

‘Deconstruct the Rotten Mud Form and Reconstruct Anew: Symbolic Curing in the *Mannayichu-Chattu* Ritual of Kanikkar

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Abstract

The body reconstruction ritual—mannayichuchattu—of the Kanikkar people living in the Kerala forests is a sparingly practised ritual, but it is an epitome of Kanikkar’s heritage in health care. It tells us about the “traditional” health conceptualisations of Kanikkar in which the human body is made of earth. Injury to earth causes illness to the human body because the earth body and the human body are, to the Kanikkar, synonymous. Illness to the Kanikkar, thus becomes expressions of experiences of injustices, violence done to earth, to a way of life, a value system. It is not about an individualised experience of injury but a collective hurt. The paper highlights that the ritual of Mannayichuchattu symbolises for the Kanikkar an attempt to take control of their lives and their value system, despite the irrecoverable material losses that they have sustained.

Keywords: Kanikkar, *Mannayichu Chattu*, purificatory ritual, *vilakkoottam*.

The Kanikkar of Kerala, while a small community with only a little over one percent of the total population of the southern state of Kerala in India, is still the most predominant of the scheduled tribe peoples of Kerala. The inclusion of Kanikkar in the constitutional category scheduled tribe denotes an official recognition by the Government of India of the historical deprivation the Kanikkar had met with that stood in the way of their advancement. Originally known to have been shifting cultivators, they are now settled in the forest ranges of three administrative Forest Divisions: the Trivandrum Forest Division, the Thenmala Range of Thenmala Forest Division, and the Anchal Range of Punalur Division. Data for this paper was elicited from a Panchayat in Trivandrum Forest Division which had the largest number of Kanikkar settlements and families. The tribal settlements in this Panchayat were segregated geographically by a majestic river that flowed through the Panchayat with all fury in the monsoons and lay as a quiet but sig-

nificant presence the rest of the times. A passenger canoe owned by the Panchayat was the only mode of transport for ferrying people across the river. In the case of health emergencies, the river posed an additional problem to the tribal people in reaching the health care institution closest to them if not of their choice. Besides, the region being a wild-life sanctuary there were restrictions for outsiders from entering the settlements. In this context, existing medical anthropology theories and models were unable to provide explanation for the complex patterns of health seeking found among the Kanikkar. Classification approach of ethno-science (Frake, 1961), hierarchy of resort approach propounded by Romanucci-Ross (1969), correlation analysis that was popular in the seventies (De Walt 1977; McClain 1977; Press 1969; Woods 1977), all provided only partial understanding of Kanikkar's health scenario. The complexity of Kanikkar's health seeking behaviour in the forest habitat is best understood as an integral part of their "health culture". In my fieldwork interactions with Kanikkar I came to learn that while accessing modern health care facilities, one's faith can still be rooted in traditional cosmology and this faith could interfere with healing or could cause for healing when the most modern health care has given up a patient as terminally ill and beyond the scope of medical intervention, as was the case in the ritualised curing ceremony of "*Mannayichu Chattu*". Concentration on cosmology need not be understood as a portrayal of these people as away from all modern institutions and as an excluded category. On the other hand, they have fallen for the "charm of medicine" and even go for self-medication asking from the local medical store the medicines that had been prescribed for them or for someone they knew by some medical practitioner, for a similar health problem sometime earlier. Kanikkar opt for all systems of medicines available in Kerala's plural medical system (Menon, 1996; 1997; 2002). They are also a part of the globalized world of pharmaceutical and corporate networks and caught up in the intricacies of intellectual property right issues (Menon, 2013). It is within this complexity of health care options that their health-seeking practices and beliefs underlying them should be contextualised and sought to be comprehended.

Ideas about death and the human body are intertwined in the mythology behind *Mannayichuchattu*. The term *Mannayichuchattu* is a combination of three words 'mannu', 'azhikkuka', and 'chattu'. *Chattu* is a term used by Kanikkar to refer to all purification rituals that are performed to the rhythm of *chattupattu* or songs for *chattu* which are accompanied by the music produced by striking the iron instrument

known as *kokkara*. *Mannu* means earth and *azhikkuka* 'means undo. Together the three words refer to purificatory ritual for undoing the earthen body. This has reference to the Kanikkar's conceptualisation of the human body as made of earth and disease as the rotting or decay of the earth. The impure or rotten earth that makes the diseased human body is undone through the purificatory ritual of *mannayichuchattu* that invokes gods to intervene in reinvigorating the renewed earthen structure of the human body. Any individual who is seriously ill has to get his earthen body symbolically deconstructed and rebuilt anew with invocations to God; Every injury to earth is believed to cause illness in human body as a human being in Kani perception is earth body moulded in human form and infused with life. An informant explained:

When the Creator sent us down, he measured rice in a *nazhi* (measuring bowl for paddy) kept inside a *muram* (winnowing basket). When this measure of rice gets over, we humans die. To correct this, we have to do *mannayichuchattu*.

