the vedu.

### **Marriage**

Rituals relating to marriage are important in the life of a Mullukkurumba. They are monogamic and observe the kulam regulations.

A child belongs to its mother's kulam. Mullukkurumbas believe that all members belonging to one kulam are brothers and sisters and marriage among them is a taboo. If a Mullukkurumba marries a girl outside his tribe or within his clan, he is excommunicated or ostracized. Many such couples are found living in a settlement called Irritalodu. They have formed an endogamy society of their own. But this trend has changed now. During data

collection it was found that Mullukkurumbas who married girls from other communities are seen living in the same area where they look after their individual land which they have got as share from their parents. Mullukkurumbas in Pandalur taluk choose their bride from seventy odd settlements in Kerala.

The peculiarity among Mullukkurumbas regarding their marriage is that the parents of the girl never go in search for a boy for their daughter. An alliance for the girl should come from the boy's parents. This rigid system has become a curse to many families. During field trip, many Mullukkurumba unmarried girls were found in many settlements. In some families younger girls who were better looking than the elder ones have been married, while those elder to them were still waiting to get married. Some of them were above 35 years.

When an alliance is settled, the bride groom's party has to give an amount as bride price ranging from Rs.50/- to Rs.150/- to the girl's father. This money is called 'parisapaNam' (bride money).

When the marriage is fixed, the bridegroom pierces his ear and put a small piece of peacock quill. He wears an ear ring called Ka:tala for the marriage. Nowadays this is not observed. The deivapera plays an important role in the marriage ceremony. On the day prior to marriage, the bride is decorated and taken to the deivapera. There, the maternal uncle ties the 'ta:li' (marriage badge) and the girl stays alone in the deivapera for a night.

The bridegroom's party arrives next day. The group includes the bridegroom's sister's husband who is called kaNankeTTi. He carries Rs.5/- and hands it over to the 'mu:ppen' (head man) of the bride's settlement. Another person called 'mu:na:men'(a close associate to bridegroom - friend or relative) accompanies the bride groom who carries a big knife with him for the protection of the couple. The bridegroom's sister carries the wedding dress for the bride. She is known as 'muNDuka: Rtti'.

The group sits on the verandah of deivapera. The muNDuka: Rtti hands over the wedding dress to the bride. She wears that dress and enters the deivapera. The bridegroom's party also enters the deivapera and both the groups face to face. The bridegroom's sister pulls the bride standing in the opposite side and makes her stand near the bridegroom. The bride is included in the bridegroom's party and the function ends here.

The members of the settlement go for hunting on the eve of the marriage and the meat is cooked and served to the guests. On the day of the marriage ceremony, the bridegroom's party is fed first. A group dance takes place in the front of deivapera with small sticks in their hands. This dance is called 'ko:lkaLi'. The songs are based on themes from epics Mahabharatha and Ramayana. The married couple returns to the bridegroom's settlement on the same day.

On the eve of marriage, the po:ruNavan brings the oracle to the settlement. (Sometimes he has to be brought from a faraway settlement) The oracle enters the deivapera and prays. After some time he starts shivering and comes out in a trance and throws some rice in one place. A small 'pandal' measuring 5" x 4" made at this place on the day of the marriage just before the arrival of the couple, the deity from the deivapera is brought to the newly made pandal in the



form of fire. A brass hanging lamp is lit in the pandal to represent the presence of deity. The po:ruNavan sits in the pandal during the dance rituals like vaTTakaLi and ko:lkaLi.

At the bridegroom's settlement also, a group go for hunting. The meat is served for the dinner. The bride and the bridegroom on entering the settlement visit deivapera. After that they receive blessings and gifts from elders and other community people. Betel leaves and betel nuts are given back by the bridegroom.

Before dinner, ko:lkaLi takes place. A lamp is placed on a wooden stand in the centre. Young children and men form a circle with two sticks in their hands. With the rhythmic beats of these sticks, ko:lkaLi is performed. Folksongs relating to forests and on the themes from epics Mahabharata and Ramayana are sung.

