DEATH CUSTOMS IN THE TRIBAL CONTEXT:
CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

CHAPTER 5

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The application of the foregoing data may lead us to certain important derivations. We may first note that the entire tribal tradition is now losing its purity and originality and is either being dissolved into the mainstream dominant tradition or being swallowed by non-tribal ethos. The typical tribal characteristics of ignorance, unambitious life, subsistence economy, readiness to believe others and the general habit of honouring debt all have made them unsuitable creatures for the modern life and have provided the necessary spiritual background for outsiders to exploit them in the most brutal way. The only option to total ruin is to get adjusted with the non-tribal social milieu at the sacrifice of age-old tribal values. As they have been besieged from outside, and as they are unable to withstand the external pressures, the tribal people will have to succumb to it. The result is their gross alienation from their traditions and values. This alienation has had its inevitable reflection even in the sphere of the cult of the dead. Funeral rites have been the most important occasions of social gathering and have played a pivotal role in reaffirming tribal unity and cohesion and settling disputes of various kinds. With culture change and with the consequent erosion of faith (also with the encroachment of the governmental authority through the agencies of the
police and law courts), such gatherings are now fast losing their use value. On the other hand, the new generation has started identifying funeral rites as instrumental in bringing about their economic decline. They also slowly recognize the exploitative role of the priestly class in perpetuating these outmoded rites for their own benefit.

This should not lead us to presume that tribal life is a blend of unmitigated virtues and a panacea for the ills of the value-less, spiritually void modern life. There is a tendency among many to perceive the tribal set up with a great sense of reverence and nostalgia and to uphold its greatness. Leaving aside the simplicity and great many virtues of tribal life, the functioning of some of the most reactionary forces within the tribal society such as the domination of patriarchal values and priestly deception would surprise even an ardent sympathizer. While all kin-clansmen bear the burden of priestly authority and exploitation, women as a class suffer the hardships of extreme gender discrimination. And all these are in the name of tradition and faith.

The archaic character of tribal life has also been an area of great interest. There is a tendency among anthropologists to look at the tribal practices as a continuous unchanging system with very little efforts at the application of the notion of change with continuity. Thus most of the tribal practices are observed to have a long historical continuity reaching up to
prehistoric times. Not only their social and economic systems but also even their religious and cultural traditions are seen as primitive and static. Thus they are living traditions of antiquarian practices. There has also been a tendency to draw a parallel between Megalithism and tribalism since some of the tribals are found to follow a few megalithic traditions. They are regarded as the lineal descendants of the megalith builders. As the true authors of the Megalithic culture are still behind the curtains, this question may continue to haunt historians and archaeologists.

**Acculturation/ Sanskritization**

The life and culture of the Malabar tribes have long been undergoing a slow process of transformation as a consequence of the contacts with the culture of the more advanced peoples of the surrounding areas. Sociologists, anthropologists and archaeologists together have described this process of culture change through culture contact as 'acculturation'. The concept of acculturation has been defined as "...those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact...". Terms such as 'disintegration', 'fusion' and 'assimilation', in contrast, have been used to describe changes resulting from contact. Stated at an intermediate level, the study of acculturation is envisaged as an assessment of both important conditions of contact and the consequences of these

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conditions for the major facets of the cultures involved. Even contacts are of different varieties, labeled by terms such as 'antagonistic contact', 'exploitative contact' and 'philanthropic contact'. "Common to all descriptions of change resulting from contact is the notion that change has direction: first, change on the part of members of one culture away from the rules governing their traditional structured activities without internalization of the rules of the other culture; and second, change towards the rules governing the structured activities of the other culture. In the first instance, which we call alienation, the rules of the culture are abandoned; in the second instance, which we call reorientation, the rules are altered by processes of internalization to bring them into line with those of other cultures".

In the Indian context D.D. Kosambi recognizes the reciprocal nature of acculturation. He observes that "acculturation in India was a continuous process extending over the millennia, very difficult to date for that very reason. It was not at base a violent action, since both the more advanced and less advanced elements in the formation of a new society borrowed from each other". Meanwhile, the process of acculturation that has been going on among the Hindu castes in India is observed to be different from the normal

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3 Ibid. p.37. The term 'philanthropic contact' is used to describe the contact between missionaries and the non-Christian local peoples.
4 Ibid., pp. 33-34.
process of acculturation and, to understand this complex process, M.N. Srinivas devised a new conceptual category namely ‘Sanskritization’. He clarifies: “The Caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and tea-totalism, and by sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins and the adoption of the Brahmanic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called Sanskritization in this book, in preference to Brahmanization as certain Vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins, and the two other ‘twice-born’ castes’.

Sanskritization thus presupposes not only an assimilation of the practices of the dominant castes but also the acceptance of the Brahmanical view of the Hindu society.

Census of India 1901, Madras contains the following passage on the process of tribal cultural adaptation as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. “The forest and hill tribes, however, are well-known to be undergoing a slow process of Hinduizing, or rather Brahmanization, as a result of their contact with the Brahmin customs of their neighbours on the plains, and to often pay a sort of reverence to the Hindu gods while they simultaneously

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worship their original spirit deities". Thus large scale acculturation, which of course includes considerable Sanskritization, has taken place among the Malabar tribes not only in the realms of the social system and behavioural patterns but even in the death customs. However, a large number of the tribes of Malabar were forest dwellers and had depended on food gathering for a livelihood. They were relatively insular. Some of these tribes like the Cholanaikkar have only recently come into contact with non-tribal people. But it is quite interesting to note that even among the most primitive tribes, and in spite of their late entry into the mainstream, the volume of acculturation is tremendous and they are slowly on a path of absorption into the Hindu religious pantheon. At the socio-religious level three kinds of relationships are crucial in bringing about these changes. First, their familiarity with Hindus of various castes; second, their relations with Christian and Muslim settlers; and third, inter-tribal contacts. While contacts with the Hindus helped to familiarize them with the Hindu gods and rituals and avail them to acquire a space within the Hindu religion (though at the lowest rank), nearness to people of other communities like the Christians and the Muslims have made them aware of the needs of social advancement. A large number of tribal people, especially the Kurichiyyas, have also been converted to Christianity which has definitely enhanced their social mobility. Inter-tribal cultural exchanges are no less important since there were clear hierarchies and rules of

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pollution even within them which was greatly restricting the scope for unity and co-operation.

