

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CULTURE OF MUDUGA TRIBES

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ABSTRACT:

The exact number of distinct tribal groups living in Kerala has not been explicitly stated by anthropologists. The social changes have brought about changes in the speech of some tribal groups of Kerala. Still, majority of the tribals possess their original speech varieties, along with the Malayalam dialects which serve as a vehicle of communication with outsiders. Muduga tribes are the small group of people. The paper describes the Muduga's Characteristics, Population, Type of hamlets, House hold articles and their traditional occasions etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mudugas are a small tribe with a small population of people inhabiting main the Attapady area of Palakkad district in North Kerala, bordering the Coimbatore district of Tamilnadu. They are also spread in a few hamlets like adivaram, Kalkothi, Kozhikoodam, Savakadu and Thanikandi in the border areas of Tamilnadu. Mudugas live in the remote forest settlements of the Attapady tribal area. They inhabit mostly the forest areas of south-western foot hills and in the southern part of the Attapady valley distributed in about 21 hamlets. The Muduga hamlets called ooru is a cluster of huts varying between 10 to 30 huts. They do not mind living within a short distance from Kurumbas and Irulas, but they always prefer to be as far away as possible from the civilized people of the plains. The Mudugas settlements are found in forest areas near the river Bhavani which gives them drinking water.

The purpose of their immigration was an ambitious plan to extensive agricultural activities in the fertile virgin soil of Attapady forests. The history of their immigration dates back to 15th Century or even prior to that.

II. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

As a tribe Mudugas are shy and do not like the company of the non- tribal people in the plains. They like to have as little contact as possible with the outside world and do not like going to the adjacent town for getting their requirements.

Mudugas consider themselves as superior to the other tribes. The Mudugas are very superstitious. If any unnatural death takes place they attribute it to evil forces. They believe in good and bad omens. They have their own auspicious days and time. Mondays are considered to be the good days for ceremonial functions.

The women of this community are industrious and they work as laborers in the field, collect tubers and other forest produces, weave mat and baskets. Mudugas receive the guest who visit their settlement and extend whatever help they can. They invite the non-tribal people of that locality known to them for their festivals and ceremonies. They help each other in agricultural operations, hunting, fishing etc.

III. POPULATION AND SETTLEMENTS

Numerically Mudugas are the second largest tribal community in the Attapady area. There are 18 Muduga hamlets in Attapady.

IV. HAMLET AND HOUSE

The Mudugas live in clusters with 12 or so house-holds in each settlement. The Muduga hamlets are referred to as uuru and the huts as kuure. The small squatter huts are low ceilinged with the ceilings not exceeding five feet from the floor level. It is believed that the huts supported by bamboo splinters and thatched with forest grass have small doors and low ceilings, they being so designed as to withstand the onslaught of adverse climatic conditions and strong winds. The floors are plastered with cowdung, clay and soil. These huts ordinarily contain two small rooms, the backroom is being used as kitchen and the front room is for the storage of agricultural products and as the place of worship of the household deities. Besides, there are also an adjoining verandah in the front of each hut, referred to by them as dinne.

Besides these huts, there are houses provided by the Government which consist of a long hall separated into several apartments by brick walls. The apartments are brick buildings with tile roofs.

V. HOUSEHOLD ARTICLES

The huts are very sparsely furnished by only mats made of grass and bamboo splinters. Mats are spread out to sleep and offered for the guests to sit. The pounding of paddy to rice and other grains are usually facilitated by means of wooden mortars and pestles often situated outside the huts and each hamlet possesses only a pair of these. The earthenwares are used for cooking and serving and seldom are copper and aluminium vessels, made use of. The hamlets are situated along the banks of the Bhavani River. The river sustains these tribesmen and the water drawn from this river is carried by pitchers made of clay, brass and copper. A chimney lamp of earthenware lights the darkness. Besides each hut possesses baskets and wickers of different size made of bamboo, cane etc. While these

tribesmen are quite dexterous in producing household utensils from bamboo and canes they depend on the markets for the earthenware.

VI. DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

The apparel of the men are sober and consists only of a handloom towel round the waist reaching up to the knee and the upper portion of the body is wrapped in a dhoti slung from the shoulders. Men are also seen wearing banyans and rarely are shirts used.

The women's apparel consists of a brightly colored strip of cloth five feet long and four feet wide referred by them as ceela. The ceela wraps this tribal women folk from the upper part of the breast to the knee. While indoors the upper portion of their body is exposed and the ceela is tied around the waist, but, while outdoors the top portion of their body is not exposed.

Women wear ornaments made of silver such as kammal and other aluminium ornaments like vala (bangles), kaikallu (beaded bangles) and necklaces made of black beads. Nowadays every women wear a small nose ring made of gold. Most of the women do tattooing on their forehead, hands, legs and chest.

While women wear their hair long, men cut their hair frequently. Women's hair-do is very simple, they roll the hair and is kept in a bunch behind their head.

VII. TRIBAL HIERARCHY

Each Muduga hamlet is presided over by a headman. The hamlets of Mudugas are reserved exclusively for themselves. The headman is assisted in his administrative responsibilities by three men. The headman is kept informed of all the happenings in the settlements. All the ceremonies are presided over by the headman, these include deaths, marriages, births etc. The permission for hunting by the tribesmen have to be sought and is granted by the headman. A portion of the game is the prerogative of the headman. He is the arbitrator of all disputes arising in the village and is vested with the authority to punish the accused. The accused in the disputes are fined a penalty of not less than five rupees. The penalty due is apportioned among the headman and his assistants.

