



TEYYAM CULT IN FUNERAL RITUAL: KOOLIYATTAM OF THE KARIMPALANS

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Abstract

The tribal practice of sending away the spirits of the dead permanently to their abode in the other world, a few days after the burial, represents the final stage of a long chain of funeral rites. Since tribal religion mainly revolves around the concept of ancestor worship, and ancestor worship is a combination of beliefs and practices concerned with the spirit of the dead, funeral ceremonies acquire special significance.

Keywords :-Karimpalan ; Kooliyattam; Teyyam; Last Rite; Ancestor ; Adiyantharam

Tribal funeral consist of various kinds of burial rituals and after-burial i.e. last rites.¹ Tribes all over the world use different terms to remark the last rite². The most common name used by the tribes of Malabar to denote it is *Adiyanthiram* or *Koottathil Koottal*. Until this ritual, the dead man's spirit is not at rest, and death pollution is not supposed to end. A typical tribal last rite is marked by the cheerful sending away of the soul of the dead to the world of the ancestors through offerings, sacrifices, music, dance and grand feasts. But in the context of the advancing process of acculturation many tribes have inculcated sanskritic elements into the tribal pantheon. Against this background, the present paper examines the last rite of the Karimpalan tribe of North Kerala which is unique for the appropriation of the non-tribal *teyyam* cult into the tribal ancestor-worshipping system.³

The Karimpalans

Karimpalans are a tribe found in the Kannur district of northern Kerala. Their settlements are chiefly concentrated in the hill tracts along the slopes of the Western Ghats. The most important settlements are Padiyur, Nuchiyad, Nedyanga, Thenkarachal, Parikkalam, Mundayad and Alakkod. The tribe is divided into five matrilineal clans or *Illams* called Chappili, Puthusseri, Pallath, Machini and Kalla. Karimpalans are a highly acculturated tribe in terms of both livelihood patterns and religious practices. They are settled agriculturists or agricultural labourers and their contacts with the higher caste as well as lower caste Hindus have caused them to imbibe non-tribal religious and cultural practices into their tribal system. Recently with the influx of the Christian migrant farmers into the area they are exposed to non-Hindu practices. An important instance of the accommodation of Christian tradition is the beginning of the use of coffins in burying the dead bodies. Nevertheless, in the realm of funeral customs, Christian influence is rather negligible and is confined to such rare instances. Even more important is the relative indifference of the Karimpalans towards the Christian religion in spite of strong missionary appeal.

Funeral Customs of the Karimpalans

Death for the Karimpalans is only a separation of the soul from the body. They believe in the immortality of human soul. The needs of the dead man are not imagined as different from that of the living man. The soul, after death, according to their concept, becomes spirit either malevolent or benevolent. Performing funeral rites and worshipping them are two basic techniques of dealing with these two kinds of spirits. That is why funeral rites are quite elaborate among them. They believe that they can control the power of the spirits through these rites and while in control the spirits can be made use of for their well being; but when they get out of control they acquire disastrous capacities.

The Karimpalans bury the dead in the precincts of their own houses. Earlier, each settlement had its own graveyard situated away in the woods. But due to the migration of peasant families from Travancore and the resultant heavy pressure on land, they lost control over their landed properties. Hence, the concept of a common cemetery is almost unknown to them today. For inhumation, they dig a burial pit and place the corpse in the lying posture with the head oriented towards the south. Karimpalans today follow the two methods of inhumation and cremation, though in different contexts. Since they were culturally more proximate to the upper caste Hindus they have come to accept the Hindu method of cremation. Cremation among Karimpalans is known as *Nasippikkal* or destruction. Seven persons stand at the head and another

seven at the feet. The nephew who stands at the head, lights up the pyre first, followed by others. Still, they do not cremate the dead *teyyam* dancers or *komaram* (shaman or oracle). The burial of a dead *komaram* or of a dead *teyyam* dancer and the burial of those who die of small pox are commonly known as *bhandaram thazhthal*. According to their belief, the germs of small pox are sowed by *Cheerumba Bhagavathi*, or *Vasoorimala Thampuratti*, the goddess of small pox. Therefore they consider small pox as a divine disease and death due to a divine disease would be truly providential.