Dinner is served to all the members of the settlement after the ko:lkaLi. Another ritual dance called vaTTakaLi begins late in the night. In front of the valiyapera, a big elephant yam is taken and then scooped into the shape of a bowl. Then oil is poured into it and a thick cotton wick is lighted. This will serve as the lamp till next day morning. Only young men and elders take part in the vaTTakaLi. One person starts the song which is followed by other. This dance is performed in a circular motion with alternate front to back movements. The song once sung by one person cannot be repeated.

vaTTakaLi is performed till sunrise. The po:ruNavan will witness the vaTTakaLi sitting in the pandal specially made for him. The bride and the bridegroom spent their first night in the deivapera. The bride enters the bridegroom's house next day morning with a pot of water. She then becomes the daughter-in-law of the house.

Dosas plays an important role in the marriage of Mullukkurumbas. Mullukkurumbar women pound the rice for making dosas. The entire cooking for the marriage is done by four or five women. A clean place in the settlement is selected and a temporary kitchen is made with bamboo and palm leaves. The Mullukkurumbar women who are engaged in cooking go to the river nearby, take bath and wear new white clothes. Then they start cooking. Others are not allowed inside the temporary kitchen. Extreme cleanliness is maintained in cooking and serving of the food.

On the third day of marriage, dosas are prepared in large quantity and packed and carried to bride's settlement for distribution. A formal hunting is arranged at the bride's settlement during that period to honor the bridegroom. This is called 'piTTuvirunnu'. After two days, the bride's family prepares equal amount of dosas and send them with bride and bridegroom for distribution at bridegroom's settlement. This exchange of dosas mark the completion of the marriage ceremony.

Nowadays, due to lack of time and heavy expenditure, the functions are cut short from five to two days. Due to scarcity of money, some conduct the marriage at Ganapathy temple, Pandhalur Taluk Devala Settlements in order to avoid the huge expenses, relating to it.

## **Death**

When a Mullukkurumbar dies, the body is brought to the deivapera. Information is given to relatives and friends living in other settlements. The body is bathed and dressed before burial. When a male member is buried, the corpse is placed with its head towards the south. The head is slightly tilted towards the east. The bow and arrows used by him along with knife, little cooked rice, bunch of plantains and little tobacco are placed near the corpse. They believe that the deceased soul needs bow and arrow in the paralo:kam (the celestial world).

When a female member is buried, the head is slightly tilted towards west. A sickle, cooked rice, a bunch of plantains and tobacco are placed beside the corpse. They believe that the deceased soul needs sickle in the paralokam. Bangles, anklets and tali are not removed from the body. After the burial, the pit is covered with thorns to prevent digging by wild animals. All the members of the settlements observe fasting till the body is taken away for burial. The third day after the death is observed as pulakuLi (pollution breaking day). The members of the deceased take oil bath. Purificatory oil is brought from Nair landlord. After taking oil bath, the women cook meals in the deivapera. Then, food is served inside the deivapera on a single koova (arrow root) leaf in the name of all ancestors. After this food is served to everyone.

On the third day after the pulakuLi, another celebration takes place in the deivapera. This is called ku: TTattuku: TTal- meaning 'joining of the deceased spirit with the ancestral spirits'. On this day, women go for fishing and men go for hunting. In the evening they prepare fish curry and a curry with the hunted flesh.

Inside deivapera, some koova leaves are spread in the names of the deceased ancestors on one side. One koova leaf is spread at a distance away from the other leaves in the name of the recently deceased member. Food is served on these leaves. The door of the deivapera is closed for ten to fifteen minutes. The door is opened later and the koova leaf kept separately is pulled and kept near the other leaves representing deceased spirit indicating that it has joined the ancestral spirits. Later the food is served to children and others.

