
Exploring the Ethno-History of the Irulas of Attappady: A Journey Between Forest and Inland

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Abstract: *India is famous for its rich bio-diversity and varied cultural heritage. One can notice a synchronous relationship between the natural resources and endemic way of life of groups of people scattered across the country. There exist different races and groups in the country with sole mode of life specific to them. Scheduled Tribes in India are generally considered to be 'Adivasis,' meaning indigenous people or original inhabitants of the country. The tribes have been confined to low status and are often physically and socially isolated instead of being absorbed in the mainstream Hindu population. The present paper aimed to document traditional way of life and social background, cultural life of one of such groups of adivasis (Irula community in Kerala) residing in the Attappadi forest of Palakkad district of Kerala. The valley is bounded on the East by the Nilgiri District of Tamilnadu, on the South by Silent vally national park. The forest is divided in to three ranges – Mannarkkad range, Agali range and Sholayur range. The tribes, who live in isolation, practice their own system of life and settlement. This research effort brings light in to timely need for preserving their culture along with the traditional life style of this group.*

Keywords: Adivasis, Irulas, Settlement Pattern, Social life, Attappadi

1. Introduction

The *Irula* tribe, designated as a scheduled tribe in the state of Kerala, holds a prominent position owing to their rich heritage of ancestral tales that trace their origins. Predominantly, they inhabit the scenic Attappadi Valley, nestled within the Mannarkkad Taluk of Palakkad District. As per the data from the 2011 Census, their population was recorded at 23,721. Linguistically, they communicate in a language closely related to Tamil. The significant migration event occurred during the late 16th century and early 17th century centuries. The *Irula* tribe, constituting a significant numerical majority in the region of Attappadi may derives its name from a characteristic linked to their physical appearance, as the term "Irula" translates to "pitch black". Historically, it is assumed the *Irulas* trace their origins to the Southern state of Tamil Nadu, specifically as inhabitants of the Coimbatore district. The region of Attappady hosts a substantial population of *Irulas*, with a total of 192 settlements or hamlets dedicated to the tribal community. In terms of their physical attributes, the *Irulas* exhibit distinct features, including a medium height, elongated arms, curly hair, prominent cheekbones, and narrow noses. These physical traits contribute to their unique identity within the broader spectrum of ethnic groups in the region.

The 2011 Census provides data on the total number of individuals belonging to *Irula* families in Kerala, categorized by sex and literacy rate. The information is presented as follows:

Irula tribe	Members	Male	Female	Literacy rate
Total	23721	11766	11955	60.21%
Rural	23100	11465	11635	37.93%
Urban	621	301	320	60%

In earlier times, the *Irula* tribe primarily engaged in honey collecting, hunting, food gathering, and practiced primitive forms of agriculture. Over time, their occupation shifted towards swidden cultivation. The *Irulas* hold the distinction of being the second largest tribal group in both Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The specific causes behind their migration from different parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to Attappadi have not been extensively explored in the studies. Drawing from research on the immigration of other tribal communities like *Irulas*, *Kurumbas* and *Mudugas*, three potential reasons for their migration to the Attappadi region can be hypothesized. Firstly, ethnic or caste-based violence may have compelled their relocation. Secondly, natural calamities such as floods, droughts, or diseases like malaria or smallpox could have played a role. Lastly, the

availability of fertile land in Attappadi might have attracted them.

1.1 Methodology and Sources

The study was based mainly on primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from 200 households located in the Attappady from the Agali panjayath. The samples were selected on the basis of simple Random sampling method. The secondary data were collected from published reports and historical records. All available data from charts, reference materials, including books, newspaper reports, periodicals and souvenirs are used so as to make this investigation as complete and accurate as possible.

Name and Origin

The term *Irula* originated from Tamil. There are two stories about the origin of the term *Irulas*: first, the skin of *Irulas* is dark and hence others call them as *Irular* and second, the *Irulas* live in dense forest or near dense forests and as they are seen in the darkness of dense forests, they are addressed as the *Irula*. The word *Irula* in Malayalam translates to darkness or blackness. Since the complexion of tribal communities such as *Kurumbar*, *Mudugar* and *Irular* are dark,¹ the reason for their being named as *Irula* is not clear. The actual meaning of the word *Irular*

may be something else. Thamizoli says² *Irul* meaning darkness may represent either the dark complexion of tribes or dark jungle. In the Attappadi region, the *Irulas* make up 80 % of the tribal people.