VIII. AGRICULTURE

The Mudugas had rights to private plots of land. Their principle agricultural products are chama, ragi, paddy, redgram, blackgram, horsegram, cotton, groundnut, ginger, sweet potato etc.

The initiation of the sowing operation is done very solemnly with no onlookers or tribesmen in the near vicinity. Four days after the sowing initiation ceremony, the farming operation starts with accompaniment of music and songs, closely watched and guided by the headman and his assistants. Agriculture is characterized by labor sharing without the attendant crop share; the proceeds of the

harvest remaining the absolute property of the owners. Due to his good offices and services that rich harvests are reaped.

IX. OCCUPATION

Besides working in their own fields their labour services are eagerly sought after to work in the fields of non-tribals. Thee principle forest products are honey, cardamom, tuber etc. Domestication of animals are also quite common among these people. The community's cattle, goats, fowls etc are reared and led into the pasture by female children of the community. Generally they do not consume either egg or milk which find their way into the local market.

X. HUNTING

Permission of the headman is required before hunting is undertaken. Hunting which starts in the evening is carried through the night till morning is conducted in a group. Their game consists of pork, deer, civet cat, wild fowl, jackals and bears. While bows and arrows are not used, the killing of game is facilitated by the use of spear, cleavers and guns which a few of the tribesmen possess. Aid of hunting dogs are not sought. The consumption of the flesh of the bear is a taboo, hence it is dried and sold in the local markets.

XI. FOOD AND DRINKS

Rice is very dear to them even though they consume it very sparingly. Their staple food consists of tubers consumed either raw or cooked. Next to the tubers ragi and wheat occupy the important places in their diet which is boiled in stream and converted into a paste like diet.

Before going to work in the morning, they break their night long fast only either black tea or coffee sweetened by jaggery. The noon meals consists of tapioca and rice gruel which is either provided by their employers and if not procured from the nearby tea shops. Supper constitutes the most important meal for them and it is cooked and served in their own huts. The supper consists of ragi or wheat boiled in water with pepper and salt added to it. The meat of the hunt and fish angled from the stream also form part of the supper.

XII. DISEASES AND TREATMENTS

Medicines are administered by the sorcerer. Resort to sorcery is done, in the event indigenous medicines out of herbs fail to secure a cure. Emulets or talisman is tied around either the waist, wrist or around the neck on those suffering from serious maladies. No treatment is applied on those suffering from smallpox.

XIII. MUSIC, DANCE, SPORTS AND GAMES

The folksongs of these tribals may be broadly divided into two categories. They are those which are sung mostly while at work. These are rendered by women only. Songs are rendered and

dances are performed during the leisure of the night. During this time there are songs and dances set apart for women, men and children. Children dance to the tune of the music forming a circle with their hands entwined. The sowing and funeral ceremonies are also accompanied by songs with musical instruments.

XIV. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS AND CEREMONIES

a) Pregnancy and Child Birth:

Before completing three months of the first pregnancy of a girl the news should be reported to the headman by her father-in-law and later the headman informed this to her parents. On an auspicious Monday of the third month the girl's parents visit her and give sweets and on the next morning they take her to their hut. Her husband and his parents also accompany her. The girl's parents have to arrange a feast for the visitors and after the feast the girl with her husband and his parents return to their hut. The birth of a child in a family especially the first delivery of a girl, is usually an occasion for rejoicing.

b) Puberty and menses

When a girl attains puberty her father has to report this news to the headmen and the headman informs this to her relatives and other members of the settlement. During these days her pubescent friends will be attending or nursing her and it is their duty to enjoy her by singing songs or saying jokes. No male member is allowed to see her. On the 8th day there will be certain ceremonies and a feast in the girl's hut in which all the members of the settlements. The expenses of the feast is met either by girl's parents or by the members of the settlements.

c) Marriage

As the first step the parents of the bridegroom will find out a girl and later they will inform this to their son. If the son is willing they will report this to the headman and request for his consent. On a Monday a group consisting of six people will go to the girl's hut. After receiving the guests the girl's father enquires the purpose of their visit. They will reply that they visit there for a girl and then the girl will be brought before them and they will ask her whether she likes the proposed marriage or not. If she is willing the bridegroom's father hands over the tobacco, arecanut, betelnut. After having a feast from the girl's hut all of them return to their own huts.

On the next day a group of six people from the bride's side visit the bridegroom's hut to see the bridegroom and fix the marriage. The day and time of the marriage will be fixed in the presence of the headman. Usually marriages are conducted at the bridegroom's residence on a Monday morning.

d) Death

Any death is considered to be the concern of the entire settlement and full honours are given to the departed soul by beating drum and playing pipes. All members of the settlement including the headman should have to attend the death ceremonies. All the ceremonial functions connected with the death are done on the overall supervision of the headman. The members in the hut observe pollution for 40 days. The pollution is dissipated by giving a feast to the members who took part in the death ceremonies. Generally, Mudugas do not have any other ceremonies in which the dead are remembered.

XV. CONCLUSION

Above these concepts are the brief explanations of the Muduga's culture and functions. Though marriage and birth are not often marked by major ceremonies among the Mudugas death is often an occasion for elaborate ceremony. The Muduga religion is based on ancestral belief and worship with the elements of rituals and ceremonies. It is the ancestors whose benevolence and protection they invoke by regular offerings.

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