### **Celebration of Festivals**

Mullukkurumbas celebrate their festivals with great enthusiasm. They relax and enjoy very well during festivals. Mullukkurumbas follow Malayalam calendar and celebrate festivals which are being celebrated in Kerala such as Onam, Vishu, Sankranthi, Puthari, Mandalam and Ucca:R.

The Ucca:R is the traditional and most important festival which no other communities in the area celebrate. It is observed during February-March. This is the season when leases of land are generally granted and cancelled. During Ucca:R festival Mullukkurumba men and women clean their houses and arrows pound rice for preparing dosas.



On Ucca:R day, Mullukkurumbas eat dosas for their breakfast. They visit deivapera and offer some cash to poruNavan. Hunting is a part of ucca:R and male members go for hunting and return in the evening. Female members go to the nearby streams for fishing. Food is prepared jointly by all. Every one gives his share of rice for this purpose. While food is being prepared, Mullukkurumbas engage in vaTTakkaLi and ko:lkaLi. After dinner, another tribe of the area, Uralikurumbas, commences their dances to the accompaniment of their traditional musical instruments. It continues till next day morning. Uralikurumbas receive paddy, betel leaves, betel nuts and tobacco as gifts.

During the festival Vishu in the month of April, Mullukkurumba men conduct shooting practice for young children. Sankranthi is another festival celebrated by Mullukkurumbas during July-August. On this day, they catch birds with the help of paste smeared bamboo sticks called koles. Dosas and curry made out of flesh is offered to spirits of ancestors and later eaten by them. Onam the popular festival of Kerala is celebrated by Mullukkurumbas with same enthusiasm as seen in Kerala.

### **Language situation**

Even though many scholars have made observations about Mullukkurumbas, divergent opinions exist about the speech of Mullukkurumbas. Thurston (1975; Vol.IV 166 reprinted) quoting the Madras census report 1891 says that the Mullukkurumbas speak Malayalam'. Aiyappan (1948:95) also states that Mullukkurumbas speak Malayalam.

The language situation in the area of data collection is unique. This area was a part of the Gudalur taluk of Nilgiri's district.

Before the state re-organization in 1956, Malayalam was the official language, Malayalam was the language taught in GTR (Government-Tribal Residential) schools. Those who have become literates before 1956 adopted Malayalam script. After the state re-organization in 1956, Tamil became the official language and was introduced in GTR schools as medium of instruction. Even today, though the area is a part of Tamil Nadu, there is a preponderance of Malayalam language and the Malayali way of life exist there.

The area comprises of multi-ethnic population, with tribal and non-tribal population belonging to various castes and communities speaking various dialects of Malayalam and Tamil. Tribal population like Paniya, Kattunaika, Chetties, UraliKurumbas who have their own distinctive speech forms.

## **Conclusion**

The life cycle rituals of the Mullukkurumbar tribe of the Nilgiris district are a vital part of their cultural identity and spiritual beliefs. These rituals, which encompass birth, naming, coming of age, marriage, death, and ancestor worship, are deeply ingrained in the tribe's traditions and customs. The research highlights the significance of these rituals in maintaining social harmony, spiritual balance, and cultural continuity.

The Mullukkurumbar tribe's life cycle rituals are a testament to the rich cultural heritage of indigenous communities. The rituals are a vital part of their daily lives, and their preservation is essential for the continuation of their cultural identity.

The study's findings emphasize the importance of:

- ✚ Preserving cultural heritage and traditional practices
- ✚ Recognizing the significance of life cycle rituals in indigenous cultures
- ✚ Promoting cultural sensitivity and understanding
- ✚ Supporting the continued practice of life cycle rituals

By understanding and appreciating the life cycle rituals of the Mullukkurumbar tribe, we can gain a deeper insight into the cultural significance of these practices and work towards preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous communities.

Ultimately, the preservation of life cycle rituals is essential for the continuation of indigenous cultural identity and the well-being of the Mullukkurumbar tribe and other indigenous communities.

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