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Rituals Of Kani Tribe In Kanyakumari District Of Tamilnadu

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Abstract

Kani, the aboriginal tribes live in the Western Ghats falling in the districts of Kanyakumari and Thirunelveli. The tribal people live in the forests, mountains and caves of Tamil Nadu. One group of these people is the Kani tribe and called as 'Kani'. The people of 'Kani' live in the hills of districts of Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli in Tamilnadu. These people live in large numbers in the areas of Motihari hill, Kallar, Mudavan Potrai, Peccipparai in the Western Ghats of Kanyakumari district. The paper explores the rituals of Kani tribe dwelling at Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu.

Key words: Kani tribe, rituals, marriage ritual, death ritual, blessings.

Introduction

The major tribes in Tamil Nadu are Malayali, Toda, Kota, Kurumba, Paniya, Irula, Kattunayakka, Kani, Paliyan, Sholagar, Kadar and Vedar. Most of the tribal communities are small in size and the exceptions are Malayali and Irular tribes. Majority of the tribal population in Tamil Nadu live in hilly ranges viz., Eastern Ghats, Western Ghats and the discontinuous hill tracts adjoining the plains and the hills. Irular in Kancheepuram and Thiruvallur districts form an exception to this general trend and are found to live in the plain areas. In Tamilnadu Kani, the aboriginal tribes live in the Western Ghats falling in the districts of Kanyakumari and Thirunelveli. The Kani tribes speak Tamil and Malayam languages.

The tribal people live in the forests, mountains and caves of Tamil Nadu. One group of these people is the Kani tribes and called as 'Kani'. The people of 'Kani' live in the hills of districts of Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli in Tamilnadu. These people live in large numbers in the areas of Motihari hill, Kallar, Mudavan Potrai, Peccipparai in the Western Ghats of Kanyakumari district.

The Kani tribes, the land owners of dark complexion are four and a half to five feet tall, and their hair is very black and curly. The dwellings where the landowners live are called 'Kanikkara'. 'Kaani' means to watch over the lands. Therefore, they are also called as the owners of the land. They have been eating food obtained by hunting, greens, tubers (such as rice and sweet potato), rice, millet, etc. Now days, they have cultivated cassava, mango, coconut, cashew and vegetables on the land given to them by the Government and eat the food obtained from it along with the food purchased from the market besides the government providing rice. Earlier, Kani tribes used to catch fish in the fish ponds and eat it, but now they buy it from the market. One of the Kani tribes dwelling at the study area responded that Government has currently imposed a fine and imprisonment on the Kani people who try to eat the food by hunting. They have made their own hunting poles, slingshots and guns to hunt their animals used to prepare food.

Dwelling houses of Kani tribes are built with mud walls and coconut-thatched roofs. Kani people have smeared dung on the walls and floor, and they build their own houses with shovels. The women have tattoos on their hands and foreheads. Men wear a turban and dhoti, and women wear a 'mundu', a chest girdle, and a shirt. Nowadays, men (young people) wear pants and shirts, and women wear jackets

and sarees. Young people do not get tattoos. They speak a language that is a mixture of Malayalam and Tamil.

The leaders of Kani tribe in these districts are 'Muuttukkaani', 'Vilikaani' and 'Pilaatti'.

Muuttukkaani

The head of the Kani tribe is called 'Muuttukkaani'. Any ritual performed by the Kani tribe is informed to the 'Muuttukkaani' and the ritual is performed under the leadership of the 'Muuttukkaani'. Kani tribes who intend to travel to another place and those who start any work must first worship the 'Muuttukkaani'. They place both their hands on the head of the 'Muuttukkaani' and place it on their own head. This is the worship method of the Kani tribes.

Vilikaani

The 'Vilikaani' is the assistant of the joint farmer. 'Vili' means 'calling'. 'Vilikaani' means 'calling land'. The 'Vilikani' will do the work of gathering the Kani tribes in one place, informing the people of the 'Vilikaani's orders, and informing the news to the other Kani tribes' settlements.

Pilaatti

Each Kani tribes' settlement will have a 'Pilaatti'. A 'Pilaatti' is a magician accepted by the Kani tribes. Mantra is the clan profession of the Kani tribe. It is used in three stages to provide benefits in cultivation, hunting, and honey extraction, to provide protection in birth, flowering, and death, and to cause suffering to the enemy. The one who chants the mantra and manifests its power is the 'Pilaatti'. The 'Pilaatti' is considered as a magician and a doctor among the Kani tribe. During festivals, the god 'Pilaatti' dreams of the next 'Pilaatti' and chooses him as the next 'Pilaatti'. Once chosen, he gives up all his possessions and goes to the forest, recites the magic words taught by Pilaatti, fasts for forty-one days, becomes powerful, and aware of the properties of medicinal plants.

Rituals of Kani

The Kani tribes perform rituals based on their profession, and the offerings they offer to the god are called 'koṭuti'. The word 'koṭuti' referring to the items also became the name of the ceremony held in the tribal settlements. Among them, 'meenakoṭuti', 'koṭuti', kurukkanmaar koṭuti', and special 'koṭuti' are important events among the Kani tribes.

