Aspects of Life and Language of
Kanikkar Tribal Community of Kerala –
A Study

Dr. Syam S.K., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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Abstract

Kanikkar is one of the important tribal communities settled in South Kerala. Kanikkar communities were known to be very honest and active. Adults are usually short in structure. Some of them live in the interior parts of the forest, especially in the Podiyam, Mukkothivayal, Chonampara, Erumbiyad, Pothod, Plath, Anakaland Aamala regions in the Agasthiyaar and Kottur Forest ranges in Nedumangad Taluk of Trivandrum district, Kerala state. In this study, the special characteristics of language/ dialect of the Kanikkar communities living in the above said places are discussed from a linguistics perspective. The language study is done with the data elicited from the selected informants of the Kanikkar settlement in the Kottur and Kuttichal areas of Trivandrum district.

Keywords: Kanikkar ,Muttukani, Plaathi, Kanipattu lands, Chattupaattu, Kokkara,   Puluvli, Pera**.**

Introduction

Fig .1: 'Earumaadam' at Podiyam Forest Range

Kanikkar Tribal community is one of the important tribes of Kerala. Most of them have settled in Trivandrum district of Kerala state. According to 2001 Census,the total population of Kani

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Community was 21677, in which 10325 were males and 11352 are females. According to 2011 Census, the total population of Kanikkar Community is 21251, in which 9975 are males and 11276 are females (Census Report, 2011, Government of India).

Ethnographically Kanikkar belongs to Proto-Australoid group. Some of them live in the interior parts of the forest especially in the Podiyam, Mukkothivayal, Chonampara, Erumbiyad, Pothod, Plath regions in the Agathiyar and Kottur Forest ranges in the Nedumangad Taluk of Trivandrum district. Around 27 settlements are identified in these regions.

Fig. 2: RasappanKani – An informant from Chathancode Kani Settlement at Kanithadam, Chathancode.

Origin

The Kanikkars believe that they have been brought by Sage Agasthyar from the neighboring districts of Tamilnadu and settled in the forests of Travancore. The Kanikkar undertake annual pilgrimage to Agasthyarkoodam, Pattanippara, Kottur Forest range, Nedumangad Taluk, Trivandrum District.

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Fig. 3: Mathikanikkari- An Informant from Chathancode Kani Settlement at Kanithadam.

The main god of Chathancode settlement is 'Agasthya Muni' of Agasthyarkoodam. During the month of 'Meenam', after observing 41 days' *Vritham* (ritual fasting, etc.), they go to Agasthyakoodam to worship 'Agasthya Muni'. For the origin of the term 'Kanikkaran', there are several versions. The word Kanikkaran in Malayalam means a hereditary proprietor of land. Extensive land given to the Kanikkars by the earlier rulers of Travancore was known as 'Kanipattu lands'. One of the interpretations for the word Kanikkaran is that they came to be called as 'Kanikkar' because they used to pay 'kani' (Customary presents of forest produce) to the king of Travancore.

A legend is connected with the history of Travancore. During the time of wanderings of MartandaVarma of Travancore, who was fighting for his throne against "EttuveettilPillmaar", he came across the tribal settlement of 'Velan' who gave him protection and food. They further escorted him through forest full of wild animals and helped him to escape to 'paṇḍidesa' (Tamilnadu). When the Maharaja ascends to throne after defeating his enemies he issued a royal gift of 36,000 acres of forest land, known as 'Kani', in the Neyyattinkara and Vilavancodetaluks to the Velan Community. Thereafter, the Velans who became the holders of the Kani land became Kanikkar. Thus the meaning of the word Kanikkar became a hereditary proprietor of land.

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Fig. 4: Mukkothimala at PodiyamKani settlement at Agasthyar forest range.

Their settlements are called 'Kanipat'. They live in groups in the deep forest with abundant water resources. In these settlements they construct their huts known as 'pera' with reeds and bamboos. There they live in group with five to ten households in a settlement. Now-a-days the Government has given them monetary help to build houses and a number of them thus have concrete homes.

Fig. 5: A Kani 'Pera' at Mukkothivayal Kani settlement, Agasthyar forest range.

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Fig. 6: A Kani 'Pera' at Mukkothivayal Kani settlement, Agasthyar forest range.

'KokkarapaaRRa' is a special winnowing basket used for keeping materials in the time of their 'Chattupaattu'. 'Perumparampu' and 'Kuppaparambu' are mats for lying and for drying crops, etc., and a small mat known as 'teḍukku' is used for sitting. An earlier device for making fire 'chakkimukki'- is also available in some huts. Different types of knives are also available in a Kani hut.

Fig. 7: A Kani 'Pera' at Mukkothivayal Kani settlement, Agasthyar forest range.