The relation of tribal people to Hinduism is quite different from their relation to Christianity or Islam. The main reason for the tribal attraction towards Hinduism is that Hindu rituals tend to be the modified form of the tribal practices and tribal religion. Thus they were able to acquire a Hindu way of life and hinduising their gods and goddesses without sacrificing much of their traditional practices. As even the tribal social structure resembled a crude form of caste system with higher and lower ranking tribes and with strict rules of endogamy and pollution, the Hindu way of life doesn’t appear alien to them. But this is not the case with other religions; those who were converted were unconditionally asked to relinquish all their previous and ‘primitive’ traditions. It is unthinkable for tribal people, who are extremely ritual- ridden, to sacrifice their ritual identity for any cause however great they may appear to be. The deep faith in ancestors also has stood against embracing new faiths. This may account for the relative low level of religious conversions among the tribal people. Conversion of lower caste Hindus to other religions were accomplished due to the less ritual-oriented character of their cultures. On the other hand, Kurichiya converts and some tribes of North-east India who have been attracted to Christianity have not compromised on the basics of their traditions.
The process of acculturation in Malabar was perhaps intensified by the establishment of the colonial power. It began with the expansion of external political power into the tribal areas and took a momentum with the migration of the land-hungry peasants to the hitherto unused forest lands. With the advent of westerners a mixture of colonial interests including the increasing economic pressures led to the British expansion into the tribal areas. Although we know that Pazhaśśi Raja had his political power over the tribals of Wynad, most of the primitive communities were out of the purview of it. But with the establishment of the British power, tribal areas were brought under control. Through stringent forest policies, the freedom of movement of the tribal people in the forests was considerably curtailed. By appointing upper caste intermediaries as Janmis and tax collectors in the tribal areas, they were not just been converted into the subjects of the state but their sovereignty over their landed possessions was being alienated. The conversion of a major area of forest lands into plantations also brought about considerable scope for external influences. Thus tribal people were exposed to unknown and alien norms and traditions which they were forced to absorb piece-meal in course of time.

In recent times the pace of migration of non-tribal people to the tribal areas gave a revolutionary impetus to the process of acculturation. But its nature varied according to the familiarity of the tribal people with one or the other religious community with which they happened to co-exist with. As
Christians and Muslims were in the forefront of migration in recent times, they were influenced most by the linguistic and cultural traditions of these settlers. The role of migration in adversely affecting the life of the tribals of Malabar mainly by alienating them of their traditional lands, and by subjecting them for ruthless exploitation and placing them at an inferior social status have been recognizes as a historical fact. But even in this great wave of cultural erosion at the socio-economic sphere, the tribal situation reveals extremely limited and a slow process of absorption of external variables in the beliefs and practices associated with death customs. And even the limited elements of accommodation are from the upper caste Hindu traits and the least from Islamic practices.

The following are the major areas of acculturation in the realm of death customs and funeral rites of the Malabar tribes.

1. The tribal attribution of the cause of death to the will of God. Earlier most of the tribes had identified death as unnatural and caused by the attack of some kinds of malevolent spirits. Now they have started telling about Āyussu (life expectancy) and Vidhi (destiny) as detrimental in the ending up of one’s life.

2. Many tribes now hold the concept of Swarga or heaven and Naraka or hell and keep faith in Kālan (yama) as the god of death. The former tribal

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belief was that the spirits of the dead lived either in the premises of their hamlets or in a nearby hill. The ghosts of the dead ancestors, who were also worshipped, were thought to be proximate enough to attend a call, anytime. The faith in Swarga and Naraka evidently stand against this cherished tradition. The identification of a god of death also negates the tradition.

3. The recent introduction of the faith in rebirth and reincarnation of souls into the tribal pantheon is the most important instance of 'Sanskritization'. The dead were never thought to be reborn either as animals or birds nor were the crows treated as the carriers of the souls of the dead.\(^9\)

We notice that it is those tribal groups who are dependants of the upper caste Hindus and therefore more acquainted with upper caste norms and traditions that offer Bali to the crows during the pollution period.

4. The present day tribal belief in the omen of death as well as other auspicious or inauspicious omens doesn’t appear to have a continuity of tradition and more possibly is an influence from the plains. The best example of this is the faith in the crow as a bird of omen. As crows are not familiar to the forest dwellers, ritualistic traditions associated with it should certainly be an external influence.

\(^9\) Even the dominant tribes like the Kurichiyas didn’t have such a faith. See, Dr. Kumaran Vayaleri, "Kurichiyasude Mithukalum Avarude Sankal pangalum", Vaidyasastram, Special Tribal Issue, 28, July-August 1997, pp.36-37.
5. Offering *Punyāham* (sacred water collected from temples) or water from a pot containing basil leaves and gold pieces to the dying person and to the corpse before the funeral are definitely an element of ‘Sanskritization’. The Basil plant is sacred for the Hindus in all ritualistic occasions and water mixed with it equals the Ganga water.

6. Lighting *Nilavilakku*, using *spouted vessel* placing coconut-halves and rice in a plate near the corpse is a later cultural intrusion. Coconut or rice cultivation was not a part of the traditional subsistence agrarian economy of majority of the tribals and therefore were items never used in any sacred rituals. With the expansion of market economy the traditional diet was replaced with rice and with the intrusion of Brahmanic ideals rice began to be used in ritual occasions like marriage and death in the form of being placed in a brass plate (*talika*) or brass pot (*Paṇa*). Same is the case with *Nilavilakku*; the tribal people were absolutely ignorant of using edible oil for lighting lamps.

7. Tribal people have started reciting Ramayana sitting beside the corpse from the time of death to the funeral. Not only that the practice is a high caste Hindu tradition but also that most of the tribals were not acquainted with *purānas* like the Ramayana till very recently.
8. Drawing circle with rice/paddy around the corpse. Though not popular among all tribes, this is a new practice borrowed by tribes like the Malamutthans from the high caste Hindus.

9. Practices such as washing the corpse, Kōdiyidal (especially paṭṭu), decorating corpse with flowers, putting vermillion marks on the forehead, and removing tāli before burial are recent cultural devices at the occasion of a funeral. The tying of tāli or a badge of marriage around the neck of the wife by the husband and which is supposed to be a life-long mark of subordination was strictly a Brahmanic practice. Even the Nair form of marriage was Pudamuṛi, i.e., tearing of a piece of cloth during marriage. Attaching the wife of the dead man with certain symbols of widowhood through special kinds of rituals was a practice prevalent only among the Namboothiri and other Brahmins of Kerala. Although corpse was sacred for the tribals, fear of the dead had persuaded them to keep a distance from it in former days and so rituals dealing with the touching of the body like either washing it or spreading kōdi over it was never followed.

10. Like the funeral functionaries among the Hindu castes, (Mārān for Nairs and Mūssad, Elayath or Athikkuriṣṭi Nair for Nambūthiris,) many tribals have such functionaries. Changāṭhi is the ritual functionary at death for both the Wayanādan Kurichiyas and the Karimpālans while Karuni and Karmi are those for the Adiyāns and Māvilāns respectively. The only
difference is that the functionary of the tribals is from the same tribe. But from
the fact that such offices prevail among those tribal communities who were
closer to the upper caste Hindus from very early days, help substantiate this
argument.

