

# Birth Rites Among the Kani Community: An Ethnographic Study of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Early Childhood Ritual

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## Abstract

This study examines the traditional birth rites practiced by the Kanicomunity, an indigenous hill-dwelling group found mainly in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Drawing on fieldwork observations and oral testimony from village informants, the paper describes the sequence of ceremonies that accompany pregnancy, delivery, and early childhood. These include the seventh-month protective rite known as Viyakkudai; the gift-giving customs that mark the transition to motherhood; the work of the community medicine-woman at the moment of birth; the ritual cutting of the umbilical cord; the bathing of mother and child; the burial of the placenta; and several later rites such as the tying of the black thread, hair-cutting, rice-feeding, and ear-piercing. By placing these practices within the wider framework of ritual studies and the anthropology of birth, the paper argues that Kani birth rites are not a collection of isolated customs but a coherent symbolic system that seeks to protect the mother and child from harm, to mark the social transition into parenthood, and to reaffirm the community's shared beliefs. The study contributes to the small body of ethnographic literature on this community and offers a usable reference for scholars working in folklore, indigenous studies, and cultural anthropology.

**Keywords:** Kani, birth rites, ethnography, ritual, indigenous knowledge, Kerala hills, childbirth customs

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## 1. Introduction

A child, as the Tamil poet puts it, is "the rare medicine" that calms the anxieties of a household. In communities across South India, the inability of a married couple to bear children has long been treated as a serious form of social misfortune, and childless men and women have been given labels that carry lasting stigma. Classical Tamil literature repeatedly returns to this theme. The Tirukkural observes that the soft prattle of one's own infant surpasses, in sweetness, even the music of the veena and the flute. Somalay, writing on the cultural life of the Tamil people, argues that men and women, from the moment they are conceived to the moment they die, perform one rite or another at nearly every stage of life, and that through these rites they experience a sense of completion and satisfaction.

Across India, the period that begins with conception and ends with the early childhood of a new child is marked by an unusually large number of ritual events. Each rite is shaped by long custom and by the social location of the family in question. In a country as diverse as India, the rituals observed by one community often differ

sharply from those observed by another, even when the families involved live only a short distance apart. The Kani community of the southern Western Ghats is one such case. Across their settlements, a clearly defined sequence of customary acts surrounds the birth of every child.

### 1.1 Research Gap

Although Indian anthropology has produced a sizeable literature on caste Hindu rituals and on tribal communities more generally, the Kani birth customs have received only fragmentary attention. Thurston's early survey of the castes and tribes of southern India offers a brief mention, and Ra. Balakrishnan's chapter on the Kanian provides useful background. More recent fieldwork, such as the study by Naseemdeen on the hill communities of Idukki district, includes short references to birth-related customs (Naseemdeen 56–57), and Tharmaraj's work on folk custom among the Kanian hill people contains relevant detail. Even so, the existing literature treats birth rites largely as a list of curious practices; the underlying symbolic logic of the sequence, and its place within the community's wider belief system,

has not been analyzed in depth. There is, in particular, a need for a study that reads Kani birth customs together as a single ritual cycle and that situates that cycle within the broader theoretical tradition of ritual studies.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

This study is guided by three questions. First, what are the specific rites performed by the Kani community from conception through the first year of a child's life? Second, what beliefs and protective concerns underpin each of these rites? Third, how are the individual rites linked to one another as parts of a coherent ceremonial sequence, and what does this sequence reveal about the community's wider view of birth, the body, and the person?

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

The Kani are one of the officially recognized Scheduled Tribes of Kerala, and they have historically lived in scattered hill settlements in the southern Western Ghats. Their traditional way of life has been increasingly affected by contact with mainstream society, and many customary practices are today observed only in attenuated form (Balakrishnan 121; Naseemdeen 56–57). A careful record of the birth rites as they are practised, and as informants describe them, is therefore valuable for the community itself as well as for scholars. For the community, such a record offers a written form of what has until now been carried in memory. For scholars, the rites provide a useful case study in how a small indigenous community organizes the universal human experience of childbirth through a structured ritual cycle.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Custom and Ceremony in Tamil Life**

Kanthi, writing on the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the Tamils, defines a rite, or *sadangu*, as the full range of events, festivals, communal gatherings, and religiously associated invocations that accompany life, together with the natural capacities and forces intrinsic to human existence. She notes that the rites performed from the time a woman becomes pregnant to the time her child is born vary considerably across caste, region, and historical period, and that such variation is itself a normal feature of custom rather than a deviation from it. Somalay takes a similar line, arguing that nearly every significant event in human life is governed by an accompanying rite, and that through such rites a person attains a feeling of contentment. This general framing applies directly to the Kani case, where each stage of pregnancy and early childhood is marked by its own ceremony.

