Megalithism and Tribal Ritualism: A Passage through the Kurumbas of Attappadi

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Received December 31st, 2012; revised February 10th, 2013; accepted February 22nd, 2013

The study of mortuary practices of Megalithic communities and its use as the basis for reconstructing the past society is unique in archaeology because it represents the direct and purposeful culmination of conscious behavior of the followers of this cultural trait. There are voluminous studies on the Megalithic builders of South India, including Kerala, written by prominent archaeologists and anthropologists from the early decades of the nineteenth century. Most of them ignored the continuity of Megalithic tradition, except a scant reference to the erection of funeral edifices among tribes like the Kurumbas and Mudugas of Attappadi and Malabarans of the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala. A study of the living Megalithic practices provides clues to ethnographic parallels, existing belief systems and habitation sites of the present communities. The present study discusses the cultural aspects of the rituals related to living Megalithic tradition among the Attappadi tribes, of the Palakkad district of Kerala. The study of the mortuary practices of the Kurumbas raises two important questions—firstly, how far this tribe can be seen as the actual successor of Megalithic builders of Kerala and, secondly, how does the social differentiation within the Kurumba community get reflected in its mortuary practices, just like among the Megalithic builders?

Kerala, situated on the South-Western Coast of India, preserves the heritage of a rich Megalithic culture in the form of a wide variety of burial monuments and of a survival of Megalithic cult among the various tribal communities who inhabit on the slopes of the western ghat, which still provides a pristine habitat for more than 36 varieties of tribal communities. Among these, Kurumbas have a close affinity with Megalithic communities because they erected funeral memorials only after the performance of an elaborate secondary burial. The Kurumbas, the most archaic among the 3 tribes of Attappadi (the other two being Irukas and Mudugas), lives in the dense forest adjoining the Silent Valley of Palghat district of Kerala, which is a part of the Nilgiri biosphere. There are two divisions among the Kurumbas-Palu-Kurumbas and Alu-Kurumbas. Alu-Kurumbas are concentrated in South-Western, Southern, South-Eastern and Eastern slopes of the Western ghat, and in the upper elevations of the Nilgiris. The Kurumbas of Attappadi are Palu-Kurumbas and they are concentrated in the lower elevations of the ghat. Both these groups are shifting cultivators and they used to live in separate hamlets. Each hamlet is a closely knit kin group with nuclear families. These tribal communities have an unfailing faith in animism and ancestor-spirits (Tylor, 1871: p. 424) which determined the nature of their mortuary practices, though slight changes existed between the two due a difference in the physical environment. There are 14 Palu-Kurumba hamlets scattered in different parts of south-western Attappadi. Among these Thodikki hamlet is the most prominent and has a com-

Introduction

The present study deals with the existence of Megalithic1 traits as a living tradition among the Kurumba tribe of Attappadi. The study of mortuary practices of Megalithic community and its use as a basis for reconstructing the past society is unique in archaeology because it represents the direct and purposeful culmination of conscious behavior of the followers of this cultural trait. There are several studies on the Megalithic traits of tribal communities in India (Hutton, 1992: pp. 242-249; Mawlong, 1990: pp. 9-14; Grigson, 1932; Bondo, 1950) but barring a few, most of the studies on the tribes of Kerala ignored the continuity of Megalithic tradition among tribes like the Kurumbas and Mudugas of Attappadi and Malabarans of the Thiruvananthapuram district. A study of such living Megalithic practices provides clues to ethnographic parallels, existing belief systems and habitation sites of the present communities. The present study discusses the cultural aspects of the rituals related to living Megalithic tradition in Attappadi, the Palghat district of Kerala. A study of the mortuary practices of the Kurumbas raises two important questions—firstly, how far this tribe can be seen as the actual successor of Megalithic builders of Kerala and, secondly, how does the social differentiation within the Kurumba community get reflected in its mortuary practices,

1The word Megalith is derived from two words, Mega means big and Lith means stone. It is a custom of erecting huge funeral edifices over the relics of the dead. Along with the corpse all the belongings of the deceased are also deposited.
manding position regarding funeral ritual related to all the ham-
lets. From the archaeological point of view Todikki acquires a
predominant position because it is from here that reports about
the Kurumba tradition of erecting dolmen-like Megaliths came
first.

**Historiography**

Historical writings on the living tradition of Megalithic prac-
tice in Kerala are very few. Most of the studies are concentrated
on the typology of monuments, their individual and common
features, comparison with those of other parts of India and the
world, and the belief systems associated with Megalithism. The
first notable effort in this direction was made by L. A. Krishna
Iyer, who studied extensively the Megalithic culture of the
whole region of Kerala. He noticed, for the first time, the simi-
arity between the ancestor worship of the Megalithic people
and the tribal practices. In his two important works, *The Pre-
historic Archaeology of Kerala* (Iyer, 1948) and *Kerala Mega-
liths and their Builders* (Iyer, 1967) as well as in his article *The
Disposal of the Dead among the Primitive Tribes of Travancore*
(Iyer, 1939: pp. 61-62), he pointed out that certain Travancore
tribes like the Mala-Arayans erected dolmens over their graves
like the Megalithic people. In his famous work, *Travancore Tribes and Castes* in 3 Volumes, he studied the burial customs
of various tribes of Travancore and found that burial was the
common mode of disposal of the dead and they deposited grave
goods along with the corpse.

In his *Early Man in Wynad* (John, 1975: pp. 125-131) and
J. John studied the survival of Megalithic culture among the
lower caste Hindus and tribal communities of Malabar. He
pointed out that majority of the tribes who live on the Western
Ghats practice a burial custom which is very close to Mega-
lithism of the ancient days. He argued that the cult of Muthap-
pan and *teyyam* ritual dance is a cultural relic of the tribal tradi-
tion of ancestor worship.