11. Like among the caste Hindus many tribes observe the ritual of
smashing the pot at the feet of the corpse. This ritual is more popular among
tribes like the Pañiyas who are having close contacts with the high ranking
Hindus.

12. The custom of payment to all funeral functionaries for their services -
for grave-diggers, bier-makers, death messengers and funeral functionaries - is
an imitation of caste-Hindu practice because among the tribal people the
concept of payments for services didn’t exist at all. Among them services for
all social functions including death were voluntary. The commoditization of
services is a relatively recent phenomenon even for the upper castes and for
the tribals it is certainly the absorption of a non-tribal norm.

13. Recently most tribes have reduced the duration as well as the rigidity
of death pollution. The early years of the twentieth century had witnessed a
conscious attempt on the part of many Hindu castes in this direction. It was
an attempt to realize the importance of the value of time in the emerging busy
material life as well as an attempt to apply reason in analyzing rituals leading
to identify them as superstitious. Although many tribes have not started
examining the rituals that they follow from a scientific or rational spirit, inability to keep away from jobs for a long time has forced them to cut short the period of pollution. The condemnation of even the very practice of pollution at the hands of the migrant Christian or Muslim settlers also might have made its impact on these lines.

14. Formal invitation is now necessary for both kinsmen and clansmen to attend the last rites. Earlier, intimation of death entailed a responsibility on the part of all to participate in the last rite as well. Now tradition and tribal ethos have given way to formalism and middle class notions of individual pride.

15. Most of the tribes have been vegetarian during the course of pollution (pula), but blood sacrifices, alcoholic drinks and non-vegetarian food was essential for the ceremony to mark the end of it. Today, restrictions on hunting and animal sacrifices combined with a penetration of Brahmanic values have induced most tribes to prefer vegetarian food being served at the feast that marked the end of pollution. Avoidance of blood sacrifices and preference of vegetarianism are supposed to erase the erstwhile wild character of the tribal people and help accommodate them into the Hindu fold.

16. An associated practice is the merging of the ashes and bones of the deceased person into the River Pāpanāśini at Tirunelli. This practice presupposes not only the identification of the land of the dead away from the immediate surroundings but also a faith in temples and temple-oriented
rituals. It also is an indication of the acceptance of Brahmanical priesthood other than the tribal functionaries and the concepts of papa (sin) and punya (virtue) since the last rites at Tirunelli are performed at the office of a Brahmin priest.

17. Offerings to ancestors at special occasions like on the New Moon day, Oonam, Vishu, etc is a recent development. Popular festivals of the plains like Oonam or Vishu had not been celebrated by the tribal people till very recently. Besides, they were not familiar with the Karkidakavāvu, since they were not aware of the Malayalam month of Karkidakam nor did they have their own calendar.

18. Recently the tribals have started seeking the help of efficient Brahmin or Nair sorcerers to ward off evil spirits. Tribes who had the faith in, or fear of, evil spirits had their own sorcerers to control them in the event of attacks from them. Now with the pursuance of external sorcerers they are not only declaring their incapacity in dealing with their own spirits but also are willingly accepting the cultural invasion of upper caste Hindus.

19. Among the Malamutthans death pollution had ended only with the wearing of a cloth by the mourners washed by the Vanṇāns (traditional washerman) known as Vanṇāthimāttu. Such a practice was common among many high caste Hindus. It is significant that the Vanṇāns had served only upper caste Hindus to remove death or menstrual pollution by helping wash
clothes and their ritual relationship with tribal Malamuthans would open a new space for more discourses. Whether it is an instance of cultural adaptation or a residue of the of the Malamuthan tradition before their segregation into a tribe is not clear. There are certain possibilities for the second inference because the Malamuthans call them as *Mala-Nambūothiris*, and tribes like the Kurichiyyas are believed to be castes transformed into tribes.

20. Certain tribes have started the construction of cement platforms over the relics of the dead in the upper caste Hindu model. It is interesting to note that this practice is being imitated by the tribals from the upper caste Hindus like the Nairs and not vice-versa.

21. The Aṭṭappādi tribes have a tradition of celebrating *Śivarātri* and worship at the Mallēswaran temple on that day after making pilgrimage to the Mallēswaran peak nearby. The Mallēswaran temple is a Śiva temple and it is constructed in the traditional Hindu style, where an Iruḷa priest performs ritual functions in the Brahmin way. Faith in Hindu gods and temples are on the rise and the Ėṟavāḷans at Muthalamada were seeking the assistance of a Brahmin

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priest for the preparations of the construction of a temple there when we visited the settlement.

22. Like the caste Hindus the tribes have started consulting Kanjiyan (or ganikan, the astrologer by caste) at the time of funeral rituals to be informed of the pros and cons of death as well as the measures to be taken against flaws or sins.

23. The use of the Sanskrit word Pretam for the spirit of the dead is an instance of cultural accommodation. The term generally used by all tribes was Peyi or some other local variants like Kuli. That the more acculturated tribes use the term Pretam itself stand as testimony to the non-tribal origin of it.

24. Besides, inter-tribal relations are fast progressing through cultural exchanges. But the volume of inter-tribal adaptation is relatively minimal when compared to ‘Sanskritization’ since there is always a tendency towards upward mobility, particularly to merge with the mainstream society. Still we have evidences of inter-tribal marriages, like that among the Irulas, Mudugas and the Kurumbas which has started influencing the insular character of the funeral practices.

25. In recent times because of the advancing market economy, tribesmen have started using many materials available in the market during the occasion of the funeral and post-burial ceremonies. For instance most tribes use incense sticks instead of dammer, rice instead of ragi, new cloths instead of old or
preserved ones as kōdi, and soap and oil for washing the corpse at the time of
funeral and most of the items needed for the last rites. In former times even
the grand second funeral of the Kuṟumbas were organized with natural goods
available at their disposal.

26. The Christian missionaries who have been active among the Indian
tribes for more than a century have offered them a more fertile life. Their
work has made a powerful impact on the North-eastern tribes in the form of
large scale conversions. The main converts are the Nagas, Kukis, Khasis,
Garos, Oraons, Santhals. In South India a section of a few tribes like the
Todas, Kuričiyas, Koṟagas, Paṇiyas, Āḷar and Uḷḷādans have also been
attracted to Christianity. These conversions have suddenly made an impact on
tribal funeral practices reorienting them on the lines of the Christian norms.
They have shifted their practice from animism to monotheism as well. On the
other hand, the constant contacts with the Christian settlers and Christian
missionaries in Malabar have failed to make a considerable influence on tribal
religion either by attracting them on a large scale to Christianity or by
transforming their funeral rituals substantially, except that a few tribes like the
Kuṟumbas, Karimpālans and the Māvilāns have started using coffins for
burying the dead by imitating the Christian practice.