### **2.2 Folk Custom Among the Hill Communities**

The hill communities of the Idukki district, of which the Kani are one part, share a number of practices that distinguish them from the surrounding lowland populations. Naseemdeen observes that, in much of this region, "once a child is born, they build a separate hut and keep the mother there for twenty days before

bringing her back to the house". He further notes that in some hill communities cloth or bark strips from the *marachani* tree, or from *palmyra*-palm fibre, have traditionally been used for the earrings worn after delivery, though this custom is now diminishing. Balakrishnan's chapter on the Kanian provides further ethnographic context, situating the community within the broader picture of Tamil hill society in the Western Ghats. Sivasubramaniyam, in a related essay, examines several of the same customs from a comparative perspective.

### **2.3 Folk Songs as a Source**

The folk songs of the Tamil hill country, as collected by Sanmuga Sundaram, also preserve references to birth-related customs. Among these is the "Song for Averting the Storm" (*ThudiSaattruPaattu*), sung by Kani women during pregnancy as a protective measure against evil spirits. Such songs form an important but largely oral source base, and they supplement the testimony of living informants.

### **2.4 The Wider Theoretical Context**

In the wider tradition of anthropological ritual theory, birth rites have long been read as part of the broader category of rites of passage, a framework established in the early twentieth century by Arnold van Gennep and later developed by scholars such as Victor Turner, whose concept of liminality describes the in-between state in which a ritual subject is detached from ordinary social roles. Mary Douglas's work on purity and pollution offers a complementary angle, drawing attention to the bodily boundaries that ritual action seeks to defend. In the Indian context, the long ethnographic tradition represented by Thurston provides early comparative material, and more recent work in folklore studies continues to document tribal ritual life across the subcontinent. The Kani sequence of birth rites can be read productively within these frameworks, as the discussion below will show.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on three theoretical traditions that, taken together, illuminate the structure and meaning of Kani birth rites.

The first is the theory of rites of passage, which understands a rite as a structured event that carries a person or persons from one social status to another. The rites of pregnancy and childbirth are particularly clear examples, since the pregnant woman moves into the status of "mother," and the newborn moves into the status of "person in the community." The Kani sequence can be read as a classic case of such a transition: preliminary rites (the seventh-month *Viyakkudai*), rites of separation (placement of the woman on the stone, the cutting of the cord, the burial of the placenta), rites of incorporation (bathing, the giving of food, the tying of the black thread), and rites of public recognition (hair-cutting, rice-feeding, ear-piercing).

The second is the theory of symbolic action, which treats ritual objects, gestures, and spatial arrangements as elements in a system of meaning. The seven pots of the Viyakkudai rite, the broad flat stone used at delivery, the black thread at the waist, and the plantain leaf spread before the rice-feeding child all function as symbolic objects whose meaning is intelligible within the community's wider belief system.

The third is the framework of purity and pollution, which draws attention to the management of bodily boundaries and the social changes surrounding birth. The burial of the placenta, the bathing of mother and child, the cloth tied around the mother's stomach, and the marking of the house as ritually impure after a birth all fall within this domain.

Together, these three frameworks allow the analyst to move beyond simple description toward an interpretation of the rites as a coherent symbolic response to the universal dangers and transitions that surround childbirth.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study draws on materials gathered through ethnographic fieldwork among the Kani community. The principal method was participant observation, supported by oral testimony from community elders and from women who have themselves experienced the rites in question.

Their testimony, recorded in field notes, forms the empirical base of the paper. Comparative evidence is drawn from the secondary literature noted in the bibliography.

