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LIFE CYCLE CEREMONIES OF MALAYALI TRIBES IN JAWADHI HILLS – AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Abstract

The Malayali tribes of the Jawadhi Hills possess a rich cultural heritage reflected in their life cycle ceremonies from birth to death. This ethnographic study examines the traditional practices, beliefs, and rituals associated with different stages of life among the Malayali tribal community. The research is based on field observations, interviews with elders, and participation in community events. The study explores birth rituals such as naming ceremonies and protective customs for infants, puberty rites that signify social maturity, marriage ceremonies reflecting kinship patterns and community participation, and death rituals that reveal beliefs about ancestry and the afterlife. These ceremonies not only mark biological transitions but also reinforce social organization, cultural identity, and intergenerational continuity. The findings highlight the role of elders, customary laws, and indigenous knowledge in preserving these traditions despite external influences and modernization. The study contributes to understanding the cultural dynamics of tribal communities and emphasizes the importance of documenting and preserving indigenous practices for future generations.

Keywords: Malayali Tribes, Jawadhi Hills, Ethnography, Tribal Culture, Indigenous Traditions

Introduction

Life cycle ceremonies are an important part of every society, marking the major stages in an individual's life such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. These ceremonies reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and social structure of a community. Among tribal societies, life cycle rituals play a significant role in preserving tradition and maintaining social unity. Among them, Malayali Tribes of Jawadhi Hills also serve as a means of passing indigenous knowledge from one generation to another.

Jawadhi Hills is located in the northern part of Tamilnadu and forms part of the Eastern Ghats. It is situated in Thiruvannamalai district and its Head quarter is situated at Jamunamarathur. Jawadhi Block or panchayat union is divided into 11 panchayats. Jawadhi Block contains 38 villages and 272 habitations. The block or panchayat union has a total population of 62,067, of which 46,984 are Scheduled Tribes (75.7%). The Malayali Tribes lead an isolated life in the jungle, rugged terrain and in an inhospitable climate. Centuries back these Malayali Tribes have chosen this hilly area as their abode and have their own culture and life style for reasons of their own.

The Malayali tribes of the Jawadhi Hills in Tamil Nadu have a distinct cultural identity shaped by their close relationship with nature, traditional occupations, and community-based living. Their life cycle ceremonies are deeply rooted in customs and beliefs that have been practiced for generations. These rituals are not only religious or symbolic but also function as social events that strengthen kinship ties and community participation. Each stage of life is marked by specific ceremonies, which guide individuals through their social roles and responsibilities.¹

However, in recent years, modernization, education, and interaction with other communities have brought changes to tribal lifestyles. Some traditional practices are gradually disappearing, while others are being modified. Therefore, it becomes important to document and understand these ceremonies in their original context. Ethnographic studies help in recording such cultural practices through direct observation and interaction with the community.

This research article aims to explore and document the life cycle ceremonies of the Malayali tribes in the Jawadhi Hills. It focuses on rituals associated with birth, puberty, marriage, and death, and examines their cultural significance. The study also attempts to understand how these ceremonies contribute to social cohesion and cultural continuity within the



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community. By documenting these traditions, the study highlights the importance of preserving tribal heritage for future generations.ⁱⁱ

Birth

Birth is considered an important event in the Malayali tribal community. Traditional practices begin even before childbirth. Pregnant women are given special care, and elders guide them with indigenous knowledge about food and health. Herbal remedies and traditional medicine are commonly used, reflecting the community's dependence on natural resources. Studies on Malayali tribes show that indigenous knowledge, including medicinal plants, plays a major role in their everyday life.ⁱⁱⁱ

After childbirth, purification rituals are observed. The mother and newborn are kept in isolation for a few days. This practice is believed to protect them from evil spirits and illness.

When a baby is delivered, word is sent to the *Thaimaman* (mother's brother) and he ties the thread (*arunakairu*) around the waist of the baby, which is made out of *aathimandanaru*. The baby is fed first with castor oil by the elders.

Naming ceremony

If a women does not conceive immediately after the marriage they take a vow and if the vow is fulfilled they give the child the name of that goddess. Immediately after the birth of the child they start calling by that name or if they have decided to call by the elders' name they call by that name.^{iv}

Puberty

Puberty ceremonies are significant among the Malayali tribes, especially for girls. The attainment of puberty marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. The word of attaining Puberty is sent first to *Thaimaman*. *Thaimaman* will build a Seclusion hut in the *verandah*, which is made up of coconut leaves, teakwood leaves. He then presents her a new dress. On the fourth day a ceremonial bath is conducted and the girl enters the house. Relatives and neighbors are invited, and a small feast is organized. The ceremony emphasizes social recognition of maturity and prepares the girl for future responsibilities. These rituals strengthen kinship ties and community relationships. The observance of such ceremonies reflects the tribe's social values and respect for tradition.^v

Marriage ceremony

Marriage among the Malayali tribes is considered a social contract that strengthens family ties. Traditionally, marriages are arranged with the consent of elders. Kinship relationships and community approval play an important role in selecting partners.