27. Islamic religious rituals attracted the tribals even less, especially those among Malabar. A few tribes in other parts of India like the Meos of Rajasthan and Meerut, Gujjar of Jammu and Kashmir and tribes in Lakshadweep islands have been converted to Islam. The rigidity of Islam and the disinterest shown by the Muslims in getting converts among the Malabar tribes have been basic to this phenomenon. Even in the region of the present day Malappuram district where Muslims constitute the majority of the population, tribesmen have not been converted into Islam. The great contempt shown by the Malamutthans towards Islam, though has not been explained satisfactorily, is a specimen of the general tribal attitude. But certain rare traits of adaptation are visible. The Chōlanāikkans are observed to use words like Khabar for the corpse and Khabaradakkam for funeral due to their close contacts with Muslim traders of Karulayi.

**Megalithism as a Living Tradition**

Megalithism, which is the practice of erecting huge funerary stone edifices called Megaliths to mark the presence of a burial, was very popular and widespread among many people of the world. Generally speaking, Megaliths are huge stone structures or mortuary houses built up generally of large, dressed stones erected commonly to protect the relics of the deceased ancestors. Although on the world scale this practice dates back to the

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Neolithic period, in India it surfaced during the Iron Age. In the context of Kerala, the megalithic period is associated with the Iron Age and is characterized by a culture as observed in other parts of India. The most popular type of megaliths namely the underground rock-cut chambers, containing a rock-cut cot along with a central pillar (or without the pillar) and with a side entrance, scooped out of the laterite bedrock resembles that of a house. The typical Kerala variety of Megalith called *Kodakkallu* though present the profile of a grant mushroom, contains a square chamber inside it sheltering the relics of the deceased ancestors. We can infer that the megalithic people who erected these mortuary monuments were placing the burial remains of their ancestors in a safe and everlasting chamber so that the spirits of the dead ancestors will not return to the world of the living to molest their life. Annual propitiation followed by rituals would keep the spirits of the dead remain benevolent.

The difference in size, shape, form and structure of these ritualistic monuments may be adaptations to the physical features of the habitat. James Fergusson, who was the first to study them in 1872 in terms of their architectural features, christened them as ‘megaliths’ and took such a view which he expressed in the title of his book *Rude Stone Monuments in All Countries* (which ranged from the Iberian peninsula to the Indian subcontinent and beyond); more surprisingly G. Childe in 1948 wrote a paper entitled “Megaliths” on a similar basis, with a map, visually relating the ‘megalithic’
tombs of Southern India (from the 10th century BC to the beginning of the Christian era) to those of Western Europe where, as we now know, they go back to the fourth millennium BC. These mortuary house complexes along with a distinct material culture appeared in different parts of the world in different contexts. Because of the confusion prevails with regard to the classification of megaliths of South India, Lawrence Leshnik termed them as Pandukal complex. K.J. John, who first termed it as Nadukal complex, later renamed it as Nāṭṭukal complex.

The cultural equipment of the megalithic community comprised Black-and-Red ware, legged jars and iron implements. Other grave goods discovered from them in Kerala include legged jars, All-black-ware, Russet-coated ware, sarcophagi, gold ornaments, beads, bronze objects, defensive and offensive iron weapons, agricultural equipments like sickles and horse bridle. Megaliths are found on all terrains of Kerala, from the coastal tract to the Western Ghat ranges. At the level of technology, both the structures and the associate finds presuppose high sophistication. Urn burials or Muthumakkal Thāzhi, found all over Kerala, though considered as a megalithic type, have no lithic appendage as in the case of Kodakkals and Thoppikkals. But the essential content of the culture comprising black-and-red ware pottery, grave goods, iron implements, etc are present in the urn burial sites. Whenever an urn burial site is marked by

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a standing huge stone, as in the case of *Pulachikals* found at Aṭṭappādi, Trichur, Perumbavur, Wynad, etc, they are categorized as Menhirs. Whenever an urn burial is sealed by a hemispherical hat-stone, they are classified as *Toppikkal*.

The material remains from the megalithic sites in Kerala unquestionably establish a tradition of life oriented towards the cult of the dead with a deep faith in the next world and a high level of divinity accorded to the ancestors. The absence of other symbols of worship combined with the commonality of burial relics suggests the preeminence of ancestor cult in the spiritual life of the Iron Age people of Malabar. There is a striking parallel between the megalithic cultural traits and the present day tribal practices. The importance given to the cult of the dead and to the spirit of the deceased ancestors, the unfailing faith in the ancestors as the divine entity, the still continuing practice of grave goods deposition and the peculiar types of grave-digging with side cavity, marking the grave with stone circles, all would help to establish this hypothesis positively. If megalithism is taken not just as a practice of constructing burial tombs, which is only a material manifestation of the concept of monumental architecture, but as a cult attributing specific emphasis on animistic religion and life after death, the absence of the erection of funerary superstructure would not dissuade us from focusing on tribal burials as a continuation of Megalithic culture and from categorizing tribal people as the inheritors of the Megalithic builders of Kerala.
The erection of Megalithic monuments is a living tradition among a number of tribes of Burma, Indonesia, Thailand, Melanesia, and also of the Indian subcontinent. The Khasis, Garos, and Nagas in North-eastern India, the Mundas, Oraons, Hos, Bondos, in Eastern India, the Gond and Baiga in Central India, and the Kota, Kurumba (of the Nilgiris), Toda and Gadaba in South India still follow the tradition of erecting memorials for the dead. A striking feature of the funeral monuments of the present day tribes is that they are miniature memorial stones. The tribes of today erect memorials only after performing an elaborate secondary burial. They collect remains from the grave and keep them in sacred places or clan ossuaries and erect commemorative stones over it to mark the burial site. Haimendorf notices that the Megaliths of the tribal folks of today are, with comparatively few exceptions, memorials unconnected with graves or burning grounds. Those of Iron Age are closely associated with graves. He adds that the distinctive port-hole opening which will be found to characterize many of the megalithic cists of southern India 'does not occur among any of the tribes of middle India, who bury their dead in Megalithic graves, such as the Mundas and Gonds'. Thus though with substantial structural changes, megalithism continues to be a living tradition in many parts of India.

16 Furer Von C. Haimendorf, "The Problem of Megalithic Culture in Middle India", Man in India, Vol 25, 1945, pp. 73-86.
Traces of Megalithism in the form of the erection of burial tombs are
still evident among a few tribal people of Kerala. The Mala Arayans of
Travancore even today erect miniature dolmens for the dead.\textsuperscript{17} They are
reported to have been erecting it when a man dies an unnatural death.\textsuperscript{18} The
Kuṟumbas of the Nilgiris cremate their dead and bury a few post-cremation
bones in \textit{Savumane} (death-house) or small cromlechs of three upright stones
with a covering slab. These cromlechs are said to have been made by their
forefathers, and which are reused by them. The Kurumbas of Malabar do not
practice cremation but bury the dead and make a circle of small stones around
the grave.\textsuperscript{19} It is noticed that the Kuṟumbas of Aṭṭappādi today worship
menhir-type idols in their shrines, which may have been the relics of their
funeral memorials of the past. Similarly, the Kādar of Erumappāra who were
resettled from Paṟambikuḷam some 30 or 40 years ago have stone circles
around three graves of their most respected ancestors. The practice of marking
burial sites with one or two stones or to put a heap of stones over the grave is
followed by many tribes even today.