### **5. The Birth Rites of the Kani**

#### **5.1 Overview**

Among the Kani, three principal events structure the ceremonial response to a birth. First, the pregnant woman herself is the focus of a number of protective observances, beginning in the seventh month. Second, the women who provide midwifery assistance play a central role at the moment of delivery. Third, the subsequent care of mother and child, including the giving of appropriate food, is likewise surrounded by formalized acts. Throughout this chain, the pregnant woman occupies the position of greatest honour, and the community maruthorammai, or medicine-woman, occupies the role of principal assistant.

#### **5.2 The Seventh-Month Rite: Viyakkudai**

In the seventh month of pregnancy the Kani community performs a rite called Viyakkudai, whose purpose is to protect the developing child from the harmful influence of malevolent spirits (Kanthi 61; Sankaran 138). The pregnant woman is subject to no particular restrictions during the first six months. From the seventh month onward, however, she confines her activity mainly to household work.

During the rite, medicinal herbs gathered from the surrounding hills are placed into seven pots. Water is

poured over the herbs, and the mixture is boiled. All seven pots, together with the pregnant woman, are then encircled and honoured by those present. According to the researcher Sankaran, the seven pots represent the deities collectively known as the "Divine Midwives" who protect a woman during pregnancy. Once the officiant, pilaathi, has recited the appropriate mantras, the pregnant woman bathes in the same water. The community holds that performing these rites ensures that no malevolent force will come near the pregnant woman. In the same seventh month, a further ceremonial dish of pongal is prepared. According to N. Chi. Kanthaiya Pillai, the Pongal rite is prepared using seven cooking hearths and seven vessels. During pregnancy, Kani women also sing the "Song for Averting the Storm" (ThudiSaattruPaattu) as an additional protective measure. Underlying all of these acts is the belief that a child born into the lineage should grow and be born free of any misfortune.

In some Kani hamlets, pregnant women make offerings to spirits associated with the death of unmarried girls and with the deaths of medical practitioners, in order to protect themselves from illness. A further set of beliefs concerns the spirit of a child who has previously died in the family. Such a spirit is believed to seek the blood that is released when the umbilical cord is cut, in order to prevent harm from falling upon the next child. That blood is therefore offered up to it. Where a mother has died in childbirth, her own spirit is also believed capable of troubling pregnant women, and additional offerings are made to such spirits. By contrast, the spirit of a mother who died after a successful birth is thought to come to the assistance of pregnant women.

#### **5.3 The Giving of Gifts**

The period from a woman's conception to the time just before childbirth is divided into two named phases: the "young stage" (Ilanthudi) and the "mature stage" (Muthunthudi). Taking a pregnant woman to her mother's house is referred to as "taking her to receive." Such a transfer customarily takes place in either the seventh or the ninth month. Her relatives bring whatever food-gifts (palaharam) the woman is especially fond of; this act is called "giving the gift for the journey" (Yaakkap Pandam Kodutthal).

Before the woman is taken to her mother's home, husked rice, food-gifts, plantain, and tender coconut are offered to the sun, and further offerings are made to the weather-related deity recognised at the time. In the seventh month, when the woman's family comes to fetch her for delivery, they bring with them seven different kinds of food-gifts. Seven women bring the seven varieties of gifts and feed them to the pregnant Kani woman, after which relatives join in eating together. Once this gift-giving custom has taken place, the woman is escorted to her mother's home. As she is taken there, her mother-in-law ties a bundle in the end of the woman's sari

containing a piece of iron and neem leaves, on the belief that this guards against malevolent forces.

After the woman has been taken to her mother's home, her own mother takes the bark of the ulinjai plant, breaks it into pieces, and presses it against the woman's belly. According to the informant Kunjammal of Thatchanmalai, if the pregnant woman rises up leaning to her right side, the child will be male; if she turns and rises leaning to her left side, the child will be female. This framing is interesting because, although the Kani are understood to be structured in principle on a matrilineal basis, several of the gift-giving customs already anticipate attention to the male child specifically.

