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Magic, Cure, And Ancestors: An Ethno- Historical Investigation in North Malabar

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Abstract

Magic, Cure, and Ancestors: A Historical Investigation in North Malabar examines how forefathers' traditional healing practices cure diseases and improve both mental and physical health conditions of the ethnic folk of North Malabar. The study examines how charm, traditional curing practices, and ancestors served as a harmonizing system of knowledge and balance within ethnic communities. Sources for ethnic magical practices found in the ethnic folk memory, ritual rites, ethnic art, and oral traditions are not simply expressions or fantasies but part and parcel of the comprehensible traditional rationality deep-rooted in the ways of their ancestors and their eco-friendly lifestyle. The paper highlights the role of traditional healing practitioners, ritual functionaries, and ancestors in keeping this tradition a long-lasting one. The study pays attention to a profound understanding of the ethnic intangible heritage and the challenges it faces due to acculturation and fast changing society.

Keywords: Magic, Cure, Ancestors, Medicine Man, North Malabar, Ethnic Folk.

Introduction

Magic and cure are essential components of ethnic ancestor worship, as well as integral parts of traditional beliefs and ethnic religions. The custodians of these two prominent ethnic healing practices are ancestors. Ancestors are one of the important parts of animism or nature worship. A notable aspect of ancestor worship is that the ancestor maintains harmonious relations with their kinsfolk. The deceased descendants are venerated as gods today and are hailed and respected as the guardians of each kinfolk. The founding fathers watched over their kinfolk, held their power by assisting friends and destroying enemies, and still rewarded the right and sharply punished the wrongⁱ. After death, each person belonging to any ethnic community became two types of spirits, either malevolent or benevolent, according to their deeds on earth, the nature of death, etc.

Spirit of Ancestors

The spirits of those who face normal death done virtuous deeds for kinfolks are known as munificent and kinfolk whose deaths happened due to abnormal ways and are always dangerous to his/her kin and kin are called malicious. The munificent is venerated through hand-outs and invocations, while the malicious are exorcized with the support of the munificent, prophesies, Great Ancestors (founding fathers), and Clan deities. Each Ethnic folk has their own munificent or malicious actions of evil spirits distress his/her kinfolks only. The ferocious action of a malicious spirit belonging to one indigenous folk upon another indigenous folk on other

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indigenous kin folk is unique, and such a situation arose when a deceitful wizard misused them.

Munificent Spirits and Kinfolks

The munificent spirits are celebrated, utilized, and invoked by the ethnic folks in various ceremonial occasions like agriculture and hunting activities, birth, puberty functions, marriage, festivals, death, and unhealthy conditions like the times of occurring diseases, psychic problems, disasters, etc. Elizabeth Ramirez's discussion regarding the intrinsic worth of ancestors is relevant in this context. The existing descendants occasionally go to the spirit houses to appeal to the well-being and fertility of the ancestors and organize soothing rituals, often nourishment offerings, and merry-making. She said that kinfolk trust that they depend on the dead for life span, fruitfulness, and fortuneⁱⁱ. Ethnic communitiesⁱⁱⁱ of North Malabar accepted, respected, and celebrated the spirits of founding fathers/mothers or great ancestors who were dexterous, robust, audacious, compassionate, and modest, and are venerated as gods. The spirits of common kinfolk are admired as guardians of the hamlet, and every aspect of the hamlet dwellers, but the great ancestor has a primary position in ethnic everyday life. J.G. Frazer observed that on the death of a distinguished man, his ghost retains the powers that belonged to him in life, in greater activity and with stronger force; his ghost, therefore, is powerful, and so long as he is remembered, the aid of his powers is sought and worship is offered to him^{iv}. There is no graphic imagery for these ancestors, but their manifestation is spotted through some physical properties owned by the ancestors kept in a special chamber dedicated to them, a sacred building dedicated to his/her name, and a sacred place located under holy trees within the hamlets. The sacred places are known by various names like *bhūstāsthān*^v, *Kūlikkōṭṭam*^{vi}, *nikalmuṟi*^{vii}, *pēnathara*, *deivapura*,^{viii} etc.

Concept of Medicine Man /Medicine Women, Herbal Lore and Magico-Religious Therapy

In every ethnic hamlet, there is a traditional medical practitioner called a medicine man/medicine woman, and she/he is aware of the rich herbal medical lore. This knowledge is passed from generation to generation. Most of the diseases are cured with the help of herbal medicine, and some mental problems like psychic disorders, incurable diseases, regularly occurring diseases, etc., are cured through magical spells and prophecies. Ethnic folk have a rich heritage of herbal medicine, and they make use of it along with sorcery for medical treatment. Studies have revealed that they have used mainly wild medicinal plants for treatment. Each hamlet has a hereditary specialist medicine-man called a *vaithyakkaran* who is an expert in handling medicinal plants and using them for healing diseases. Generally, the herbal lore passed through the male lineage. If a *vaithyakkaran* has no son to inherit, his daughter inherits the father. They considered this rich lore as the blessings from their ancestors, and in early days, the practice was treated as a sacred duty of the *vaithyakkaran*. The treatment is based on a mutual agreement between the patient and the healer; the patient should have faith in the capacity of the medicine-man, while the practitioner should believe that he has the knowledge and skill to cure the disease. The *ethnic* knowledge on the ethno-botanical use of wild plant species has been acquired through the trial-and-error method and passed orally from generation to generation. Today, many *vaithiakkaran*s have developed commercial links, and so many clinics for tribal medicine have been opened in different parts of the country. They also actively take part in medical camps and exhibitions organized by the government as well as private agencies inside and outside India.