Likewise, other features of the megalithic culture such as the
deposition of grave goods are widespread among them. Excavation reports of
Megalithic burials of the Iron Age have revealed the prevalence of the practice
of burying the dearest possessions of the deceased person in the grave along

\textsuperscript{17} L. A. Krishna Iyer, \textit{The Pre-historic Archaeology of Kerala}, Trivandrum, 1948, p.18.
\textsuperscript{19} J.W. Breeks, \textit{An Account of the primitive Tribes and the Monuments of the Nilgiris}, London,
1873, pp. 54-55.
with the dead body.\textsuperscript{20} This practice is common among all Malabar tribes. Goods being deposited in the graves include knives, sickles, spades, digging sticks, needles, axes, fishing hooks, bow and arrow, pottery, ornaments, coins, clothes and cooked or raw food materials. Gender differences can also be noticed in the grave goods with materials such as ornaments, daily utensils and sickles predominate over the graves of women. In recent times grave good deposition is getting less and less popular because of the increasing awareness of their material value which is chiefly due to the process of the advancing acculturation.

L.A. Krishna Iyer and K.J. John have argued that Megalithism is still a living tradition among the people of Malabar. But Krishna Iyer notices that while megaliths are commemorative rather than sepulchral today, they have lost their funerary significance by getting associated with the gorgeous, but unrelated, memorial feasts.\textsuperscript{21} John identifies three important areas of megalithic survivals in the present day society, both tribal and non-tribal. First of all, it survives in the form of the worship of the ancestor, particularly among the Vaṇṇans, Malayans, Theeyans and Nairs. Secondly, the practice of offerings to the spirits of the ancestors on special occasions is a fossilized behaviour from the past. And finally, tribal burial practices like the peculiar


kind of grave digging and grave good deposition, construction of stone circles or making burial marks with stones over the graves are a continuity of the megalithic tradition. Let us quote him in detail:

"The continuity of those aspects of Megalithic culture centered on the cult of the dead is manifested in the surviving ghost worship and the ritualistic ghost dances of the little communities of Malabar, and in the burial customs of tribes in isolated areas in the Sahyadri ranges. Most of the traditional houses of the little communities contain a room dedicated to the dead ancestors, in which are placed small low stools or peethams. It is believed that a particular ghost comes to sit on each of these on days when offerings are made. The spirits of the dead ancestors are regularly propitiated on the New Moon days of Karkidakam (July-August) and Thulam (Oct-Nov). Food is cooked in the kitchen and a large portion is placed on a plantain leaf for each of the ancestor-spirits... Toddy and arrack were traditionally served along with the meal. If a dead ancestor is known to have enjoyed special foods during life, he receives a large portion of these foods during the ceremony.

"Dead heroes, powerful ancestors, and persons who died prematurely in accidents or from contagious diseases are worshipped on a large scale by the little communities of Malabar in the form of theyyams. During the performance of the theyyam ritual the dancer achieves identification with the spirit of the dead ancestor... Theyyams are also known as ghost or mask
dances. In the north of Kerala, there are hundreds of ancestral theyyams and now a few are being worshipped as sanskritized deities.

“In aristocratic households of north Kerala the spirit of the dead ancestor and the presiding deity of the lineage segment (tarawad) may be housed together in an ancient shrine. A theyam dance will be performed annually in front of this shrine along with rituals for the dead ancestors. Another practice indicating ritualistic continuity of Megalithism is the cult of Muthappan. The little communities of Malabar offer payamkutti to the Muthappan, the dead ancestor, on occasion of difficulty, misfortune or need.

“Tribal burial customs are also significant. The majority of the tribals who live in the Sahyadri ranges practice a burial custom, which is very similar to the Megalithism of the ancient days. A rectangular pit is sunk in the ground and a side chamber is excavated at the bottom for the body, which is accompanied by pots containing food and water and grave goods such as bow and arrow, a bill hook, a sickle, and other tools closely associated with the deceased. The pit is then filled with earth and boulders, sealed with huge stones, and earth is piled in a heap above”.22

22 K.J. John, “The Megalithic Culture of Kerala” in V.N. Misra and Peter Bellwood Eds., Recent Advances in Indo-Pacific History, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 487-489. John also argues that payamkutti is a ceremony which redeems debts due to the ancestors in order to improve the fortunes and well being of the living. It is in accordance with the traditional belief that if the ancestors are propitiated, all misfortunes that may cast a shadow over the members of the tarawad will be averted.
It thus becomes clear that Megalithic traits persist strongly among the Malabar tribes in various forms such as the peculiar kind of grave-digging with cavity or side chamber, grave good deposition and ancestor cult. As already noted, deposition of grave goods is still popular and widespread among them. And till very recently, the items deposited were strikingly in conformity with those discovered from the megalithic graves. Tribes who dispose of the dead in a special kind of grave with an interior cavity may be following the megalithic tradition of building subterranean rock-cut chambers as mortuary houses. The prevalence of specialist gravediggers, special kinds of rites performed before the commencement of grave digging and offerings to the dead at the grave after the funeral, all substantiate this presumption. Ancestor worship is common among the tribes of Malabar and till the recent intrusion of Brahmanical Hinduism among them their religion was nothing but animism incorporating ancestor worship or cult of the dead.

The problem of Gender in Death Customs

No other realm of tribal life is so discriminatory in its approach to women as that of funeral ceremonies, for these rituals deny them a space and voice. Not only are women set aside as silent spectators but they are even forced to bear the worst kinds of victimizations. Even among matrilineal tribal communities patriarchal norms dominate. Gender disparity is clearly reflected in all spheres of tribal funeral rites, as in the case of the upper caste Hindus.
Though the scope for individual freedom is greatly restricted in the social life of a clustered tribal hamlet, women enjoyed relatively larger possibilities for sovereignty and freedom of action at the material level. Of course there are restrictions on her sexuality and social intercourse but as the system of nuclear family is the established norm, women get more opportunities and freedom at home for decision-making and autonomy. But this relative freedom shrinks considerably as far as their social interventions particularly regarding marriage and death are concerned. On the death of their husbands tribal women are subjected to some special rituals associated with intimating the fact of their widowhood in public which though are not as humiliating as the custom of shaving of the head in the case of the Brahmins, evidently reflect certain elements of gender discrimination. The voicelessness and marginal role of women in funerals stand explicitly against the cherished nostalgic notions of gender equality in tribal social life.