Among the Kanikkar community, headman is known as 'Muttukani' and they have a priest known as 'Plaathi' in their own language. Their village council is presided over by the 'Muttukani' and 'Plaathi'. They cultivate everything and make agriculture as the main profession. They have a special liking for fishing and hunting.

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Fig. 8: MathiyanKani – An informant from Mukkothivayal Kani Settlement at Kottur Forest range.

The Headman and Plathi take main decisions about hunting, cultivation, management of the settlement, marriage festival and other ceremonies. 'Muttukani' is the presiding personality in all important ceremonies and rituals. 'Plathi' is the medicine man to remove evil influences and cure illness and diseases. The headman is also vested with the powers of imposing penalties to members who violate the moral code in the community.

Fig. 8: Mathiyan Kani – An informant from Mukkothivayal Kani Settlement at Kottur Forest range, was teaching the researcher how to use bow and arrow.

Ritual Songs

The ritual songs among the Kani tribes are known as 'Chattupaattu'. This is offered by them for different purposes. Musical instrument for this ritual is known as 'Kokkara'. This kokkara consists of an iron rod having a hole inside and a thin iron rod 30 cm in length known as 'puluvli'.

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These two rods are connected with an iron chain to get a kokkara. A man holds the hollow cylindrical rod in left hand and draws the thin iron rod over this to and fro quickly. The sound thus produced is in tune with the songs of the Kanikkar. Pinichattu, Tunichattu, Mannayiccuchattu, Raasivettichattu, Valakettichattu,etc.,different types of 'Chattu'existing among Kanikkars. The medicine man Plathi is the authority to perform this ritual ceremony (Sam Mohanlal, 1972).

Fig. 9: MatthanKani – An informant and Head man from Podiyam Kani Settlement at Kottur Forest range.

In olden times, at the time of child birth, the mother is lodged in a seclusion shed. Old women who were experienced in midwifery attended on the pregnant woman and aided in delivery. Pollution lasted for sixteen days. Husband could not approach the shed for ten days. On the sixteenth days after taking bath the mother got rid of pollution and she returned home (Vasanthakumari 1972). The seclusion shed available in each settlement was used for the female's menstruation period also. Now-a-days this situation has changed and most of them have the facilities for medical support through Medical centers situated within the settlement. At the time of puberty a girl was also kept in this shed at the time of pollution. This system exists in some kani settlement even now.

Arranged marriage is the usual mode of marriage and the ceremony is celebrated in the bride's house. Bride price is not in vogue. Widow Remarriage is permitted. Divorce may be granted for incompatibility. If a dowry had been paid to the husband at the time of marriage, it has to be returned at divorce.

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Traditionally Kanikars in Kerala are shifting cultivators. Presently to a large extent they have abandoned this, kind of cultivation and almost all of them became settled farmers. Paddy is their main cultivation. In addition to this, they cultivate various kinds of cereals, pulses and tapioca. Each settlement now has a forest block assigned to them for cultivation, hunting and honey collection. Some of them are employed in the Government.

Funeral ceremonies among Kanikkars vary from region to region. Cremation and burying of the dead body are two methods existing among this tribal community. In the case of burial, the corpse is lowered in to the pit and filled up with earth. But in the case of cremation, the pit is packed with billets of fuel and corpse is laid over this. Fuel billets are placed and these are set to fire at head and foot. Sixteen days pollution occurs in both cases.

Fig. 12: A Plathi's Place at Mukkothivayal Kani settlement, Agasthyar Forest range.

Linguistic Aspects

The main concern of this paper is to give indigenous details among the Kanikkar Tribal Community. The present research is a brief surface study of Kanikkar Community with focus on Anthropology and Linguistics. In the Linguistic aspects, Phonemes identification, some grammatical and lexical characteristics, pronunciation and sound changes of the language spoken by Kanikkar are included. Special features of the Kani language are discussed with phonological parameters and Anthropological aspects with personal interview and discussion are done with the elders in the Potiyam, Mukkothivayal, Erumbiyad and Choonampara settlements in the Kottur- Agastyar Forest range.

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Fig. 13: A Trap for catching small animals at Mukkothivayal Kani settlement, Agasthyar Forest range.

Kani Language

Kanikkar Community speaks a different kind of language, having peculiar features. Kani Language is a mixture of Malayalam and Tamil Languages. They usesome different 'tunes' in some terms they utter. They use some rhythmic expressions for some lexemes. The syllyable 'lle' may be used rhythmically by increasing one more syllable. For Example: 'kaṇṭille- kaṇṭillayalle'. (don't you see?)