When the dead body is taken to the grave, they carry along with them an arrow, a stick known as *penakkol*, a bundle of rice and a new earthen pot. The son or the nephew of the deceased carry the *penakkol* and stand in front of the grave along with seven others who may not be the relatives of the dead. All of them together circle the grave thrice and throw rice into the grave. Then the four persons standing at the head of the grave and the other three at the feet ask thrice: '*pena etto?*' and one among them reply '*ettu*'. After the funeral this *penakkol* is stuck on the grave in order to keep the spirit away and to prevent its return.

On the seventh day of the burial, they raise a mound over the grave and perform *Ottalam Kamizhthal* and draw pictures of *Kalan* and *Kooli* if disposal is by inhumation. The rite called *Ottalam Kamizhthal* is very simple yet obviously meaningful. They cook rice in a new earthen pot and serve it to the dead in a plantain leaf by keeping it at the head of the grave. The earthen pot used for cooking the rice is put upside down, along with the remaining cooked rice, over the grave, with a hole being pierced in it. The rite is evidently meant to prevent the waking up of the spirit till the completion of the last rite or *Kooliyakkal* and the small hole on the pot is to help the spirit breathe. Subsequently, they draw a picture of *Kalan* at the head and of *Kooliyan* (ancestor spirit) at the feet of the grave with turmeric powder, rice powder and charcoal. It is to please the god of death *Kalan* (the Hindu god) and the spirit of the dead *Kooli*. Thereafter all of them take bath in a flowing stream, collect water in a folded leaf and keep it for the spirit of the dead to alleviate his/her thirst.

The Karimpalans are strict followers of death pollution. Among them, apart from the close relatives, a long chain of people outside the kin group, including the grave-diggers and the carriers of the corpse, too get polluted and they have to abstain from work during the pollution period. It caused to create considerable obstacles for all the people under pollution so that the Karimpalans are very particular that the period of pollution should be strictly observed and successfully completed. This is particularly because any evidences

to the contrary may end up in a punitive extension of pollution for a further period of 3 months. They keep water in a leaf bowl and food in a plate inside as well as outside the house till the end of the pollution. Pollution ends in most cases with a ritual bath of the mourners and kinsmen, cutting of the hair and moustache by the male and the taking of non-vegetarian food. For removing *Pula* they also bring consecrated water from the temple and sprinkle it over all the polluted people. To end the pollution of the deceased *teyyam* dancers, certain sacred rites should be performed by the Nambutiris on the day of *Adiyanthiram* or last rite.

In all the rituals associated with death, the Karimpalans have a specialist arbitrator called *Changathi* to help and supervise them.⁴ He is also called *Moonnaman* or *Moonnan*. Each Karimpalan clan has a *Changāthi*, who should belong to another clan, and who supervises the funeral rites. From the time of the death to the end of all the funeral rites, the presence of the *Changathi* is indispensable. He is not a functionary nor is he a ritual performer but his decisions are binding when a dispute arises over the particulars of rites. Although the office of the *Changathi* has depleted much of its powers in this age of rapid social change, it continues to demand respect and honour within the community.

The Cult of Teyyam

Teyyams (etymologically derived from Sanskrit *daiva*) are deities/ancestors impersonated in ritual dances of north Malabar.⁵ After the harvest season, people gather around shrines, mostly in forest groves, to celebrate the festival of teyyam. The performer of the teyyam invokes the spirit, gets possessed and become a medium. In a state of identification with the divinity the performer bestows his grace and manifold blessings on the worshippers. The festivals incorporate religious sentiments which develop from an initial obeisance to an increasingly fascinating blend of ritual and entertainment, involving the performer as well as the spectators.