The role of women in Malabar tribal society has been severely circumscribed by tradition. In the Indian context funeral rites are entirely a male domain where male chauvinism is articulated in the most visible form. All tribes in Malabar prefer male issues to perform the funeral rites and to inherit family property. The chief mourner of all tribes is the eldest son/nephew or the nearest male relative of the deceased. Apparently tribal tradition discourages women from participating in the event. Among the Malabar tribes there are strict taboos against women on occasions like
menstruation, pregnancy, etc which severely restricts their participation in sacred rituals. Such restrictions are not important or detrimental to tribes elsewhere in the world.

The restrictions on a tribal widow, as in the case of an Adiyān widow, were very stringent when compared to those on a widower during death pollution. An Adiyān widow in early days was to lead an extremely austere life and was not supposed to come out of the hut. But a widower was granted certain concessions and if he violated the pollution rules, punishments accorded to him was less stringent than that to a widow. In the matter of the violation of pollution rules, especially those related to chastity, a widow was unconditionally ostracized from her tribe. Most of the tribes also insisted that a widow should sever all her relations with the dead husband’s house just after the burial ceremonies were over. In former days she was denied any right in the property of her deceased husband except that she was given a few of his implements. Widow marriage was strictly prohibited in the past and tribes like the Malamalasar still hold fast to this tradition.

Generally, women are excluded from all kinds of religious functions and are prohibited from entering sacred places or ancestral shrines especially during their polluting state. This prohibition is related to the whole concept of bad sacredness associated with emissions of the body. Kathleen Gough’s observations on the marginal role of women in the cult of the dead of the
Nayars in matrilineal *tarawāds* find similar parallels in the tribal tradition.\(^{23}\)

As the matrilineal system of the Nairs had failed to provide either a space for female autonomy or gender equality, the tribal communities who were mostly matrilineal treated women almost in a similar way. But the status of women in tribal society greatly varies from that of the women of upper caste Hindus who traditionally play a very minor role in economic production and consequently are subordinates in the legal sphere. Although childbearing, cooking and other domestic affairs are the sole responsibility of the females even in the tribal society, their relatively higher role in economic production provide them greater autonomy. Gough remarks that the exclusion of women from participation in sacred functions expresses in a formal manner the notion that the power which women derived from them was polar and even antipathetic to the legal and economic power of men and that it also relates to the general position of women in the society.\(^ {24}\)

In Malabar the role and decision of the headman and funeral functionaries are unquestionable while their wives have no such rites to perform. But this is not the case of the wives of African or Australian tribesmen who have to perform so many rituals before burial. Unlike among Malabar tribes, washing the corpse of both men and women elsewhere is carried by elderly female folk under the guidance of the headmen’s wives and


after the burial all other purificatory rites are performed by them. The only important ritual which is performed by a tribal woman in Malabar is the untaking of the tāli or the marriage badge of a married woman at the death of her husband. The tribes of Aṭṭappādi and Paṟambikulam allow a certain amount of female participation in rituals associated with death and funeral. But even this is confined to just dancing along with their male counterparts. In all other matters women are passive spectators. Even in the dance-drama Jogiyāṭṭam attached to Kuṟumba Chēṭu, in which a few characters are females, women are not allowed to play a role.

The tribal tradition in Malabar forbids women from joining in funeral processions or attending the funeral ceremony at the graveyard. This is not the case with tribes elsewhere where even children accompany the funeral procession and attend the burial. In Malabar, apart from the existing taboos on women one reason for the sanction against them was the peculiar terrain of the tribal areas: most tribal cemeteries in early days were situated in thick and distant forest lands inaccessible for the females.

No tribe in Malabar offers women the position of a ritual functionary. From the headman to the oracle, men dominate. (This is not just the case of the Malabar tribes but tribes all over India follow the same tradition. But we are surprised by a unique case of the Sōraś; among the Sōraś women act as
Women are not allowed to give offerings to the ancestors even during special occasions. Women ancestresses are also conspicuous by their absence among most tribes. They are never revered as founding mothers of a family or a tārāwād. The only exception is the Pēna of the Kuṟichiyas. But the way the Kuṟichiyas treat the Pēna clearly exemplifies the gross neglect that they occupy in the tribal pantheon. Pēna is installed in a dark corner of the kitchen and her presence is informed only by an oil lamp. Instead, it is quite interesting to note that the most horrific malevolent spirits are those of pregnant and barren women. Besides, a lion share of the expenditure of the funeral rites are to be born by the married daughters of a hamlet. The only right of a widow’s family over her husband’s family is that if her deceased husband had not paid the bride price before his death to his wife’s father, father-in-law had the right to withhold the funeral of his son-in-law (and even this was not the right of the widow).

The only important duty/ritual performed by tribal women in Malabar is to wail loudly at the time of death till the disposal of the corpse in intervals and also at the time of the last rites. On the death of a tribesman/woman, kins/clanswomen gather at the house of the deceased to cry aloud for the dead. Unlike the tribal women in Malabar, their counterparts in Africa or Australia have an equal status in funeral rites. Here women make preliminary

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preparations for disposal while engaging in traditional wailing. But their wailing is different from the Malabar tribes. They scratched at their cheeks, drawing blood and tore at their hair, directing their violent emotions against themselves. They wailed outdoors during the funeral procession and at the cemetery.26

Varier Elwin's opinion about tribal women is noteworthy in this context: "the most important thing about the tribal woman is that she is a woman. I stress this because there is sometimes a tendency to regard the tribal people as though they were something altogether apart from ourselves, almost as if they were of a different species. It is important, therefore to emphasize that the tribal woman is, in herself, exactly the same as any other woman, with the same passions, loves and fears, the same devotion to the home, the husband and children, the same faults and the same virtues".27 Ehrenfels has argued that the common traits of womanhood present among the tribal woman and the present day secondariness of them, in relation to the male segment, is not to be mistaken as a continuity of tradition but is certainly an aberration brought about by the culture contact with people of the plains. He acknowledges that a certain division of labour between sexes is found even in a semi-food gathering economy—women will mainly be engaged in procuring the vegetarian part of the common diet and men will more often be out for

hunting. However, both sexes play a comparatively equal role, not only in the economic, but also in the family and spiritual aspects of life among such a group of people. “The agent which undermined the formerly existing independence of aboriginal womanhood, therefore appears to have been the example of intruding people and civilizations among whom women held a less independent position”.

28 Ehrenfels’ millenarian approach of course, at least, doesn’t match with the position that tribal women have been holding in the religious and sacred realms and there is very little possibility to argue that it is a later innovation. Rivers reported that among the Todas although women have greater freedom, they are unimportant in ritual life. The exclusion of women from the dairy cult, the culture-focus of the Todas, reflects the attitude of the community towards the sex.