This language is called 'Malambhaasha' or the language of the Hill. They use both Malayalam and Tamil slangs for different terms they utter. They have a system of communication based on their specific culture. For example, they use a term called 'Pathayakettu' for conveying happy news and 'Mukkumparakettu' for showing unfriendliness.

Phonology of Kani Language

Phonemes identified in the Kani language are 24 in number. Of these five are vowel phonemes and nineteen consonant phonemes. The Alveolar Approximant l̠ is identified in the data collection procedures, but this sound is not used by them frequently except in some terms especially.

Vowels

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Vowels phonemes identified in this language are '*a'*, '*I'*, '*e'*, '*u'* and '*o'*. Length is also phonemic in this language, that means length phonemes are considered as separate phonemes ie; *a:, i:, u:, e: and o: (aa, ii, uu, ee, oo) or* (ā, ī ē ō ū).

Phonemic status of these vowel phonemes are illustrated by the minimal pairs given below. Minimal pairs are two words which differ in meaning when only one sound is different.

Vowel Chart

Vowels

	Front	**Central**	**Back**
High	i, ii		u, uu
Mid	e , ee		o, oo
Low		a, aa	

Chart. 1

Consonants

20 (19 usual sound and 1 relative sound /**l***)* consonant phonemes are identified on the basis of contrast.

		Bilabial	**Labio dental**	**Dental**	**Alveolar**	**Retroflex**	**Palatal**	**Velar**	**Glottal**
Plosive/ stop	**Vl**	**P**		**t**		**ṭ**	**c**	**k**	
	Vl asp	**-**		**-**		**-**		**-**	
	Vd	**b**		**d**					
	Vd asp	**-**		**-**				**-**	
Fricative									
Trill					**R**				
Flap					**r**				
Nasal		**m**		**n̠**	**n**	**ṇ**	**ň**	**ń**	
Lateral					**l**	**ḷ**			
Approximant					**(l̠)**				
Semivowel			**v**				**y**		

Chart 2

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They use this soundthe sound /l/ relatively less.

For /āḻcca/ 'week' they pronounce the sound as in the Malayalam language while for /paḻam/ they pronounce it like /payam/.

Grammatical Aspects

Pronouns

	Kanikkar	**Malayalam**	**Tamil**
1st P. sg	ñaan	ñaan	n̠aan
1st P. pl	ñaṅkaḷu	ñaṅṅal	n̠aṅke
2nd P. sg	Il	il	Nil
2nd P. Pl	niṅkaḷu	iṅṅal	niiṅkaḶ
3rd P. Mas. sg	avanu	avan	Avan
3rd P. Fem. sg	avaḷu	avaḶ	avaḶ
Ep. Pl	avaru	avar	Avar
Neu. Sg	atu	atu	Atu
Neu. Pl	---	ava	Avai

Chart 3

1st person singular and 2nd person singular are similar to Malayalam and Tamil. 1st person and 2nd person plurals show similarities with Tamil and Malayalam language. In the case of 3rd person pronouns,Kani has four distinct types masculine singular, feminine singular, epence plural and neuter singular. Malayalam and Tamil have five types: masculine singular and plural, feminine singular and plural, neuter singular (Dhanushkodi 1972).

In the case of numerals also this language shows resemblance with Malayalam and Tamil. Examples of numerals are given below(C. G. Syama1986).

Numerals	**Kani Language**	**Malayalam**	**Tamil**
one	onnu	onnu	onRu
two	raṇḍu	raṇṭu	iraṇḍu
three	munnu	muunn	muunRu
four	naalu	naaluu	naaṅku
Five	eñcu	añcu	Aintu

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Six	aaRu	aaRu	aaRu
Seven	eeyu	eeḻu	eeḻu
Eight	eṭṭu	eṭṭu	eṭṭu
Nine	ompadu	ompatu	Ompatu
Ten	pattu	pattu	Pattu

Chart 4

Above mentioned are a few examples of the similarities of Kani Language with the major Dravidian languages.

The 'a' of Malayalam becoming 'e' is the most important feature of Kani phonology.

Example:

Malayalam	Kani language	
Añcu	eñcu	'five'
Ari	ei	'rice'
arivaaḷu	erivaaḷu	'sickle'
Aluku	elakku	'split reed'

Chart 5

It is also noted that Kani adds the link morphs in or –n after all noun stems, except after –n ending noun stems in the accusative case.

Example:

Malayalam	Kani language	
Aare	aarine	who (acc)
makaḷe	makaḷine	Daughter (acc)
Nayye	naayine	dog (acc)

Chart 6

Another peculiarity of this language is that it cannot use personal terminations. Just like in the old Malayalam, ā negative suffix is also common in this language.