The cult of Teyyam has incorporated different forms of worship that had prevailed over the early societies. The cults of Mother Goddess, ancestor-worship and hero worship have been central to the teyyam ritual. Other primitive forms of religious practices like spirit-worship, tree-worship, animal-worship, and serpent worship are vital parts of this cult. Besides, Brahmanical religious concepts and mythologies have had a strong influence on it and various religious cults including Saktism, Vaishnavism and Saivism have infiltrated into the teyyam tradition. Several teyyam figures are now treated as the incarnations of Brahmanical gods and goddesses and the legends behind them have been modified to place them within the

Hindu religious pantheon. However, the forms of propitiation and dominant rituals are by and large archaic and primitive.⁶

Teyyam is performed by people belonging to scheduled castes like Vannan, Malayan, Pulayan, Velan, Mavilan, Vettuvan, Koppalan, Munnoottan and Anjoottan.⁷ Among them the Vannan community performs over 60 percent of teyyams. Among the various tribal communities of Kerala, the Karimpalans and Mavilans of Kannur and the Kalanadis of Wayanad are the only traditional teyyam dancers. They propitiate their ancestors through the *teyyam* cult. But Karimpalans are the only tribe who regard teyyam as the ritual medium to merge the souls of their departed kinsmen with the souls of their forefathers.

The Kooliyattam

Among the Karimpalans, the merging ceremony of the newly departed soul with the ancestors is known as *Kooliyattam* (literally meaning spirit dance). This is done on the day of *Adiyanthiram* or on the first anniversary of the death. There are three stages involved in this ritual such as *Thaypetta Koolikettu*, *Penakettu* and *Koolikettu*. The spirit of the newly dead before *Kooliyattam* is called *Pena* and afterwards it becomes an ancestor spirit and is called *Kooli*. The two functionaries of the ritual are the *Peruvannan* and the *Attiyan*. *Peruvannan* as the chief functionary decorates himself in *teyyam* costumes while the *Attiyan* serves as the oracle. Since the Karimpalans were matrilineal, in early days the expense of this ritual was met by the nephews of the dead.

On the day of the *Adiyanthiram* they prepare a rectangular berth, with bamboo sticks and a new cloth is spread over them, known as *Kundam*. Then a bottle of toddy is placed at the centre of the floor of the berth. The persons, who had performed the rite of *Ottalam Kamizhthal* during the burial, have to repeat it again and they after bath, carry porridge in a pot and go to the spot where the arrow/penakkol was stuck during the burial. They place the pot of porridge there and then circumambulate the arrow and the porridge-pots thrice chanting the words (*mozhi*): “if there is any ghost, come to the courtyard”. Afterwards one of them pulls out the arrow and moves towards the *Kundam*, circumambulates it thrice and wait for others to come. Meanwhile the relatives of the departed pour a little toddy in the bottle kept under the *Kundam*. Now the spirit enters the body of any one of the relatives of the dead causing him to faint. Fainting is the sign of spirit possession. Returnees from the grave circle the *kundam* three times, pour toddy in the bottle and remove the new cloth over the *kundam* with the arrow in their hand. A vegetarian feast is served to all and

toddy is distributed among all the elder male members. It is interesting to note that special pots of toddy are presented to the gravediggers for their service.