29 He doesn’t seem to have taken into consideration the role of pollution, associated with both menstruation and child birth, in all primitive societies undermining women’s claim for equality particularly in the spiritual sphere. In matters of funeral rites, they were certainly a poor lot having been extremely sidelined with little right to speak for themselves. And it perfectly conforms to Gayatri Spivak’s comment: “...the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant...the
subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow".30

Social Uses of Funerary rites

As in other parts of the world, tribal funeral and death ceremonies are public events in Malabar and therefore are occasions of tribal solidarity. They serve to reaffirm kin-clan ties and provide possibilities for cultural interaction. Though funeral rituals are overtly organized in honour of the dead, in the practical sense they benefit the living. David Mandelbaum, who extensively studied the social uses of funeral rites, opines that “rites performed for the dead generally have important effects for the living. A funeral ceremony is personal in its focus and is societal in its consequences”.31 A similar observation is made by Raymond Firth for whom a funeral rite is a “social rite par excellence. Its ostensible object is the dead person, but it benefits not to the dead, but the living”.

The tribal tradition in Malabar insists on the participation of all close relatives, members of nearby settlements, friends and functionaries from all clan settlements in funeral and after-burial rituals. That is why envoys are sent to spread the message of death in all clan hamlets. Death according to the tribals is the most sacred ritual and representation in it is a must. Those who

fail to attend the ceremony, and fail to account for his/her absence in the tribal council, are debarred from all future tribal affairs. Those who can satisfactorily justify their absence will be relieved of with the imposition of a fine. The Adiyâns have devised an extremely practical and priest-benefiting system to deal with acts of indiscipline: they impose penalty on the defaulters with the imposition of Tappubala, the number of which may vary according to the nature and gravity of the fault. Thus the event of death functions as an occasion for both the reestablishment of tribal solidarity and the enforcement of tribal laws.

Death in a settlement and the attendant rituals help in eliminating factionalism among the tribal people because, apart from relatives and friends, the recalcitrant too participate in them keeping aside all kinds of disputes. All the members assembled at the hamlet of the deceased person cooperate in one or the other functions, either in making the bier, digging the grave, helping in washing and other purificatory rites or in arranging the facilities for ritual dancing (if they have had the practice). The neighbors of the dead persons prepare food for the attendees of the funeral after the disposal.

The death of an earning member, either male or female, makes the condition of the family pitiable particularly in the case of a widow. She and her children have to live at the mercy of the other members of her husband’s family or her own natal family or other clansmen. The time honoured custom
among the tribes in Malabar strongly asks for relief and help extended to such persons by the relatives and all members of the settlement. Evidences for such cases are found among the Adiyāns. An Adiyān widow/widower is under pollution for a whole year. On all these days he/she is materially and morally supported by the clansmen. Moreover, certain tribes insist that all those who are gathered at the house of the dead should come forward with financial help or provisions for meeting the expenses of the funeral and last rites.

The clansmen of a deceased person also play a considerable role in reducing the sorrows of the kin-members of the dead by giving them the necessary psychic support and help to bring them back to normal life. All close women relatives of the dead lived together with the family of the bereaved till the end of pollution and make all arrangements to successfully complete the course of pollution.

Among all tribes in Malabar last rite or secondary burial is a ritualistic festive gathering for reaffirming kinship ties. The best example of such gatherings is the Kākkappula and the Chīṟu. Tribal people deliberately create a festive mood on these occasions since their tradition pay the utmost care in sending the spirits of the dead to the other world in the most joyful manner with the accompaniment of music, dance and grand feasts. All these are done not only for pleasing the spirits of the dead but also to honour those who had helped the family of the deceased. These family gatherings and collective
enjoyments help in weilding tribal unity and reducing ill-feelings among the tribesmen.

The greatest use of funeral rites in promoting community interests is their role in settling disputes among clansmen. In that sense they act as legal and juridical institutions. The last rites of all prominent tribes entail the judicial sitting of the tribal elders and functionaries in which all familial and extra-familial discords within the tribe would amicably be resolved. That no other ritual occasion provides for such an elaborate legal and judicial arrangement is an index to the social role of funeral ceremonies in the material life of the tribal people. The Kūṭṭam of the Adiyāns at the occasion of the Kākkappula is a classic example of such a system of tribal jurisprudence. Similar instances are the Cheeru of the Kurumbas/Mudugas, the Kanji-chīru of the Irulas, Inangusabha of the Karimpālans during Kūliyāṭtam, Karimpadam Veṭṭuka of the Thachanādan Muppans during Chāvali and the Kākkappula of the Pāṇiyas. These politico-juridical assembling, even while serving to reproduce the primitive and exploitative form of priestly dominance, has been instrumental in maintaining a kind of order and discipline, with a high sense of moral force, within the tribal community.

Faith in ancestors and the rituals to commemorate them also play an almost similar social function. Kathleen Gough's observations on the patron-like role of the Nair ancestor-ghosts are equally applicable to the tribal
situation. Although the lineage spirits have only subsidiary judicial functions, their cult served in several ways indirectly to maintain right relationship within the tribe. First, a headman who respected and correctly propitiated his own forebears provided a role model of piety for his clansmen in their relations with the living elders. Second, the ancestor spirits provided some sanctions against a headman’s ill treatment of his wards. The headman (along with other functionaries) must keep his clan in good order because if he does not do so the lineage spirits may inflict suffering on all, including himself. Third, the ancestor-cult obviously provides one explanation for the cause of misfortunes, and offers a course of action whereby these may supposedly be allayed. Further, the clan’s collective responsibility for its misfortunes in a sense make the ancestors a common threat to its members, for all may suffer from their anger. The ancestor cult thus enhances the sense of unity and common destiny of clan members. Ancestresses also acquire considerable amount of moral authority over the kinsmen since they are believed capable of harming the clan members for any flaws in the existing norms of sexual discipline.

**Funerary Rites Causing Economic Drain**

Extensive funeral ceremonies and elaborate post-burial last rites are a great drain on tribal resources and is a grave menace to the stability of the

subsistent tribal economy. The unbearable weight of tradition, combined with the inability to realize the negative role of funeral customs in bringing about an economic decline, have promoted an uninterrupted continuation of these practices. Normally the expenses incurred for a funeral is beyond the capacity of a family or settlement to bear with. Among majority tribes the expenses of death should invariably be borne by the concerned family. Among certain others, there is a custom of receiving contributions but these have to be repaid later. Among the two tribes of Aţţappâdi, the Kuṟumbas and Mudugas, while expenses for burial are the responsibility of the kinsmen of the dead, post-burial ceremony (Chīṟu) is a common venture, the expenses of which are shared among the whole inmates of the settlement. (The expenses of Pachachāvu, on the other hand, has to be borne by the relatives of the dead) But that too doesn’t minimize the burden, since such rites are extremely grand and are hence heavily expensive. The long chain of funeral ceremonies among the Adiyāns ranging over a whole year with many stages like Kunnupula, Chemmappula and Kākkappula for a single death imposes unbearable economic burden on a family and may produce in an outsider an extreme sense of sympathy towards the victims.