In this reference to the depletion of rice may be read the symbolic expression of the loss of Kanikkar's rice cultivation. This was a death knell to their social body. Human bodies suffer also due to distancing from the earth body, herbs and wildlife. Illness thus becomes an expression of an experience of injustice and violence to the earth, a way of life and the body collective.

In this context, one may recall Vandana Shiva (1994:3):

"Environmental problems become health problems because there is a continuity between the earth body and the human body through the processes that maintain life...People, their environment and their society are not separable by rigid and insular boundaries".

Shiva defines environment as everything that affects peoples' lives. In a similar vein, environmental problems of the Kanikkar and their health problems become one and the same. In many of the illness narratives of the Kanikkar that I have recorded, health is unattainable when the quality of the environment—which is not separable from the quality of life—is deteriorated. To regain lost health, one has to regain the quality of the environment, the quality of life. This is what the Kanikkar aspire to achieve in the ritual of "*Mannayichu Chattu*".

The procedures involved in the ritual described to me by an informant will exemplify the belief system and the symbolism in the ritual:

Bathe a *nazhi* (paddy measuring bowl) and place it upright inside a *muram* (winnowing pan), fill it with rice, decorate with flowers,

draw lines around it with lime, and put flowers on all four sides. Then invoke Lord Siva, the one who created us: “Oh Lord, let the rice you measured brim over like this”. That is *Mannayichu Chattu*. Our body is created by Lord Siva out of earth. With magic, that earthen structure is demolished and constructed again, that is *Mannayichu Chattu*. Our life is secured within a cage woven by parrot. (That is why parrots don’t have beaks!) The parrot flies to *vadakkumthirikkotta* (a Fort) and from a palm tree there, bites out a palm leaf and brings it to Lord Siva. He cures the palm leaf by drying it in the sun and then mellowing it in the mist. On this palm leaf he writes our destiny with a *narayam* (stiletto for writing on palm leaf). If this palm leaf rots or is destroyed, we die. With *Mannayichu Chattu*, a person’s life can be extended to seven more years, but a *plathi* (ritual practitioner) can do this no more than seven times for fear of endangering his own life.

Shortage of rice and rotting of the palm leaf are symbolic expressions of destruction of the earth and thus, of health. My informant who sung parts of the invocation from the very long *chattupattu* (song for chattu) gave me a summary and his interpretation of the worldview of Kanikkar that finds expression in the song. There was emphasis on the idea that Kanikkar was the first human created and sent to earth together with his female partner. Birds and beast had been created and sent to earth ahead of this human couple. The Kanikkar were intellectually superior and blessed with speech. They were sent to earth to control all other species created and sent to earth before them and to look after the welfare of all the species on earth, he explained.

In the ordinary day-to-day living, these myths may not mean much to the Kanikkar. But in the case of exigencies as in the case of a life-threatening illness of oneself or one’s loved ones, they recall the anecdotes passed on by ancestors. The secret knowledge of *Mannayichu Chattu* that only the Kanikkar possess, and only a great Kani ritual specialist can perform, is too elaborate a ritual to be performed for all ailments. It is the ultimate life-saving attempt when all else fails. It remains in the Kani repository of traditions alongside all other beliefs about cosmology that are at the root of many of their health care practices, as a legacy from their gods and ancestors. It is a legacy to be taken out and embellished and collectively recanted in times of crises in health. In one sense, it conveys a message across cultural cleavages to “others” about the uniqueness and superiority of the Kanikkar, a pride in their heritage and faith in their “traditions” (Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 1983). Even when western pharmaceuticals are used and

hospitalisation is resorted to, the belief in this ultimate life-saving ritual that only a great Kani *plathi* can perform preserves Kani traditions in health care and provides the Kanikkar with a sense of the ultimate control over their own bodies and health. In the ritual of *Mannayichu Chattu*, one could see expressions of the Kanikkar's senses of identity—an attempt to demolish a deteriorating body and reconstruct a new rejuvenated one, but also of an attempt to recapture life's quality that was taken from them.

In the year 1911, the Rules for the Treatment and Management of Hillmen brought all tribal people under the control of the Forest Department. The Rules defined the hillmen as those tribes who have been living in the hills from time immemorial. The list of tribes appended to the Rules had the name of Kanikkar on the top of fifteen "hillmen". These rules enforced a kind of social control over the Kanikkar. One form of that enforced social control was made explicit in clause 3 of the Rules:

Each settlement will have a headman, who has attained that position either by hereditary right or by selection or election by the members of the settlement, in conformity with the existing practice.