Stage 1: *Thaypetta Koolikettu*: It is also called *Nayattu Veeran Thaypetta Koolikettu*. The *Thaypetta Kooli* is the first great ancestor of each Karimpalan *tarawad*. He is popularly known as *Thaypetta Katri Ammon* or *Nayattukodi Veeran*. The two functionaries of the ritual are the *Peruvannan*⁸ and the *Attiyan*⁹. *Peruvannan* is the chief functionary who decorates his body with *teyyam* costumes such as red silk cloth with tinsel around his waist, silver anklets on his ankles, painted bangles on his hands, ornaments on his head, beard and moustache along with face painting and besmeared vermilion marks on the forehead and the chest. The *teyyam* sits on a *peetam*¹⁰ while the *Attiyan* stands beside carrying a bow and arrow in his hand. The *Karanavar* (uncle) of the newly departed person chants *mozhi*¹¹ three times and throws a handful of rice each time on the face of the *teyyam* and blesses him. Then *Attiyan* chants *thottam*¹²: *Vazhka daivame Polika Daivame* (Hail God, help us prosper) and hands over the bow and arrow to the *teyyam*. The *teyyam*, in possession, starts dancing and goes on chanting *mozhi*. First stage of the ritual comes to an end with the *teyyam* finishes dance and sits on a *peetam*.

Stage 2: *Penakettu*: While the *teyyam* takes rest on the *peetam*, arrangements are made for the next stage. Rice and coconut halves are kept in a brass vessel; a wick is lighted and placed on one of the coconut halves; two persons - one standing in front of the *teyyam* and the other at his back - carry a canopy made of new white cloth over his head. This is known as *thalappoli pidikkal*. Then *karanavar* addresses three times the newly dead with the *mozhi* “if the spirit is alive as shade or dragon-fly, come and help get possessed” and each time he throws a handful of rice on the *teyyam*. Then *Attiyan* chants the *thottam*: ‘Hail God, Help us Prosper’. At this stage one of the members of the *tarawad* faints, as if possessed by the spirit of the dead. The canopy is then removed and the *teyyam* dancer pours tender coconut water or toddy into the person’s mouth to wake him up.

Stage 3: *Koolikettu*: It is at this stage that the spirit of the newly departed joins with *Nayattukodi Veeran Thaypetta Katri Ammon*. While the *karanavar* finishes again addressing the spirit of the dead, the *Attiyan* circumambulates the *teyyam* three times and gets possessed. Then he hands over the bow and arrow to the *teyyam* and repeatedly request him to give him a place to dwell.¹³ At the end the *teyyam* chants a *mozhi* by which the *Pena* is converted into a *kooli* and it thereafter comes to be known as *marukutti*. Then he removes the decorations. This is followed by a feast served to all. Later the *marukutti* is installed in the room of

his/her house or in the *koolithara* or *koolikkottam* (abode of the ancestor) attached to the house of the *karanavar*. The moment they are installed, they are addressed as *dharmadaivam* (Righteous God) and they are deemed to look after the welfare of the *tarawad*.

Conclusion

The last rite of the Karimpalans is important for two reasons. Firstly it adds strength to the argument in favour of the theory of the transition from tribe to caste. Though the Karimpalans still retain considerable tribal elements in their religious and cultural practices, they have undergone a powerful process of sanskritization and have appropriated dominant Hindu traits. They still follow ancestor worship but have become the patrons of Hindu gods and temple worship. The same process could be noticed more or less in similar intensity among so many other tribes of Kerala. Secondly, it reaffirms the cultural association of Teyyam with ancestor-worship. Scholars who have studied about the origin of Teyyam have been considerably confused by the origin myths associated with many of the teyyam figures as having had a sanskritic ancestry (such as many teyyam deities are sons of Siva), but the appropriation of teyyam cult by the Karimpalans to articulate ancestor worship and the ritual role of those communities who are strong believers in ancestor cult as the sole performers in teyyam dance would reveal that it was among the ancestor-worshipping communities that teyyam had made its origin. Although many of the divine groves where teyyams are annually celebrated are under the control of the upper castes and the caste Hindus have a commanding role in conducting the teyyam festival, these would not undermine the subaltern ideology contained in the teyyam cult.