Concept of Oracle

One method for curing disease is consulting oracles. The spirit of the ancestor enters the body of

the mediator or oracle, and he speaks with the patient who is himself unconscious while he speaks. This type of prophecy is mainly done when a patient's relatives desire to discover the cause of the sickness. The spirit also appears as dream images, advises about medicinal herbs, and discloses answers to their distress. The oracles sometimes communicate with the ancestors through dreams to seek solutions for their miseries. One of the prominent oracles among the ethnic community in North Malabar is *Āṭṭiyan* of the Karimpalan community, who is popularly called *āttukāran* or *āruthal*. During emergencies, the Karimpalan consults the *āṭṭiyan*, and he engages in a negotiation with the ancestor after being possessed in situations like the frequent occurrence of illnesses, bleakness of women, and psychic problems. The oracle of the Kuṛichiyan consults *nikal* or ancestor spirit, and they execute a ceremonial ritual called *nekalāṭṭam* when they face problems, and through a mediator or oracle spirit reveals answers to the troubled problem. The Kāṭṭunāikkans used their customary performance called *daivathē viḷikkal* by their head man, who appeals to the spirits for an explanation of the problem. The oracle in red clothes is possessed, and he jangles the gourd shell, arranges a discourse, and looks for causes of existing troubles and how to overcome this situation.

Malicious Spirits and Kinfolks

The malicious spirits are categorized as daring ghosts by the ethnic communities. Those kinfolk whose life span is prematurely short by their enemies, and according to ethnic beliefs, such spirits are ferocious and hunt the person/persons who are responsible for their death. And since, in their wrath, they do not always discriminate nicely between the innocent and the guilty, they may become a danger, not only to individuals but to a whole community^{ix}.

As J.G Frazer said, malicious spirits are those who confronted ferocious deaths, women who die in pregnancy or childbirth, or unmarried, suicide, or victims of epidemics like smallpox, and spirits of evil sorcerers, munificent spirits converted into malicious if kinfolks are not appeased them frequently by their kith and kin and misused by evil sorcerers. The malicious spirits attack his kinfolk or hamlet dwellers by generating illness, spates, psychic complaints, sterility, and catastrophes like draught, dearth, storm, or flood. They also come into kinsfolk's bodies, their pets' or domesticated animals' bodies, and disturb them in many ways. This causes the signs in their behavior pattern, like sudden falling and dying without any visible cause, faintness, fever, shivering, etc., to be noticed in the affected persons. The victim of the malicious act jumped into a state of babbling, repeated fainting, weeping, snickering, or disturbing others, and etch marks appeared on the face and body of the affected kinfolk.

For different problems arising due to malicious activities, the ethnic community mainly depends on magical spells rather than herbal medicine, which is the least preferred in this case. To pacify malicious spirits and to save patients from incurable diseases and psychic disorders, the patient's relatives consult the headman, who tries to deal with them by tying up the spell-knotted threads around the wrist of the patient. If it is not effective, sorcerers are utilized who could exorcise the spirit through blood sacrifices. One such practice is done by Adiyans of Wayanad called *gaddika mādal*^x.

Different magical spells and exorcising methods are adopted by the vivid ethnic communities of North Malabar. The Paniya headman conceals a pot containing a combination of milk and the juice of a plant called *kaitha* (pandanus tree), and it is supposed to be a real instrument for driving out the spirit. *kaḷari azimuthal* is another method, and the headman of the hamlet takes some paddy and draws mystic figures and writes spells with his fingers. Then the spirit enters his

fingers and discloses itself through the pictures drawn. The third method is appealing to the spirit and invoking the spirit into an iron nail and fixing it on a Pala tree or *Alstonia Scholaris*, the abode of spirits.

Wayanādan Kādar pushes out the malicious spirits by requesting the ancestors and the goddess *māriyamma* to push out the spirit. The method of removing the haunted spirit among the Māvilāns is called *nīkkal*. The main stage of this method is *rāsi vekkāl*, fastening a black cord on the wrist of the patient, and thrashing the patient deeply with a staff to drive out such spirits. The efficient sorcerers perform all these. The spirit is then invoked and compelled to move into a pot, which is enclosed with red silk and finally fixed in a temple.