#### **5.4 Rites Performed at the Time of Childbirth**

When labour begins, the woman sends someone to summon the medicine-woman. Among the Kani, virtually all elder women within the community serve in this role. Once she arrives, a broad, flat stone is brought in from outside and set up inside the hut. Special care is taken to select a location suitable for childbirth, most often the section of the house associated with unmarried girls. In some Kani settlements the interior corner where hens' eggs are hatched is specifically favoured.

Roots of hill plants are ground into a paste and given to the woman to drink in order to bring on labour pains and ensure an easy delivery. In hill areas, one particular root, the menthonik root, a rare and hard-to-find medicinal plant, is especially valued for this purpose. Elder Kani women search for and gather this root, and the medicine-woman presses it against the chest of the woman in labour and strokes it downward, in the belief that this eases delivery. In some hill areas, where labour goes without much pain, the shoot of a plant called puravanchai, a creeper, is given instead. The Kani medicine-woman handles this plant with the utmost care when pulling it up: if the male root, the "mother root," is broken off while pulling it up, the mother is believed to die; if a side root is broken off, the child is believed to die.

Once labour pains begin in earnest, the woman is seated on the flat stone that has been brought in from outside, with the belief that this position ensures a painless delivery. In some areas the sari she is wearing is untied, sand is heaped and tied into it, and the woman is seated upon this improvised cushion. Two or three women stand beside a woman in labour. Once the intensity of labour pains increases, a rope is suspended from the roof-beam of the house; the woman holds onto this rope and remains seated. The Kani hold that, as long as she holds the rope firmly, she will not feel the pain. The Kani medicine-woman is referred to by the term maruthorammai. There persists, by inherited tradition, a belief that if the delivery is watched over while the woman is seated upon a virgin's breast-stone, the child will be born with ease.

##### **5.4.1 The Kuravai Cry**

Among Kani settlements, whenever a joyful event takes place the community raises the ritual celebratory cry known as kuravai. As soon as a male child is born, the women present join together and raise this cry. If a female child is born, the kuravai is not raised. The custom is deliberate: by raising or withholding the cry, those outside the birthing space learn whether the newborn is male or female, and any harmful spoken words or ill-omened influences are kept away from the child. This custom makes evident that, even within a community that is in principle matrilineal, the male child occupies the more privileged place in the everyday social structure. As the Manimekalai observes, "in order to be born a woman one must have performed some past act of virtue" (Manimekalai 77.3), affirming in principle the special significance of female birth; in actual Kani practice, however, the male child's birth is the one treated as heroic. Once a child is safely delivered, the community prepares a sweet preparation called Senthanaverai, made from green-leaf extract mixed with palm jaggery, and gives it to the mother.

##### **5.4.2 Cutting the Umbilical Cord**

As soon as the child is born, the medicine-woman cuts the umbilical cord with a knife. Before cutting, she ties off the lower portion of the cord with thread. As she cuts, a small amount of the blood that emerges is taken on her hand and used to touch the child's mouth, in the belief that this keeps evil force from touching the child and prevents the child from being affected by the "shadow" of others — for instance, the shadow of a menstruating woman. To ensure that the child is not immediately subject to fear, it is customary to strike the roof of the hut with a palm-leaf frond, either from the palmyra palm or the coconut palm.

Various medicinal remedies are used to heal the umbilical wound. Powdered, roasted cow-dung ash is placed on the wound. In present times, quinine powder is also used. The cut umbilical cord is enclosed in a protective covering, tied up, and left hanging beside the cooking hearth. If the child later falls ill, the protected umbilical cord is taken down, threaded with fibre, and, with appropriate mantras recited around it, tied at the child's hip. It is held that tying it in this way drives the illness from the child and protects against further ailments, including the "evil eye" (kannetru, also called kambottru), eye-related illnesses, and rheumatic complaints.

##### **5.4.3 Bathing the Child**

As soon as the child is born, the medicine-woman bathes it. While bathing a male child, the women present stand in a circle and perform the kuravai cry. Once the child has been bathed, the child's paternal aunt, or a woman standing in a customary grandmotherly role, feeds the infant a small quantity of a preparation made from husked-rice powder mixed with milk, prepared as a beverage of sweet, well-fermented grape-like extract.

The community holds that this preparation will spare the child any speech impediment and will help the child develop early speech.