References

- [1]. For a discussion of the funeral customs see Effe Bendann, *Death Customs: An Analytical Study of Burial Rites*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Turner & Co. Ltd, London, 1930; Block & Perry eds., *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982; J.G. Frazer, *Fear of the Dead in Primitive Religion*, 3 Volumes, Macmillan & Co. Ltd, London, 1933-36; J.G. Frazer, *The Belief in Immortality and Worship of the Dead*, 3 Volumes, Macmillan, London, 1913-22; J. Goody, *Death, Property and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the Loddagaa of West Africa*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1962; Elizabeth Schombucher & Claus Peter Zoller, *Ways of Dying: Death and its Meaning in South Asia*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1999 and Arnold Toyenbee, Arthur Koestler, et. al., *Life after Death*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1976. My PhD thesis *Death, Funeral and the Ancestors: Cult of the Dead and the Malabar Tribes*, submitted to the University of Calicut in 2006, deals with the funeral customs and ancestor-worshipping ceremonies of the Malabar tribes in considerable detail.
- [2] Such as for example *famadihana* of the Marina of Madagascar and the Green Funeral of the Todas of the Nilgiris. For details see M. Block, *Placing the Dead*, Seminar Press, London, 1971; Antony R. Walker, *The Toda of South India: A New Look*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1986; W.H.R Rivers, *The Todas* Vol. I. Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1986; Deborah Sutton, "Horrid Sights and Customary Rights: the Toda Funeral on the Colonial Nilgiris", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39:1, 2002, pp.45-70

- [³] The data for the present study has been collected from my personal participation in a Kooliyattam ceremony performed at Mundayad on 24th March 2009.
- [⁴] We have similar functionaries among other tribal communities such as the *Karumi* for the Adiyans and the Mavilans and *Bijakkalan* for the Uralikurumans.
- [⁵] Balan Nambiar, “Tai Paradevata: Ritual Impersonation in the Teyyam Tradition of Kerala” in Heidrun Bruckner, Lothar Lutze and Aditya Malik ed., *Flags of Flame: Studies in South Asian Folk Culture*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1993, p.140. J.R. Freedman refused to accept teyyam as either a ‘folk art’ or as a ‘cult’ but rather defined it as a related set of religious beliefs and practices centered on the cultural proposition of divine possession. See J. Richard Freedman, “Performing Possession: Ritual and Consciousness in the Teyyam Complex of Northern Kerala” in *ibid*, p.112.
- [⁶] For details see K.K.N. Kurup, *Aryan and Dravidian Elements in Malabar Folklore*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, 1977, pp. 1-7.
- [⁷] S.R. Chandramohan, “Deification of Heroes/Heroines: Representation of Dalits in ‘theyya thottam’ Songs”, *Malayalam Literary Survey*, Kerala Sahitya Academy, Trissur, July-December 2009, p.130.
- [⁸] *Peruvannan* (means ‘Great Vannan’) is the title ordained to great and experienced *teyyam* dancers by dignitaries like the Chirakkal Raja or the great Nambutiri Brahmin family of Kurumathur.
- [⁹] *Attiiyan* is the ritual functionary among the Karimpalans who could mediate between the living and the dead. The spirits of the ancestors enter into the body of the *Attiiyan* to get him possessed and engage in a dialogue with his/her kin relatives through him. Karimpalans consult him during adverse situations like famines, crop-failures, regular occurrence of diseases, barrenness of women etc.
- [¹⁰] *Peetam* is a special kind of large sized stool used for providing the *teyyams* a ceremonial rest.
- [¹¹] This is the *mozhi*: “Hey the great ancestor, when the spirit of the newly dead is staged as *teyyam* to merge it with the group of ancestors, it is done in your name and in your person”. Cited in M. J. Jose, *Karimpalanmarude Nadodi Samskaram (The Folk Culture of the Karimpalans)*, PhD Dissertation, University of Calicut, 1994, p.299.
- [¹²] *Thottam* is the ritual songs that accompany *teyyam* performance. Different kinds of *teyyams* have different *thottam* songs which would explain the legend behind them.
- [¹³] “You made me a spirit; I want a place to settle down”.