Meenakoṭuti

When the people of Kani tribes want to cultivate in the forest, they have to destroy the forest and cultivate the land. They believe that destroying the forest is a sin, so they offer offerings to the forest deities, which is called 'meenakoṭuti'. This 'koṭuti' is performed in the months of February and March (Aravanan:1992).

On the day of the 'koṭuti', early in the morning, the 'Pilaatti', 'Muuttukkaani' and six others go to the place chosen for planting and perform Sunday prayers. Then the Pilaatti offers food cooked on three banana leaves, coconut, fruit, and bichipoo, etc., facing east. This is called 'paṭaiyal'. The seeds placed in the leaves of the kuuva plant are considered offerings to Shiva, Satan, Ayiravalli, Madan, and Muthanmar. Before doing offerings, a pit is dug and a fire is lit in it and worshipped. This act is called 'kuḷiru piṭittal'. This means an act of asking for forgiveness. Finally, after purifying all the cutting knives they have in the fire, they will confirm who will use which land. For this, the Pilaatti will take some seed and give it to the other six people. The seven will count the seed they have and if it is an even number, they will use the land they have confirmed for themselves. If not, they will choose another place and use it for cultivation. No dancing or singing will take place during this ceremony. They will perform it peacefully due to the sacrifice that is given to forgive the sin they are about to destroying the forest.

Puu koṭuti

Of all the offerings, the ‘puu koṭuti’ offering is the most grand function among the Kani tribes. When they harvest, they celebrate the joy with a festival. This offering is held in the months of September or October. On the day of the ‘koṭuti’, early in the morning, everyone in the household goes to the muuṭṭukkaani’s house with their families and offers Sunday prayers. Then, a small pavilion is built next to the harvested land and things like aval, fruits, coconuts are placed there. The youths who come after bathing there, grind half of the seven paddy into rice flour and the rest into aval. The ‘pilaatti’ starts performing the puja. Then, the ‘muuṭṭukkaani’ and the other three start singing the ‘paṭayal’ song with music. The musical instrument ‘kokkare’ is used to play the music. They are reverent when playing this instrument. The song sung here is to praise the goddess of the land wherein Kani tribes live and to give abundant crops that grow in the land without diminishing.

The peak of this ‘koṭutti’ is at noon. At that time, everyone will raise the sound of the crow and cheer to show the greatness of the goddess. At that time, some of the Kani tribes will dance after receiving grace from ‘muuṭṭukkaani’. This is called ‘veliccapaṭu’. It is worth noting here that the dance performed during festivals in the Kanyakumari district is called God dance and the blessings are recited. In this way, the dance that takes place for about an hour to fulfill the blessing given to the person who is standing there, at the end of the dance, the aval, fruit, and coconut that have been prepared are distributed to everyone. With this, this ‘Koṭuti’ ritual ends.

Kurukkanmaar koṭuti

Kani tribes who go for hunting give ‘kurukkanmaar koṭuti’. They worship the goddesses called ‘kaatramaakkal’ to ensure that they return from hunting without any trouble on the way. For this, they finish their Sunday worship early in the morning and go into the dense forest to perform puja. After completing the worship, they dig a two-foot square hole, light a fire in it, place their weapons in front of it and worship. Then, the Pilaatti recites the mantra and hands over the weapons to each person. This ritual is called ‘flowering the cellaappillai’.

Special koṭuti

Another offering that is celebrated by all the Kani tribes and is still practiced among the Kani tribes. When the land dries up due to lack of rain, or people suffer from a serious disease, or the troubles occur within their territory, everyone gathers and offers special offerings to the gods ‘Tampuraan’ and ‘Satan’ in order to remove them.

First, the ‘Pilaatti’ and the ‘Muuṭṭukkaani’ from various places gather together and make the necessary arrangements for the offering. For this, an eight-legged pavilion is made of coconut leaves and decorated with young coconut leaves, banana branches, and kamugam flowers. A hut is built on the western side of the pavilion facing east and all the clothes and weapons belonging to the deity are placed there. In the middle of the pavilion, a pile of kamugam flowers is kept two feet high. A banana is placed in front of the Pilaatti’s hut. He would offer rice, watercress, kelp, betel leaves, fruits, and ciccipoo to the gods ‘Satan’, ‘Airavalli’, ‘Mallan Tambuuraan’, ‘Maatan’, ‘Maatapperumal’, ‘Villiraasa’ and ‘Muttanmaar’. Then, the three others would sing the ‘Saarruppaatṭu’, ‘Maatapperumal Paatṭu’ and ‘Villiraasa Katai’ one by one. At about twelve o'clock in the afternoon, three crackers would be burst to show off their power. There would be a great commotion in the crowd. Then, the blessed ‘Pilaatti’ would come out of the hut with his hair hanging down and foaming at his mouth, looking terrifying. At two o'clock in the evening, he would pile firewood three feet high and light it on fire. After it had burned for two hours, ‘Pilaatti’ would stand on it and dance. After dancing for a quarter of an hour, he would try to pour the pile of flowers there on himself and offer his blessings. Then he will call each of the Kani tribes standing there by a different name, and then the Kani tribe will be called by that new name.

