



Journal Homepage: - [www.journalijar.com](http://www.journalijar.com)

## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/18616

DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/18616>



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### "CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF THE KANIKKAR TRIBE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY"

Maya M.<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Abhilash Babu<sup>2</sup>

1. Research Scholar School of Social Sciences, M.G. University Kottayam.
2. Associate Professor School of Social Sciences, M.G University Kottayam.

#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 28 February 2024

Final Accepted: 31 March 2024

Published: April 2024

##### Key words:-

Kanikkars, Culture, Cultural Dynamics, Adaptation, Traditions

#### Abstract

This ethnographic study delved into the intricate cultural dynamics of the Kanikkar tribe, a marginalized indigenous community residing in the southern regions of Kerala. Through immersive fieldwork and qualitative analysis, the research explored the multifaceted aspects of Kanikkar culture, including their social organization, livelihood, traditional practices, belief systems, cultural identity, and interactions with the surrounding environment. The Kanikkar tribe displayed unique cultures, lifestyles, customs, traditions, religious practices, and rituals. Their lifestyles connected them to the land, forests, rivers, and natural resources. Subsistence practices such as hunting, fishing, agriculture, and gathering sustained them. Traditional clothing, music, dance, and storytelling formed integral parts of their cultural expression. They were renowned for their traditional medicinal expertise, possessing intricate knowledge of herbs and their healing properties. The findings of this inquiry shed light on the resilience of Kanikkar traditions in the face of modernization, as well as the ongoing processes of cultural adaptation and transformation within the community.

Copy Right, IJAR, 2024,. All rights reserved.

#### Introduction:-

The Kanikkar or the Kani Tribal community holds significant importance within Kerala, particularly in the Trivandrum district where they constitute the largest populated tribe. Recognized as one of the 36 tribes listed in the Gazette of India, the Kanikkars primarily inhabit the extremes of South India, with a notable concentration around the Agasthyarkudam peaks in Nedumangad Taluk, Thiruvananthapuram District. Kanikkaran means "hereditary proprietor of the land," thus recognizing their ancient rights over the forest lands (Mateer, 1883, p. 63).

This tribe represents a unique cultural entity with deep-rooted traditions and customs. Despite centuries of societal changes and external influences, the Kanikkar people have preserved their distinct cultural heritage, closely intertwined with their natural surroundings. However, globalization, urbanization, and governmental policies have posed significant challenges to the traditional way of life among the Kanikkar community, prompting an exploration into the evolving dynamics of their culture.

#### Review of Literature:-

According to Adabiya (2022), the Kanikkar customs and practices vary slightly across different regions, highlighting the diversity within their community. Notably, their utilization of medical genetics, focusing on extracting medicinal

**Corresponding Author:- Maya M.**

Address:- Research Scholar School of Social Sciences, M.G. University Kottayam.

plants for manufacturing medicines, is gaining prominence. With a profound reverence for nature and a commitment to conserving natural resources, tribal communities, including the Kanikkars, have significantly enriched Kerala's cultural heritage. Preserving the unique aspects of Kanikkar culture is vital, highlighting the responsibility of broader society to safeguard their traditions for future generations.

Sebastian (2007) portrays "Moottukani" as the traditional leader of the Kanikkars. Unlike conventional rulers, Moottukani doesn't show visible symbols of power. Instead, their authority emerges from ancestral wisdom and collective memory. "Vilikani" supports Moottukani, and "Plathi" holds significant power as a magician and medicine man within the community. He performs the most important ritual of Kanikkars, called "Chattu," with the help of an instrument called "Kokkara." Kokkara is the only musical instrument used by them.

### **Methodology:-**

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, emphasizing prolonged engagement and participant observation within the Kanikkar community. Fieldwork is primarily done in the villages and forest settlements inhabited by the Kanikkar, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their daily lives, rituals, ceremonies, and social interactions. In addition to ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews with community members, elders, and local leaders were conducted to gather diverse perspectives on their culture and its transformations. The area selected for the study is Thiruvananthapuram district. The interior forest settlements namely Chonampara, Valippara, Kaithodu, and Ariyavila under Kuttichal Panchayath were selected for this study.

### **Housing and Settlement Patterns**

Kanikkars typically live close to forests, reflecting their traditional lifestyle and reliance on forest resources for sustenance. The settlements of the Kanikkars are known as "Kanipat". Historically featured huts constructed from bamboo leaves, referred to as "veyila" in their language were used earlier. However, with government support, many Kanikkars have transitioned to concrete houses. Despite this shift, challenges persist. Some of these concrete houses are unsuitable for habitation, raising concerns about the adequacy and durability of the housing provided through government assistance.

### **Livelihood Patterns**

For centuries, the Kanikkar tribe has relied solely on the forest for their subsistence and survival. For a considerable duration, the primary economic activities were shifting cultivation, livestock farming, gathering small-scale forest produce, hunting and fishing, weaving, and handicrafts.