1.2 Life and Culture of Irulas of Attappadi

Birth

In olden days Polygamy is a prevalent custom within the *Irula* society. Following childbirth, a woman is traditionally considered unclean for a period of three months. On the seventh day after birth, the newborn is given a name. Ear piercing for both males and females can take place at any time after six months. It is common for individuals to be referred to by nicknames that reflect their physical attributes, habits, nature, or unique characteristics. During the delivery process, a midwife known as "*pettichi*" typically assumes responsibility.

Settlement pattern

The settlement pattern of the *Irula* community revolves around small clusters called "*Ooru*" or hamlets, which typically consist of 25 to 50 households. Each *ooru* is led by a hereditary headman known as the "*Mooppan*." The authority of *Mooppans* extends to all social,

¹ B. P, Paul, *Op. cit.*, p.32.

² P, Thamizoli, *The Sacred Grove of Kannimar the Irula Deity and in Situ Conservation of Biodiversity*, 1997. p.345.

economic, political, cultural, and religious matters within the hamlet, and he serves as the crucial link between the tribal folk and the government. Another integral figures within the settlement is that *Bandari* and *Kuruthala*. The *Bandari* implements the decisions made by the *Ooru* committee and is responsible for investigating complaints raised by the tribals to determine their validity. On the other hand, the *Kuruthala* serves as a messenger and holds a ministerial position, comparable to a treasurer in modern times. The agricultural activities of the *ooru* are overseen by the *Mannukkaran*, who plays a vital role in performing rituals and cultivation on his own land. The *Irula* society follows a patrilineal structure, where possessions are equally distributed among male heirs, such as sons.

Puberty Ceremony

The young girl may have already witnessed puberty ceremony of her close friends and observed women following menstrual practices, which mentally prepares her for her own menarche and subsequent menstruations. As soon as she experiences her first menstrual flow, she informs her mother. The significant moment is referred to as '*Vaysekkevanthache*' (menarche) in *Irula* tradition. Her mother or other female relatives then instruct her not to mingle with or see men, immediately moving her to a secluded corner outside the hut of the family. A specially built *Kalavasane* (*Pachakudishi*), a small

seclusion hut constructed with bamboo poles and covered with reed leaves, becomes her place of seclusion during this time.

Marriage Ceremony

The marriage ceremony takes place at the house of the bridegroom. On the day before the wedding, parent of the boy along with socio-political functionaries from the hamlet, visit the house of the girl. They are warmly welcomed and treated to a grand feast held in a specially erected *Panthi* (marriage booth) for the occasion. With the blessings of her clan and ancestors, the girl, accompanied by her siblings of the parents and functionaries from her natal hamlet, moves to the house of the bridegrooms in her exquisite bridal attire. The girl undergoes a ceremonial bath and is adorned in her beautiful bridal attire. The *Guruvan* of her clan plays a significant role during this momentous occasion. He shows her the *Gurumadam*, a sacred object, and recites a magical blessing to invoke the blessings of the ancestors for her married life. As a gesture of respect and homage to her ancestors, the girl places a few coins in the *Gurumadam*.

At the centre of the booth, a ritual lamp and a vessel filled with paddy, plantains, and betel leaves are placed, symbolizing auspiciousness. The officiant of the ceremony is the *Jathiyar* from the hamlet of the bride. The marriage badge, known as *Thali*, is a small round piece of

gold or copper tied with a yellow or black thread.

2. Social Structure of Irulas

The *Irulas* form an endogamous tribe with a society comprising seven clans. These clans are known as *Vellaga*, *Kurunaga*, *Karattiga*, *Kuppar*, *Aarumoopu*, *Sampar*, and *Devanar*.³ Upon marriage, females adopt the membership of the clan of their husbands for all practical purposes. Clan affiliation transcends hamlet boundaries, and in larger hamlets, all clans can be identified. A paramount feature of the tribal political system is the '*Ooru Panchayat*' a vital decision-making body of the Ooru. Comprising all adult members or representatives from each family, the Panchayat assumes responsibility for making significant decisions pertaining to the Oorus affairs.