Malamutthan's method for propitiating the spirit is called *rāsi veal*, which an astrologer does to recognize the real intention or the need of the ghostly spirit. After astrological calculation, he recommends remedies to soothe the spirit. After pacification, the haunted ghost is directed his/her way to the spirit world, and this is called *Nāḷi Vekkāl*. Symptoms of certain illnesses, like headaches and stomachaches, are the result of the entering spirit inside the head or stomach, according to Cholanaikkans. To remove the spirit, the headman performed *orisādu* or warding off the malicious power by puffing of wind on the patient. *charadu-orisādu* is another traditional custom to pacify the malicious spirit. A cord is taken from cotton stuff, and the *chemmakāran* blows wind on the cord, reciting charms and hexes and tying a few knots on the cord. After the invocation, the spirits are believed to enter each of the knots. Then he ties the cord around the neck or hands of the patient. When a malicious spirit troubles a child, his/her parents blow wind through their mouth on the forehead and ears of the child three times.

The Karimpālans implement three categories of means to eliminate the spirit from an affected person. *Aṇimantram* is one method, and it is mainly performed by *vīran*, the more treacherous one. An efficient sorcerer is invited to perform this rite. He is in ritual costumes like white attire with a red waistband around his waist, draws a *kaḷam* in the courtyard of the patient (*piṇiyāḷ*), prepares *kuruthi*, a mixture of turmeric and lime blended in water, which turns red colour and is poured into a brass pot, and puts iron nails into this pot. The patient is asked to sit on a wooden board before the *kaḷam* and the *kuruthi*. Then the enchanter becomes possessed, delivers magic hexes, circles the *piṇiyāḷ* three times, and takes a peg from the *kuruthi* and waves the brass pot from the feet to the head. Then he blew the wind on the nails, which forces the spirit to enter into the nails, and he stuck the nails on a *pāla*, *kānjiram*, or jackfruit tree. *kumbaḷam kothu* is an important method. For this custom, a big grey cucumber and a penknife are positioned on the *kaḷam* or ritual area and the performer discharges *kuruthi* above them., draws four lines on the cucumber with lime paste, chants a spell, circles around it three times, then took a stem of the basil plant and waves from feet to the head of the *piṇiyāḷ* who sits in front of *kaḷam*. The sorcerer becomes possessed and takes the knife, cuts the cucumber into four pieces, and is kept in a sacred place. Among the Ūrālikuṟmans, a kinfolk affected by a malicious spirit, the *bijakkāḷan* executes an enchanted ritual known as *daivam kāṇal* for appealing the ancestor spirits.

Health Care

The ethnic community had its own rich tradition of food habits, which had maintained their health and immune system. Their staple food was ragi, chama, etc., and they had wide knowledge about wild species of edible green leaves, tubers, various kinds of millets, wild meat, and fish of different kind and these were added in their daily diet. But their health has been steadily declining

in recent times. The free supply of low-quality rice and groceries through the ration system, decline of traditional farming, increasing use of junk foods, alcoholism, and the use of ganja are the major reasons for the change in the food habits of the tribal communities. The sickle cell gene showed high prevalence among them.

Conclusion

All ethnic communities in North Malabar believe in the spirit's existence in every aspect of their life. They are invisible, but they are experienced in various ways. Being a patriarchal group, most of the kinfolk believe in the founding fathers and some cases founding mothers. He is the supreme judge and guardian spirit who directs every action of his kith and kin in their lifetime and after. The reverence of ancestors may be carried out either by the folk or by the entire community. Community veneration would customarily center on the founding fathers or great ancestors and are worshipped in ceremonial and special occasions like birth, marriage, harvest, hunting, and the death of kinfolk and common ancestors are revered in everyday life. The entire ethnic world in North Malabar has been rotating around the ancestor, which is the way of their ancestors. It was one of the bonding factors between ethnic folks and the connecting links between the past generation and the present generation. The kinfolks learned lessons of family tradition and respected the ancestors' ways of living. It reflects the cultural identity of the ethnic communities through their oral tradition, art, craft, music, and dance, as well as social, political, economic, and religious structures. But today their culture, faith, belief, and identity are under threat due to the steady and drastic process of acculturation and negligence on the part of the administrative system and government. The present society considers all the customs and practices of the ethnic communities to be utter nonsense and to be thrown off. But this folk tradition has its intrinsic value, and the survival of such a type of ethnic tradition will be an asset for our heritage wealth.

End Notes and References

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Prominent Ethnic Communities are Adiyani, Paniyani, Kuruchiyan, Mullukuruman, Urali Kuruman, Betta Kuruman, Koraga, Marati, Karimpalan, Mavila etc

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Koraga abode of spirit of the dead within each hamlet

Karimpalan abode of spirit of the dead within each hamlet

Kurichiya abode of spirit of the dead within each hamlet

Uralikuruman abode of spirit of the dead within each hamlet

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Adiyani method of exorcising the spirit of the dead