### **Agriculture**

They engaged primarily in agriculture and led a nomadic lifestyle. The forest restricted their traditional slash-and-burn cultivation method, posing challenges for them as farmers. These constraints compelled them to adopt settled farming practices. They would commence the jungle clearing process on a Friday in Vrishchigom (November-December) and complete it by the end of Dhanu (December-January). They would then burn the accumulated debris in Kumbham (February-March). In March and April, they would prepare the land for cultivation. Using a "thottakkambu" (an L-shaped wooden tool), they would scratch the land's surface and then scatter paddy seeds (Irshad, 2008). This practice reflects their adaptation to the environment and their resourcefulness in sustaining their agricultural activities. But recently their settled agricultural practices have also been significantly impacted.

In the study entitled "A Study on the Livelihood and Income Pattern of Kanikkar Tribe, Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu," Ganesh & Manickavasagam (2023) opined that erratic weather patterns, notably the failure of monsoons and excessive rainfall during off seasons, have profoundly disrupted settled agriculture among these communities. As a result, many tribes have suffered crop failures or the destruction of their harvests, resulting in significant financial losses. Poor ecosystem management compounds these challenges by depriving dependent biota of essential resources like food and water. Furthermore, the destruction of wildlife habitats and the increasing fragmentation of forests escalate conflicts between humans and wildlife, leading to further losses for tribal communities.

### **Hunting**

Hunting played a vital role in the Kanikkar way of life, serving as a primary source of sustenance. Their diet was diverse, encompassing everything from small rodents to larger-like tigers, yet they held a deep reverence for domestic animals, believing in their inherent purpose. Utilizing bows and locally crafted guns, the Kanikkars

demonstrated remarkable skill in hunting, often venturing out in groups to seek the blessings of hill deities through rituals such as the “Nayattuchattu” ceremony. After a successful hunt, they offer the first catch to the gods before being equitably distributed among community members. Their diet included a variety of wildlife, including pigs, monkeys, raccoons, deer, porcupines, squirrels, turtles, and wildfowl. However, with the enforcement of hunting bans by the Forest Department and the rise of poaching among locals, they found themselves vulnerable, unable to continue their traditional practices.

### **Fishing**

Fishing is a traditional activity for many indigenous communities, including the Kani tribe, who have historically relied on water bodies like rivers, streams, and dams for sustenance. The Neyyar reservoir, located nearby, serves as the primary fishing destination. They utilise various fishing tools and techniques, including conventional rods made from toddy palms (*Caryotaurens*) and lines. Earthworms have been a popular bait for a long time. However, introducing crocodiles into the reservoir has significantly threatened their fishing activities. With inadequate safety measures in place and a growing population of crocodiles, the Kanikkars now face heightened risks when venturing out to fish. This situation has diminished their ability to access this vital food source and raised concerns for their safety and well-being. Efforts to mitigate these risks and find sustainable solutions are crucial to safeguarding their livelihoods amidst these new challenges. Additionally, modern challenges such as overfishing, pollution, and changing ecosystems have threatened the sustainability of traditional fishing practices for many tribal communities.

### **Gathering minor forest produce**

The Kani tribe in Kerala is known for collecting various forest products such as honey, bee wax, medicinal plants, cardamoms, wild ginger, dammar, bamboo, turmeric, and gums. They gather honey from wild beehives found in the forests. Honey serves as both sustenance and a valuable trade commodity. The most expensive variety, “Cheruthen”, is in great demand. They collect “Perumthen” in substantial amounts, with each hive potentially yielding 3 to 6 litres from one comb and containing around four combs. These hives are often high up in trees or on rugged rock ledges. “Thoduthen”, the hardest to harvest, is found beneath tree roots or deep within rocky outcrops and is treasured for its medicinal uses. In addition to honey, the tribe also collects bee wax for traditional uses. Alongside honey, they collect beeswax, which has multiple uses, including in conventional medicine and as a raw material for candles and cosmetics. The forest provides an array of medicinal plants, which they use for healing. These plants are essential for their well-being. The tribe also extracts gums and resins from various trees. These substances find applications in traditional medicine, crafts, and rituals. Recently the collection of minor forest produce has decreased substantially.

### **Animal breeding**

They raise various animals including hens, goats, cows, rabbits, buffaloes, pigs, and ducks. For generations, the Kani people have maintained a close relationship with their environment, relying on sustainable methods of animal husbandry to meet their needs. But there is a gradual decline in animal breeding among them.

### **Handicrafts**

Handicrafts, particularly bamboo ones, hold a significant portion of the local market. However, the artisans often face economic difficulties due to seasonal fluctuations in the availability of raw materials. They craft a variety of items, including “muram” (a type of winnowing fan), “vatti” (a small bowl), “kotta” (basket), “parambu” (mat), as well as bamboo hats, crowns, and “vallam” (a type of boat). The insufficiency of raw materials and competition from mass-produced goods drive artisans to explore alternative livelihoods for stability and better income prospects. As younger community members pursue education and urban employment opportunities, traditional craftsmanship faces the risk of fading away due to a decline in interest and skill transmission across generations.