To protect the child from illness, offerings are made to the thousand-and-one "Divine Midwife" deities of the hills. The greatest offering is made to the eldest among them, and the remainder is distributed to the others. After the delivery, the very first food given to the mother includes a handful of cooked rice, which is taken and offered, placed upon a leaf, as part of the same offering.

#### **5.4.4 Burying the Placenta**

Immediately after childbirth, the afterbirth (the placenta, referred to figuratively as the "poisonous vine") is taken to the side of the hut and buried within a small hut-like enclosure built especially for the purpose. By custom, only the community medicine-woman performs this burial. The afterbirth cut at the time of the first delivery is also employed in the recitation of protective mantras; this first afterbirth is regarded as possessing especially powerful mantric potency. In some settlements the afterbirth is carefully wrapped and buried in the earth, on the ground that, if birds or animals were to disturb the buried matter, the mother's breast milk would fail. In some Kani hamlets, the mother is customarily seated on a round stone placed over the spot where the afterbirth was buried, and bathed there.

#### **5.4.5 Bathing the Mother**

On the very day the child is born, the mother is bathed using hot water. She is bathed for the stated reasons that she will not feel bodily pain and will regain her strength. She is bathed seated in the very spot where she was first seated for delivery, and this continues for ten days, with the mother seated and bathed daily. While the bathing of the child takes place on the first day itself, the mother's first bath is on the following day. The medicine-woman performs the rite using milk and turmeric-infused hot water. The mother's limbs are massaged, her joints are worked over, and she is seated in the sun to receive its warmth on the days following delivery. These rites continue in this pattern up to the seventh day following delivery.

#### **5.4.6 Tying Cloth Around the Mother's Stomach**

Immediately after bathing, a cloth is wrapped tightly around the mother's abdomen to help the stomach contract back to its former size. By customary rule, only the mother's own mother, and no one else, is permitted to tie this cloth. The binding cloth is kept around the stomach for a minimum of ten days.

#### **5.5 Items Given to the Mother to Consume**

Immediately after childbirth, items such as neem oil, arrack, and herbal decoctions are given to the mother as medicine. The community holds that these substances restore bodily strength in the postpartum period.

##### **5.5.1 Neem Oil**

Since the mother's body loses much blood during childbirth, it is customary, to help the body regain its

former condition, for Kani women to drink neem oil. At present, this custom is observed only among a select group of Kani hamlets.

##### **5.5.2 Arrack**

For the first eleven days after childbirth, arrack, a distilled local liquor, is given to the mother. This is done to dull the pain of childbirth and to help her body cope with the physical strain. A particular preparation of arrack, made specially for this purpose, is given; the method of preparing it is known only to a specific lineage-group within the community and is not disclosed to outsiders.

##### **5.5.3 Decoction (Kasayam)**

As soon as it is known that a woman is pregnant, a well-ripened coconut is set aside, suspended over the cooking hearth. Good-quality pepper is likewise stored. Once the news of the child's birth is received, the mother of the newborn's mother takes some of the pepper, grinds it on a grinding stone, places it in a new pot, pours in water, and boils it. The pepper-infused water is then poured into a clay bowl and allowed to cool. The coconut that has been hanging over the hearth is then husked, ground on the same grinding stone, and mixed in with the decoction, and the resulting mixture is given to the mother to drink. The decoction is given specifically to help the mother's bodily condition improve, on the belief that her stomach will be cleansed and that the harmful retained blood will be expelled.

##### **5.5.4 Melted Jaggery**

A piece of palm jaggery is melted along with the same pepper decoction and given to the mother to eat. The mother's body during this postpartum period is referred to as pachapun, a "green wound," meaning a fresh, tender, still-healing state. The pepper decoction is believed to have a heating strength that may cause a burning sensation in the stomach, and the melted jaggery is added precisely to counter that effect.

##### **5.6 Giving Sena to the Child**

On the day the child is born, the Kani community gives it a preparation called sena, also known as panjuppall. Sena is prepared by boiling together honey, dried fibrous grape (raisin), and rock sugar candy in correct proportion. The preparation is given to the child in the belief that its consumption will bring health throughout life and that the child will be spared harm.