Eg: varaa   'will not come'

Poovaa 'will not go'

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Most of the vocabulary items corresponds to Malayalam form, but a few native words like eccan 'elder brother',ecci 'elder sister',miruvam' animal',irikkalaane 'two elephants', etc., are also available.(Sam Mohanlal 1972).

Kinship Terminology

The Kinship terminology of Kanikkar is related to early Travancore system. In early periods they used the term 'ammidi' and 'apidi' to refer mother and father. Now-a-days this changes to 'ama' and 'appa' for reference. Father's elder brother is referred as 'peerappan' and his wife as 'paramma'. The term 'peramma' is also used to refer to mother's elder sister and her husband is referred as 'perappan'. Like this 'ciRRappan' is father's younger brother and his wife is 'ciRRamma'. 'ciRRamma and 'ciRRappan' are used to refer mother's younger sister and her husband respectively. Mother's brother and father-in-law are referred by the term 'ammaachan' and mother-in-law and father's sisters are referred by the term 'ammaayi'. From this point of view it is clear that cross-cousin marriages are permitted inthis community (Jyothishkumar.1972).

The term 'eccan' is used to address elder brother and the term 'ecci' to address elder sister. Now-a-days they use aṇṇan, akkan, akkacci and eniyan to represent elder brother, elder sister and younger brother. Due to the influence of plains people there occur many changes in their language and kinship. A list of kinship terms among these people are given below. (C. G. Syama1986).

Kinship Terms

1. Muttån   - Grand father
2. mutti/ muttiyamma   - Grand mother
3. aaṇuṅkaḻu   - men
4. peṇṇuṅkaḺ   - women
5. aaṅkuRumaaru   - boys
6. peṅkuRumaaru   - girls
7. appiḍi   - father (in earlier period)
8. ammiḍi   - mother (in earlier period)
9. appa   - father
10. amma   - mother
11. valyappiḍi   - grandfather
12. valyammiḍi   - grandmother

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13. peerappan	- father's elder brother
14. peeramma	- mother's elder sisters husband
	- father's elder brother's wife
15. ciRRappan	- father's younger brother
	- mother's younger sisters husband
16. ciRRamma	- mother's younger sisters
	- father's younger brother's wife
17. eccan	- elder brother
18. ecci	- elder sister
19. eniyan	- younger brother
20. eniyatti	- younger sister
21. ammaaccan	- father- in low & mothers brother
22. ammayi	- mother in low & father's sister
23. mavan/moon	- son
24. mavaḷu	- daughter
25. peeramavan	- son- in- low
26. peeramavaḷu	- daughter – in- low

Conclusion

Kanikkar's distinct language has so many peculiarities. They use different expressions in the same sentence (S.K. Syam. 2017).

For example: Ningalvannillenkilnjangalpokum   (If you didn't come, we will go)

1. 'neengamvennenkiverinnjankampoorine'
   nīnkamvennenkiverinñankampōrine
2. 'ningaluvanthillenkilumnjankalepoovum'
   ninkaḷuvantillenkilumñankalepōvum
3. 'neenkalveerayenkinjankalumvera'
   nēnkaḷvērāyenkiñānkaḷumvera

They use some rhythmic expressions for some lexemes.

For example: The syllable 'lle' may be usedrhythmically by adding one more syllable.

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'kandille – kandillayalle'   'kanṭille- kanṭillayalle'

'mindille – mindiyillelle'   'minṭille- minṭiyillelle'

'paranjille - paranchilleyall'e   'paRanñille- paRancilleyalle'

It is also found that they change the sounds as /va/ - /ve/, /śa/ - /ca/, /kk/ - /cc/, /i/ - /cc, /i/ - /e/ ,/ṅa/ - /nka/ rhythmically at the end as /the/ - /le/ (S.K. Syam. 2017).

For example:

as /va/ - /ve/   vaanguka- veenduka/ veendine   'to buy'

/śa/ - /ca/   Shappad – chappad   'food'

/kk/ - /cc/   /padikkathavan/ - padicchathavan/   'an illiterate'

Elimination of /i/ - /cc/   /pūccaikku/ - /pūccaccu/   'for the Cat'

/ṅa/ - /nka/   /ningal/- /niinkam/   'You'

And the pronunciation of /kai/ changes to /kei/

/ka/ - /ne/ and /le/ are added at the end rhythmically. (S.K. Syam. 2017).

/varuka/ - /varine/ -/varile/   'come'

/pōvuka/ - / pōrine/- / pōrile/   'go'

They also use most probably Malayalam language with some Tamil syllable at the end. After this study it is clear that the distinct language/ dialect of Kanikkar community isendangered. Most of the terms used commonly previously are changed with the influence of the Media and other contact languages. Most of the Oral literature collections are being lost. And there are no documentations on the Oral Literature and the Kani language has been done yet.

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