Dieter B. Kapp in his remarkable article, “The Kurumbas’
Relationship to the ‘Megalithic’ Cult of Nilgiri Hills (South
India)” (Kapp, 1985: pp. 493-534) examined the past and pre-
sent relationship of the Nilgiri Kurumbas towards megalithism.
The most significant features of this article is that it presented
the erection of dolmens, stone circles and various other lhetic
remains as a pointer to the cult of megalithism as a living tradi-
tion among them even today.

**Megalithic Traits in Kurumba Burial Practices**

**Disposal of the Dead**

“The onset of death is universally the subject of ritual, and
there is not a single human society that simply throws the body
out as a mass of decaying protoplasm” (Murphy, 1989: p. 211).
And, for the Kurumbas, rituals are very elaborate, complex and
weird. Their mortuary practices had three phases-pre-burial,
burial and post-burial or secondary burial. According to Alek-
shin, the most important component of burial practice is ritual-
the activities sanctioned by tradition that occur before, during,
and after the burial and are considered essential to the transfer
to the other world of deceased members of the community, both
those forming its nucleus and others related by blood (Alekshin,
1987: pp. 137-138). Most important pre-burial ceremonies are
announcement of death, purification ceremonies, funeral dance
etc. Interment and mourning are the most common ceremonies
of the second phase. Through interment the corpse is put inside
the pit dug in the ground and the grave is filled, after inhuming
the body inside it, with earth. Their graveyard, which is located
away from the settlement in the forest, is known as *Chodalai*
and graves are dug by expert gravediggers from the tribe. The
grave is 6-feet deep and has a side cavity called *Allekkuzhi*,
where the body of the deceased is placed and well protected
with bamboo mats.

**Grave-Goods**

The corpse will be interred with a variety of goods including
the personal possessions of two varieties—one domestic posses-
sions of the deceased person like different kinds of food mate-
rials and water, clothes, ornaments, pottery, money, a cane basket
known as *tekku* which contains different varieties of grains
and second varieties are implements like knife, hoe, axe, spade,
sickle, digging stick etc. Grains such as rice, millet, ragi, kora,
thuvara, etc. also are mainly interred. Money is the token for
the ferry charge to cross the river in the land of the dead for the
spirit. After interment Kurumbas used to fix a stone as a burial
mark at the head. All these grave goods gives us important his-
torical clues like the type of their economy, type of metals used
by them, their dietary pattern, anthropological data, belief in
life after death etc.

**Social Differentiation**

It has been suggested that the social position of the departed
is one of the important elements of the burial practices. It con-
ists of the collection of material elements—the burial structure,
the assemblage of grave goods, and the position of the deceased-
required for a person of a particular age and sex to be trans-
ported to the other world (Alekshin, 1987: pp. 137-138). This
social differentiation is reflected in mortuary ceremonies and
clearly in the deposition of grave goods. The burials of infants
are devoid of grave goods. On the basis of productive activities
grave goods of men and women vary. Being an agricultural and
hunting community, the Kurumba men are engaged in hunting
and fishing and in various agricultural activities like ploughing
while the women are involved in reaping, making baskets for
keeping grubs and digging tubers. Hence the most prominent
grave goods deposited in men’s graves are hoe, fish hooks, ar-
rows, axe etc. whereas those in the graves of women are sickle,
digging stick, needle and cane basket. Besides, a Kurumba
woman is buried along with her precious and semi-precious
ornaments. Thus their burial deposits appear to be richer than
those of men.

**Secondary Funeral and Erection of Memorial**

The secondary burial ceremony of the Kurumbas is popularly
known as *Cheera* (Poyil, 2009: pp. 31-38) which is protracted
and very elaborate. Through this ceremony Kurumbas make
necessary arrangements for the spirit’s journey to the land of
the dead. The Kurumbas called their spirit *Nikal* or shadow.
The ceremonies connected with *cheera* are spread over four
days. This post-burial ceremony is conducted after the death of
101 members in a settlement; hence it took 10 to 20 years or
more between two *cheerus*. This long interval between two
cheerus is also caused by the huge expenditure incurred in celebrating this event. The prime ceremony is the collection of specific bones, i.e., clavicle, of the dead from the graveyard. The clavicle of the person who had died first after the last cheerus is collected first. A decorated funeral car known as gudikettu is constructed with a sacred chamber called gubbe at the bottom. The collected bones are kept inside the gubbe till the end of cheerus. The funeral rites are accompanied by funeral song, dance and music, feast and blood sacrifice.

At the end of the cheerus bones are taken to a sacred place known as nikatumalai or shadow-land, situated in the forest away from each Kurumba settlement, where the remains of the forefathers are kept. Then the bones are put inside a dolmen-like structure known among Kurumbas as malikai or matinati. A fitting farewell to the spirits is indispensable because the soul or nikal remains alive after death and it hovers around the hamlet to cause harm to the members of the entire hamlet. Hence it is essential to provide a permanent abode for the spirits.

**Conclusion**

Burial practices are significant archaeological sources for the analysis of past and present human societies. Thus knowledge of the living Megalithic tradition is helpful in unfolding the past history of early Iron Age communities. It would also enable us to trace out the antiquity of those communities who follow megalithism presently. In order to extract this information, tribal burials have to be excavated carefully and all the grave-goods accurately recorded so that a comparative investigation with tribal funerary ceremonies would be possible.

**REFERENCES**