Marriage is preferred between the sister's daughter or mother's brother. To fix the marriage formally the parents of the bridegroom side go along with elders to the bride's place. With them they will carry cooked rice in basket (*Kuda Soru*) and also serving spoon made of bamboo (*kondi kola*). Taking the "*Kuda Soru*" to the bride's place is called *madhiga*. When the *kondi kola* is given to the bride's side and it indicates that the bridegroom likes the bride. If the bride's side accept this proposal, they will keep the *kondi kola* with them. If they don't like the offer they will return the *kondi kola* back to the bridegroom's side. The visit of the bridegroom's side to the bride's house is called *Ponnu Veedu Parka Poran*. Once the marriage is fixed, the elders from both the sides visit each other. After this ritual, both the bridegroom and the bride start living together.^{vi} After living together for few months, they are free either to separate or continue their relation. If they wanted to continue, they inform their parents and request them to organize another ritual confirming their marriage. If they don't like to continue the relationship they can separate by paying the penalty. The elders of the village will decide the penalty. During the inter-ragnum period between the initiation of marriage process and the final confirmation if the bride becomes pregnant, the baby born will be with the father.

The final confirmation ritual is celebrated for three days. Usually the ritual takes place in the bride's place. If the boy and a girl started living together before the confirmation then the ritual will take place in the bridegrooms place. Nowadays the bride's parents think that this is the best, as the expenses will be borne by the bridegroom's side there by reducing the expenditure during their daughter's wedding. On this occasion, all the relatives will be given saree and a dhoti. However, if the marriage takes place at the bride's place both the sides will bear the expenses equally.^{vii}



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Three days before the marriage the elders from groom's side will go to the bride's place and offer a pig and twenty *maraca* of paddy. On the first evening the boy and the girl will be smeared with the paste of *nalangu thala* with grass. It is called *nelangu veedu*. The same custom is repeated on the second day. On the third day, this process will take place wherever the marriage is celebrated. The grooms assistant (*Somakaran*) will carry *arasani* which consists of pots, flowers, small stool etc., in the basket.^{viii} The umbrella, knife will be carried by the *somakaran*. Before the confirmation ritual, the groom is taken to the place which was situated in the middle of the village (*mandaveli*) and the *moopar* acts as a priest and chant the mantras and put sounds using by the drums with *mucha kairu* (rope made of grass). They do some ritual to get rid of the evil eye or *theetu*. This is called as *thanivirunthu*. All the village people will participate in this function.

Marriage takes place in the nights. On the arrival of the groom the bride's side will offer juice which is made of jaggery, and flowers to all the guests who attend the ceremony. The girl is carried by the *thaimaman* to the wedding tent (*pandal*). The girl is made to sit on tile right side of the bridegroom. The sword is placed on both bride and bridegrooms lap. Both of them are made to sit facing the eastern direction. They exchange rice and cereals. After tying the nuptial thread (*tali*) the bride is made to feed the groom with cooked rice. This is called *bhodhakali soru*. The couple is made to sit on the cot and the relatives lift the cot and swing it. On the same day after the marriage the bride is taken to the groom's place. After entering the house, she is made to worship the family deity. Nuptial take place it the grooms place. On the third day again the couple will go to the bride's place with the sword to remove the *pandal*. It is called *pandal pirital*. If the bridegroom forgets to carry the sword he is made to pay the penalty, which will be decided by the elders. The kola is returned back as a gift to the groom.^{ix}

After the marriage, they keep the feast to the relatives. They will give the leaves to all the guests who have to stitch the leaves into a plate to have a meal. First they serve the rice and then pieces of *thokari* (blood of the pig is fried) and *sambar*. The pork pieces in the *sambar* will be distributed separately. First the men, and then the women will sit and eat. They keep the vessel and basket so that they are also filled and are they are taken home. This custom is continuing still. In the third batch all the elders will eat together, this is called *nadu bhanthi*. Nowadays *biriyani* is also part of the feast. In addition, vegetarian food is also served to those who won't eat pork.