A related practice is the treatment of illness in newborn children. Several plants — among them sengorai, upasogappoovarasu, seemai, and aavarasu — are boiled together, and the resulting decoction is given to the infant to drink as medicine. Over the course of about twenty-eight days, additional rites known as "wind" (therapeutic massage with warmed oils) and "medicated smoke" (fumigation) are performed for the child, and the community holds that these contribute to the child's healthy growth.

##### **5.7 Purification**

Unlike many other tribal communities of Kerala, who keep the mother in a wholly separate hut after childbirth, the Kani do not build a separate hut for this purpose. The settlement where the birth occurs is nonetheless treated as being under ritual pollution as soon as the child is born. Naseemdeen records that "once a child is born, [the hill communities] build a separate hut and keep the mother there for twenty days before bringing her back to the house". This custom is not, however, found among the Kaniar, among whom childbirth takes place within the family hut.

Among the Nayakkar hill community with whom the Kani sometimes share settlements, cloth or bark strips from the marachani tree (a variant identification given as maravalli) or from palmyra-palm fibre are used to fashion earrings following delivery, though this practice is now diminishing. As wider civilization has reached these hill areas, Kani women have taken to wearing earrings of gold, provided by their own families, at the child's ear-piercing celebration. In field investigation of coastal-adjacent villages, most Kani women today are seen wearing gold earrings.

#### **5.8 Tying a Black Thread**

On the twenty-eighth day after a child's birth, in the presence of assembled relatives, the officiant (pilaathi) performs a pooja, and the presiding elder (mootukaani) ties a black thread around the child's waist. The event is referred to as "the tying that completes the twenty (days)." A stone bead is threaded onto the black thread, and this is what is tied around the waist. The community holds that this guards the child against a digestive/stomach illness called peralikkadi believed to afflict infants. Afterward, offerings of pongal are made to the deity Bhagavan. Rice flakes (aval), puffed rice (pori), vermilion powder, sacred paste, and pongal are placed on five plantain leaves, and reverence is paid to Thamburaan, the spirit of a deceased ancestor. During the rite, it is the mootukaani who serves as the officiating head. Some families, on the day a child is born, make offerings of arrack and chicken to the deity understood to preside over "hill-fever" (malaivaathudeivam), in the belief that this deity thereby protects the child from any illness.

#### **5.9 Cutting the Hair**

Once a Kani child has completed one year of age, the community performs the hair-cutting ceremony. The hair that is cut is carefully preserved and wrapped. Among the Kani, it is customary for the child's own father to be the one to cut the hair. At present, if the child owes a particular vow or debt to a temple, the family, like the surrounding settled communities (naattaar), goes to a temple to have the hair cut there instead. People undertake such vows in hope of divine grace, especially when they wish for a child: "O Lord! Through your compassion, once I am blessed with a child, I promise that I will first offer the child's head-hair to you."

Fulfilling the vow, by offering the hair as promised, is believed to ensure that the prayer is granted.

#### **5.10 The Rice-Feeding Ceremony**

Once the child has completed one year of age, its relatives, together with the presiding elder, conduct a ceremony of giving the child cooked rice for the first time. The child is seated ceremonially at the front of the house. On a broad plantain leaf placed before the child, rice, fruit, flowers, puffed rice, playthings, and money are set out. Once the pilaathi has performed a pooja over these items, all present watch with delight to see which object the child first reaches for. The child's father is the first to feed the child cooked rice; the mother continues the feeding afterwards. A feast for the assembled relatives follows.

#### **5.11 Ear-Piercing**

On the belief that creating a small, deliberate mark or deficiency on the body wards off larger misfortune from befalling the child, the ear is pierced. Kani parents pierce their child's ears with exactly this intention: the child should carry a small, deliberate "lack" so as to be spared larger misfortune. In earlier times, ear-piercing was performed using an instrument fashioned from the wood of the marachani (or maravalli) tree or from a stiff palmyra-palm leaf-rib, and earrings made from palmyra-leaf fibre were worn afterwards. In present times the custom has become less common; Kani women now typically wear, at the ear-piercing celebration, gold earrings provided by their own family.