At the end of the sacrifice, the butcher will cut off the head of a rooster and give it to ‘Pilaatti’. He will put the cut part in his mouth and suck the blood. While sucking and drinking, he will stumble and fall down. Immediately, realizing that the sacrifice has been rewarded, everyone will cheer and cheer. When the sacrifice is over, they will distribute all the things created there to everyone.

The rituals practiced by the people of Kani tribes can also be classified into i) Mantra rituals, ii) Marriage rituals and iii) Death rituals.

The ritual performed by the priests of the land, in which they fast for seven days, chant mantras, light a lamp, burn incense, and worship the deity, is a 'mantra ritual'. The people of the land have a habit of following this ritual when they fall ill, when women are possessed by demons, or when evil happens. The priest who performs this ritual is called a 'muuttukkaani'. He is also the head of the Panchayat of the particular Kani settlement.

Mantra ritual performed for a girl possessed by a demon

Playing the musical instrument 'kokkarai', Kani people sing 'kokkarai song' or 'chatru song' in their language. The possessed girl after blessed by the head of the Kani tribes 'muuttukkaani' is made to sit in front of the magician 'Pilaatti' accepted by the Kani tribes. The 'Pilaatti' holds her hand and asks what the illness is, then a banana leaf is placed in front of the girl. Pooja items like corn flakes, flowers and coins are offered on it. After fasting for seven days and receiving the boon, the 'Pilaatti' performs this ritual. It is customary for only women to be possessed by demons. Little girls who have not reached puberty (not undergoing the ritual) or old women are not possessed by demons. On the contrary, the Kani tribe informant mentioned that only young virgins are possessed by demons.

Marriage ritual

The rituals observed during marriage are marriage ceremonies. Generally, the marriage of the landowners is arranged as a love marriage. The uncle is the main person and conducts the marriage. The bride does not have to be given any dowry. Only a new piece of cloth is given by the parents. The groom wears a turban, a kerchief around his neck and a mundum around his waist. The wedding is considered to have taken place when the cloth given by the groom is tied around his waist. A feast of rice and rice cakes should be given to the guests who come to attend marriage. At present times, it is customary to wear a gold plate on a yellow rope.

In those days, weddings were held in a 5-foot-high wedding hall made of earth, waxed with dung and dried. Nowadays, wedding halls are built and weddings are held according to financial means. The bride is married by old grandmothers. They sing a song of welcome. It is customary for the groom to give the bride produce, clothes, hunting equipment, etc. as dowry. After the wedding, the bride is taken to the groom's house, and then the bride is guarded by her brother-in-law and mother-in-law (maini) for 7 days. After seven days, they offer 'Pongal' to their deity. After offering 'Pongal' and worshipping the deity, the husband and brother-in-law, along with the maini (sister-in-law), bathe the bride in the river and dress her in new clothes before allowing the bride and groom to celebrate their first night.

On the wedding day, in order to punish the groom for all the mistakes he made in his youth, the panchayats gather and make the groom bend over and carry a round rock weighing 4 to 5 kg on his back. He is made to carry this until the time specified by his maternal uncle. The time for carrying the load is decided by the panchayats (muuttukkaani). In the Panchayat where men and women gather, it is customary for the village headman, the 'muuttukkaani', to lift a stone on the bride. The punishment of carrying a load can be imposed on the bridegroom by his maternal uncle or any of his siblings. If any faults or crimes occur during the marriage, the verdict given by the 'muuttukkaani' must be accepted.

Death ritual

The Kani tribes observe death rituals whenever someone in the Kani tribal community dies. They have the custom of announcing the news of death with the help of a musical instrument made of 'iguana skin' and using instruments such as a bronze drum. The musical instrument is played to inform their fellow villagers living in their villages and other mountain ranges. Although they are fighters, they have the good habit of participating as soon as they know the news of death. They usually sing and dance during the death ritual. They have the custom of digging a pit (kunda) to bury those under the age of 40 and burning those over the age of 40. This ritual is also performed under the leadership of the 'muuttukkaani'.

Conclusion

Religious rituals are considered very important in the lives of Kani tribes. Since Kani tribes live mostly in forests and mountains, they do activities such as farming, hunting, collecting honey and making fire. They give sacrifices to prevent harm while doing work. There is a special feature in each sacrifice. All the Kani tribes do this sacrifice together and they live in great unity.

The Kani tribal people living in the mountains have reached various stages of development today with education and the help of the government. Due to this, their diet and practical habits have changed now. When looking at the rituals of the people of Kani tribes in the district of Kanyakumari, one can clearly understand their culture and customs, and see the practice of the village headman named 'muuttukkaani' leading and guiding all the activities by the Kani tribal people. The people's faith in God and the belief that seeking God will bring good results are also evident from this study.

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