### **Social Organization**

Marriages within the Kanikkar tribe blend traditional customs and evolving societal norms. Historically, the initiation of marriage arrangements rested with the boy's parents, often overseen by elder family members, particularly the uncle. However, contemporary trends witness a rise in love marriages, marking a departure from traditional matchmaking practices. While Plathis once determined auspicious wedding timings, modern consultations with astrologers have become customary. Symbolic rituals like tying the “minnu” around the bride's neck by the groom have transformed into gifting gold jewellery or “thali,” reflecting changing economic circumstances. Former restrictions on marriage partners, limited to cross-cousins, have relaxed, leading to a surge in love and intercaste marriages, alongside instances of elopement. The customary bride price, once symbolized by “athyarappanam” or “penpanam,” has gradually transitioned to dowry practices. Authority figures such as the

Moottukani and elders previously held sway over marriage arrangements, but contemporary couples enjoy greater autonomy in mate selection.

Family is the bedrock of support, providing emotional, financial, and social sustenance and nurturing individuals through life's challenges and triumphs. Its significance lies in fostering a sense of belonging and identity and in shaping values, beliefs, and intergenerational bonds that endure over time. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift within the Kanikkar tribe towards nuclear family structures, with a decrease in the prevalence of joint families. It's become increasingly common for newly married couples to establish their households, typically not far from their parental homes, though there may be greater geographical distance in some cases. These nuclear families primarily consist of the husband and wife, with a minority including grandparents. Upon setting up their new homes, the couples often acquire a ration card, enabling them to access government benefits and support schemes. The evolving social context among them now emphasizes economic freedom and personal autonomy while recognizing the significance of family bonds and community solidarity.

### Religious Beliefs and Rituals

According to Kanikkar's belief, spirits are divided into benevolent and malevolent categories, each with distinct characteristics and roles in the spiritual realm. Chattu is the main religious practice and ritual of Kanis. The songs sung during Chattu are known as Chattupattu. "Chattu is not a mantra or magical practice but a great form that can be said to be a reflection of the culture or way of life, "as elucidated by K. R. Ajayan, in his work "AgastyarkoodathileAdivasikal" in 2009. Chattu is named differently based on the purpose. There are various chattu like Pinichattu, Thudichattu or Vayattuchattu, Chavuthottichattu, Nayattuchattu, Karthikachattu, Vaazhavettichattu, Mannazhichuchattu, Karimkalichattu, Rogashamanachattu, Valakettichattu, Koduthichattu etc. The economic dimension has become a primary focus, overshadowing its original religious significance. However, the ritual's sustainability faces challenges as younger generations show declining interest in performing it and learning the oral tradition from elders.

"Koduthi" is another significant ritual of Kanis which is conducted to please the deities and to ensure various forms of prosperity, protection, and well-being within the community. The Aandukoduthi, also known as Kumbhakoduthi due to its association with the Kumbhamasam month, serves as an expression of gratitude and happiness towards nature, accompanied by the blessings of deities. Through this ritual, prayers are offered to the gods, seeking their favor for abundant harvests, fertile lands, and favorable weather conditions essential for successful cultivation. Putharikkoduthi and Muthikoduthi, are performed to secure future agricultural prosperity. Nowadays Koduthi is not practiced accordingly in most of the hamlets.

### Results and Conclusion:-

The Kanikkar tribe has witnessed significant transformations across various aspects of their lives, reflecting the profound changes sweeping through their community. From their housing patterns, which have shifted from traditional bamboo huts to modern concrete structures, to their livelihood practices transitioning from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture, the Kanikkars have adapted to new ways of living. These changes signify a shift in lifestyle and economic pursuits, mirroring broader societal norms and values shifts. Social institutions like marriage and family have also changed, with a rise in love marriages and a shift towards nuclear family structures. Moreover, once deeply rooted in tradition, rituals and ceremonies have evolved to accommodate changing circumstances and beliefs.

### Bibliography:-

1. Adabiya, H. (2022). Culture and Traditions of Kanikkars in Kerala: An Analysis. IJAR, 10(12), 739-742. DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/15897
2. Ajayan, K. R. (2009). AgasthyarKoodathileAdivasikal. Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute.
3. Ganesh, T. U., & Manickavasagam, B. (2023). A study on the Livelihood and income pattern of Kanikkar Tribe, Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu. Journal of Survey in Fisheries Sciences, 10(2S), 3529-3537. DOI: 10.17762/sfs.v10i2S.1590.
4. Irshad, M. (2008). Kanikkar. Sreenivasavanam: Dravidian University.
5. Mateer, S. (1883). Native life in Travancore. London: W.H. Allen & Co.
6. Sebastian, M. (2007). Kanikkar: JeevithavumSamskaaravum. Trivandrum: Mythri.