The heads of expenditure in the event of a death include those incurred at the time of death and burial and those at the time of the Adiyānthiram. Soon after the occurrence of death, messengers have to be sent and they have to be paid for their service. A lot of materials such as new cloth or Kōdi, oil,
coconut, incense sticks, mats, betel, areca nut and tobacco, have to be purchased. Functionaries like bier-makers and grave-diggers have to be paid and arrack served. Although these expenses may appear trivial to an outsider, it is difficult for an ordinary tribesman to meet them and hence he has to borrow money from an outsider, most probably his employer or the nearby merchant, entailing a future obligation. Expenses at the last rite are even more heavy with provisions for the feast, arrangements and decorations, payments to functionaries, etc etc. In the case of kūliyāṭṭam, the Karimpālans pay a relatively high amount for the teyram dancers, drummers and musicians and a significant amount is spent on liquor also. Although priestly exploitation is not a marked feature of all tribal communities, those tribes among whom it exists like the Adiyāns and Paṇiyas, its magnitude is certainly alarming. On the whole, in one way or the other, individually or collectively, funeral rites cause heavy damage to the standard of living of the tribal people. Their surplus resources are drained and economic improvement is curtailed. They fall into a debt-trap which invariably lead to their pauperization by perpetuating their poverty, deprivation and life-long bondages.

No less important is the drain caused by the deposition of goods in the graves, which is a common ancestral tribal heritage. As noted earlier, goods deposited include cloth(e)s, weapons, implements, ornaments, etc. The disposal of those goods, which could have been reused even for many generations, is a dismal loss to the tribal economy. Slowly this fact has
dawned upon the new tribal generation and they have started to disregard tradition and faith. This welcome change is brought about both by the massive impact of acculturation and by the slowly deteriorating material condition of the tribal people.

It is an interesting fact to note that tribes who are being more acculturated realize the importance of the drain through funeral rites. Similarly tribes who have been owner-cultivators like the Kurichiyas and Mullakurumans spend less and less on them. Thus culture contact with the people of the plains, particularly migrant Christian cultivators, and the awareness of reinvestment in agriculture have been instrumental in determining the level of funeral expenditure and the mode of grave goods deposition. Though very slow in its pace, education also must have had a considerable impact on them. Despite a high level of acculturation, tribes like the Paniyas and Adiyâns still spend high amounts on them and thus perpetuate their economic dependence as well as material backwardness. Dignitaries like Kâlan and Palîiya Râman strongly advocate the limiting of funeral expenditure in the context of the tribal deprivation but these attempts at change have not made a strong headway. They have submitted themselves to both ritualism and alcoholism. Among the tribes of Attappadi and Pañambikułam, funerals are expensive but it is relatively more expensive among Aṭṭappâdi tribes than among any other tribe in Kerala and this may be due to their semi-food gathering character and contacts with the Nilgiri tribes.
Tendency for limiting of funeral expenditure is not strong among them. It is quite interesting to observe that tribesmen do not complain much about the burden caused by funeral expenses may be because their belief in ancestors is so deep rooted that even culture change has had little impact on them.

Funerals have not been that much expensive nor have been causing life long indebtedness in the past. Funeral services were free and obligatory and materials used were available locally. There was no show or pomp associated with them earlier. Even for the funeral feast they depended largely on forest produces like different varieties of tubers, honey, fruits, mushrooms and bamboo shoots and hunted meat. Now with the restrictions on free passage into the forests, and more stringent vigilance on hunting, all the materials needed for the funerals have to be purchased from the market. This has had far reaching effects on tribal communities. First, it is a great drain of resources and manpower to the tribals and they are subjected to the exploitation of external elements like merchants and money lenders. To repay the money borrowed, they have either to sell their products at arbitrary rates or have to work for nominal wages for prolonged periods. Some tribals are reported to have borrowed loans from banks to conduct funeral ceremonies and the failure in repayment has led to the attachment of their landed property by the bank authorities. One of the main reasons for the aggrestic communities like the Adiyâns and Paṇiyas to live as chattels till recent times was their over-insistence on funeral rituals and the consequent self-pledging for meeting the
funeral expenditure of a kin-member. Second, the prohibition of hunting compelled tribals to accept a change in their funeral diet with a shift towards vegetarianism in their feasts and ancestral offerings. This fact in association with the advancing forces of Sanskritization together has induced many tribes in recent times to turn to vegetarianism. Even among tribes that still practise non-vegetarianism the number of animal and bird sacrifices have been reduced drastically. Moreover, such tribes now-a-days opt for domestic animals/birds for sacrifice in place of hunted ones.

In certain tribal communities the nature and extent of priestly exploitation is really alarming. Such a trend is more prevalent among dependant tribes like the Adiyāns and Papiyas and is present to a limited extent among the Karimpālans, Koṟagas, Iruḷas, Kuruṁbas, etc. Tribal tradition facilitates the functionaries to exploit their clansmen to the maximum in rituals and celebrations connected with death whereas such exploitation is not possible on occasions like marriage. They extract compulsory levies in the form of money, clothes, and provisions like rice from each family who conduct the function. Priestly exploitation also includes penalty imposed for even silly faults and fee collected for settling disputes. The Adiyān mūppans impose fines in the form of tappubala for even trivial shortcomings leading to the perpetuation of the distress of their own compatriots. The practice of Manṭri Virikkal among the Iruḷas also is a similar instance of resource
allocation for the functionaries although the element of force and punishment is not present.

Certain necessary and welcome changes are nevertheless apparent in the direction towards limiting the funeral expenses. Most of the tribes have reduced the period of death pollution since it is found to cause unnecessary inconveniences for all the kinsmen and at the recognition that a long pollution period is a wastage of time. Moreover the obliteration of the traditional tribal ethos has made the subsistence of the mourners very difficult. They are not supported by any, for their fellow-tribesmen are as poor as themselves. They cannot depend on the forest, as in olden days, for their daily requirements. Hence it is difficult to refrain from work for long. The days of the last rites also have been cut short by tribes like the Thachanādan Müppans who earlier had three-day Adiyānthiram called Chāvali has now been reduced to two-days'. A similar trend is visible among many other more acculturated tribes. Even the most ritual-ridden tribe like the Adiyāns has now started organizing Kākkappula collectively at one chemmam, for many deaths together in a year, in an attempt to reduce the expenditure. On the whole, the awareness that is slowly spreading among all tribes, but which may not be openly visible among all, is that funerals are so much unproductive that they not only destroy even the slightest chance for making reinvestment but even make survival impossible. Now-a-days grave goods deposition has become just nominal, that valuables are now no more enclosed with the corpse. Thus a slow replacement
of animistic faith by Brahmanical Hinduism and tribal rituals by Hindu ceremonies has formed a convenient environment for this silent transformation.