Provided that when a headman fails to carry out any of the duties, (...) the Divisional Forest Officer may call upon the adult male members to depose him and elect another competent man to take his place.

The forms of social control that existed among the Kanikkar revolved round two major roles of authority: the headman known as *moottukani* and the spiritual leader known as *plathi*. The kanikkar were organised into a hamlet known as Vila with reference to crops and cultivation. Each vila was a single socio-political and religious unit under the authority of *moottukani* who decided on matters of importance to the hamlet in gatherings known as *vilakkoottam*. All heads of households formed the *vilakkoottam* which was presided over by the *moottukani*. The office of the *moottukani* was hereditary and the oldest of the sons of the sisters of headman succeeded him. Settling internal disputes, punishing offenders who violated communal norms and customary practices, settling matters of marriage, propitiating ancestral spirits and other deities, fixing the time for clearing the jungle, sowing seeds and reaping the harvest, all formed part of the authority of a *moottukani*. (Thurston, 1906:169; Iyer, 1937:32).

That social organisation which Thurston and Iyer described, the one centred on *moottukani*, is long gone. Of the eleven settlements I collected data from, only three had *moottukani*. And they exerted very

little authority in socio-political affairs of the community. The waning of the traditional authority of these headmen began with the restructuring of the authority of tribal headmen under the Hillmen Settlement Rules. Under these rules there was provision for the State to depose a headman who failed to carry out the prescribed duties and replace him with a “competent” headman.

Through these Rules, the State restricted the movement of these tribal people and confined them to fixed spaces, curtailing their nomadism. Even temporary moves in times of water scarcity or epidemics like smallpox needed written permission from the Divisional Forest Officer. They were also required to register their numbers annually with the Forest Department. Such registration was one of the new duties of the headmen. No Kanikkaran could leave his settlement and migrate to another place without the permission of the headman of his settlement who is an agent of the Divisional Forest Officer and could exercise no independent agency.

There were other restrictions that the new Rules put on the Kanikkar. Although they could cultivate in the forest land, they could not have ownership of the land that a patta or title deed could give. They could own their crops but not the valuable food grains and tobacco which could not be removed from the Government Forest or Reserve without written permission from the Divisional Forest Officer. The rules also made it binding on the Kanikkar to supply to the Forest Department any produce they might be asked to collect at a price fixed by the government while forest land was being leased out for food crop cultivation and for plantations. Iyer (1935) has recorded that the nomadic Kanikkar were driven to more uncongenial lands that did not give them enough yield to feed their families for the whole year. Combine with this, there was restriction on outsiders from entering the Reserve and from having financial dealings with the Kanikkar or purchasing the crops in the settlements. In effect, the lives of these once-nomadic people had dramatically changed with forced settlement, restricted social interactions and monitored economic transactions with outsiders.

Forced settlement had destroyed their socio-political organisation and subsistence pattern. It had also affected their dietary habits. The variety of greens, fruits and meat protein reduced substantially with the enforced settlement. Early accounts of Kanikkar (Iyer, 1937; Thurston, 1909) have documented that the Kanikkar produced different varieties of rice, cereals, pulses. Millet, ragi, sugarcane, sweet potato, tapioca and garden vegetables such as cucumber, pumpkin, beans, eggplant,

plantain etc. were no longer to be part of their diet once. My own fieldwork showed no trace of such dietary diversity. The main food crops I found the Kanikkar cultivating during my fieldwork were only plantains and tapioca. Cash crops like rubber, pepper, areca palms and fruit trees such as cashew, jack fruit and tamarind were seen widely planted in the settlements. While jack fruit was eaten by them, cashew nuts and tamarind were being sold in the local market. The dietary variety that Iyer and Thurston noted was part of their narrative as a memory of their by-gone days and traditions.

Even after independence the relationship of the Kanikkar with the State remains somewhat strained despite the policy of protective discrimination. Inclusion in citizenship has not made the ideal of *Mannayichu Chattu* fade away. Communal rituals are becoming more and more a thing of the past with a disrupted social organisation but traditions are often invoked if not invented; memory is a great aid in this selective invocation to the Kanikkar. By and large, they access the plural medical system and its benefits but the symbolic meanings of *Mannayichu Chattu* keeps traditions intact and the ultimate control of their healing with themselves although herbs and forests have gone and crops dwindled and *plathis* and *maruthuvathis* are becoming a memory.

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