Religious beliefs and practices

The *Irulas*, in their traditional beliefs, are animists, adhering to a pantheon of diverse deities, each serving different functions in their lives. These deities encompass a wide range, including jungle Gods, household deities, ancestral spirits, hunting spirits, agricultural Gods, and those associated with causing diseases and evil. It is worth noting that each deity is often associated with a specific location, and thus, they are worshipped only at their

designated spot. Apart from their pantheon of Gods, the *Irulas* also worship *Maariamamma* and *Bhathrakali* in every hamlet. At home, they venerate a deity known as the "*Pasath*" God. Another significant aspect of *Irula* belief is their devotion to "Malleswaran" where Lord Siva holds the principal position. In the traditional *Irula* society, each clan has its own revered figure known as the *Guruvan*. The individual holds the significant responsibility of being the custodian and propitiator of the clan deity.

Occupation

Historically, the *Irula* community thrived on traditional occupations such as hunting, gathering, bird and animal trapping, as well as animal husbandry and pastoralism. Traditional farming methods employed by the tribe include *slash-and-burn* and shifting cultivation techniques. The traditional *Irula* tribes practiced two main types of cultivation: *slash- and burn* farming and shifting cultivation. In the *slash - and-burn-* method, they would clear the land by cutting and burning vegetation, and the ashes left behind served as natural fertilizer for the crops. In the slash-and-burn method, ash serves as a vital source of manure for the crops. Shifting cultivation is practiced on forested uplands, known as "*kottukadu*" where land is cut and cleared for farming. Dry land farming, involving ploughing ("*erkadu*"), and wetland farming, primarily paddy cultivation ("*gedde*"),

are also prominent agricultural practices among the Irulas.

Burial Rites

The *Irula* community upholds an elaborate and ritualistic approach to burial rites when a member of their community passes away. The deceased individual, referred to as the '*Chavu*' is bathed by members of the clan of the brother-in-laws before being placed inside a ceremonial booth called the *Pattekettal*. The *Ooru Mooppan* and the *Guruvan* are informed of the death, and the latter, as the clan head of the deceased, takes charge of arranging the burial rites. The body of the deceased is adorned with a new piece of cloth, and additional new cloths are brought by affinal kins to be placed over the corpse. The burial structure comprises seven sticks fastened crosswise on two long sticks. During these ceremonies, the son or a designated person serving as the chief officiator is required to shave their head, signifying a solemn act of mourning and respect for the departed.⁴ Additionally, the headman, senior nephew, and son are mandated to actively participate in these funeral rites, underscoring their significance within the community.

Funeral dance and music hold a significant role in the tribal practice of spirit worship, serving as a means to allay the fear of the spirits of the deceased. Meanwhile, the *Veenan*, a youth from

the hamlet, orchestrates continuous dance around the *Pattekettal*, accompanied by music. Experienced elders take on the responsibility of playing musical instruments such as *Dhaval*, *Kohal*, *Jhalra*, *Pera*, and *Dhambatta*. The dancers adorn themselves with anklets while performing the dance. The *Kanjicheeru* ceremony holds the purpose of guiding the recently departed souls to the realm of ancestral spirits. The participation in the ceremony is not restricted by clan affiliation, as *Guruvans* from all clans, along with the *Ooru Mooppan*, collectively decide the date of the event.

3. Conclusion

The study leads us to certain conclusions. First, the tribes in Attappadi and in the surrounding areas are the descendants of the early inhabitants of the land and they had a common ethnic homeland in the past; second, though the tribes in the Valley do share certain degree of similarity, they do not have common cultural pattern in all aspects of their life; third, two tribes, *Kurumbas* and *Mudugas*, are still primitive food gatherers and Irulas are mainly wage labourers; they become the masters of transition, who directly contact to settlers. fourth, due to the large scale settler migration from outside attappadi disappearance of the tribal characteristics and the consequent identity crisis is the most significant feature of the tribal scenario of Attappadi. Examining briefly the historical context, culture, socio-economic and

political status. customs and traditions, life style Attappadi especially *Irulas*.
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