Marriage customs among the Malayali tribes emphasize cooperation and collective responsibility. These ceremonies reinforce social structure and maintain harmony within the community. The traditional lifestyle of Malayali tribes, based on agriculture and forest resources, influences their simple and community-oriented marriage practices.^x

Death

Death rituals among the Malayali tribes reflect their beliefs about ancestors and life after death. When a person dies, relatives and community members gather to perform funeral rites. Burial is commonly practiced, though cremation is also seen in some areas.

The message about the death of a person is first informed to the *Ooran*. *Ooran* inturn will passes on the message to the relatives who are living in other villages. Immediately after the death they fire in the air with the country-made gun to alert the villagers about the death. This is called *edikolam*. Only then they send the message. *Thaimaman* brings the pot with water as *thaai veetu seethanam*.^{xi}

Before performing the final rights, the pit is dug and the platform is erected. They keep the body on the platform and pour water. The water is boiled in the pot, and they apply turmeric and *arapupathai* (thurangi leaves) paste and the oil mixed with coconut oil, sesame oil, Caster oil on the head and then they pour water. Afterwards, pot is kept upside down.

The elder son will perform the last rights. They light the pyre near the head with bamboo stick, they call it *moksa vilaku*. All the relatives/pangalis (coparcenary heirs) go round the body with that lamp. They break the coconut near the head, and place the *kumkum* and put the garland. They tie the toes and the hands. They keep the body facing the entrance. They erect the *pandal* outside the house.^{xii}

In the case of death of a boy or a girl, the *thaimaman* puts *yerukamm pu malai* on the dead body. If the boy dies without ear piercing, the ear will be pierced with paddy before performing the final rights.

They bury the dead. But in the case of suicide, the burn the body. The face is kept facing the south direction and the legs facing the northern direction.



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They perform a ritual to mark the end of *teetu* (pollution period). Usually the end of pollution period is observed on an odd day. During these days, they don't attend any functions. In case of some auspicious functions to taken place immediately after a death, milk is offered to the dead person in the burial ground the very next day and other rituals performed later. Usually on the seventh day they call all the relatives for feast. They offering to the ancestors (*padhachal*). They make pongal (Rice cooked with jaggery) and cook pork and rice. They keep two *padhachal* separately, one for the ancestors and the other for the dead person. The priest performs ritual (*sangiyam*). Later they join the two *padhachal* together symbolizing the joining of the dead person with the ancestors. Each bow (kumkum) on the wall will represent the number of persons dead in the family. This process is performed when a person expires inside the house. If a person is dead in the field or some other place they perform another ceremony called *padhu kalakarthu*.^{xiii} They believe that the souls of persons who expire outside the house will not reach the house. They perform this ritual, a year later. They call *poojari* and he sacrifices the goat and chants mantras so that the spirit (*aavi*) possesses a close relative of the dead. The *poojari* keeps one vessel on the head of the possessed and he goes round the village to capture the *aavi* and bring it home. This they believe *aavi* will enable to join the ancestors. If an unmarried girl dies, a green tree is selected and they call it *puvadakari* and offer a goat and a new saree. On the day of final ceremony of the death (*karyam*) they take the lamp to the burial ground with head closed with piece of cloth in order to protect the light from the wind. After all formalities are over, the *pangalis* will be taken to the bathing area by the village people (*oorkaran*) and apply a mixture of three oils (coconut oil, sesame oil, Caster oil) and they take bath there. This marks the end of pollution period. They believe that during the pollution period the goddess will not enter the village.^{xiv}

Conclusion

The life cycle ceremonies of the Malayali tribes in the Jawadhi Hills reflect their rich cultural heritage and deeply rooted traditional beliefs. From birth to death, each stage of life is marked by specific rituals that guide individuals in their social roles and responsibilities. These ceremonies are not only religious or symbolic in nature but also serve as important social events that strengthen kinship ties, community participation, and collective identity.

The ethnographic findings show that birth rituals emphasize protection and acceptance of the newborn into the community, puberty ceremonies mark social maturity, marriage customs reinforce family relationships and social structure, and death rituals express beliefs about ancestors and the continuity of life. These practices demonstrate the strong connection between culture, tradition, and social organization among the Malayali tribes.

However, the study also indicates that modernization, education, and increased contact with mainstream society have influenced some of these traditional practices. While certain rituals continue to be followed, others are gradually changing or declining. Despite these changes, the community still values its cultural traditions and makes efforts to preserve them.

This study highlights the importance of documenting and understanding life cycle ceremonies as part of tribal cultural heritage. Preserving these traditions is essential for maintaining cultural identity and passing indigenous knowledge to future generations. Further research and cultural awareness initiatives can contribute to safeguarding the unique traditions of the Malayali tribes in the Jawadhi Hills.

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