#### **6. The Structure of the Birth-Rite Sequence**

The Kani birth rites can be read as a structure of six linked phases:

Phase 0: Pre-birth protection. The seventh-month rite (Viyakkudai), the offering of pongal over the seven fires, the giving of seven kinds of food-gifts, the transfer to the mother's home. Subject: the pregnant woman. Purpose: to ensure a complete and successful pregnancy and delivery.

Phase 1: Delivery assistance. The arrival of the medicine-women; the seating of the pregnant woman on a virgin's breast-stone; the tying of the rope. Subject: the pregnant woman, assisted by the medicine-woman. Purpose: separation, enabling an easy childbirth.

Phase 2: Post-birth care. Cutting the umbilical cord; bathing the child; burying the placenta; bathing the mother; tying cloth around the stomach. Subject: child and mother. Purpose: separation and severance; purification.

Phase 3: Medicine for the mother. Neem oil, arrack, decoction (kasayam), melted jaggery. Subject: the mother. Purpose: relief from pain; regaining bodily strength.

Phase 4: Food for the child. Giving of sena and panjappal. Subject: the child. Purpose: nourishment.

Phase 5: Purification of the house. Seventh-day and fifteenth-day rites. Subject: the house. Purpose: purification.

The underlying idea at the root of this entire ceremonial sequence is the act of separating the mother and child and, through that separation, purifying them both.

## **7. Discussion**

### **7.1 Rites of Passage and Liminality**

The Kani sequence maps closely onto the classical structure of rites of passage. The pregnant woman is gradually separated from her ordinary status through the seventh-month rite and the transfer to her mother's home. She is then placed, at the moment of delivery, in the liminal space of the broad stone associated with unmarried girls — a piece of the domestic architecture charged with the symbolism of a transition. The cutting of the umbilical cord is, in turn, the formal severance from the mother's body. Finally, the bathing, the giving of food, the tying of the black thread at twenty-eight days, the eating of rice at one year, the cutting of hair, and the piercing of the ears together constitute the rites of reincorporation, by which mother and child are gradually readmitted to ordinary social life.

### **7.2 Symbolic Action**

Each object in the sequence carries symbolic weight. The seven pots of the Viyakkudai rite represent the seven Divine Midwives; the seven hearths and vessels of the Pongal rite affirm that protection; the broad stone used at delivery invokes the symbolic safety of a virgin's space; the iron and neem leaves in the mother-in-law's bundle function as apotropaic objects; the black thread with the stone bead acts as protection against peralikkadi. The whole sequence reads as a coherent symbolic response to the perceived dangers of pregnancy and childbirth.

### **7.3 Purity and Pollution**

Purity and pollution concerns run through the sequence. The burial of the placenta, the bathing of both mother and child, the cloth tied around the mother's stomach, and the marking of the house as ritually impure following a birth all manage the bodily and spatial boundaries that a birth opens up. The withholding of the kuravai cry on the birth of a female child is similarly a response to the perceived pollution risk of ill-omened speech in the birthing space, and the sounding of the cry for male births reinforces a hierarchical pattern which, as Kunjammal of Thatchanmalai confirms, places the male child in a privileged position within the community's actual (as distinct from formally matrilineal) social structure.

### **7.4 Beliefs Underlying the Sequence**

A summary of the principal beliefs found in this study:

1. If a pregnant woman finds herself alone at any point during her pregnancy, a malevolent spirit will seize the child.
2. During the Viyakkudai rite, by cooking pongal in the seven pots and having the pregnant

woman touch and reverence them, the child developing in the womb will grow to full term free of defect and will be born without undue pain.

3. If, at the place where the afterbirth has been buried, a broad stone is placed and the mother is seated and bathed upon it, no harm will come to either mother or child.
4. If the umbilical cord is properly preserved, threaded on a half-span length of cord, and tied at the child's waist, the child will be spared the digestive ailment peralikkadi.
5. If the branches of a milk-yielding tree are cut and tied into a swing (thottil) for the child, an abundance of breast milk will be produced.

Together, these beliefs reveal a coherent view of the body, the household, and the community: the body is permeable to external spiritual forces, the household is a vulnerable space at the moment of birth, and the community must act collectively, through ritual, to seal the new child and the new mother inside a protective envelope of care.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study has examined the birth rites of the Kani community as a structured ceremonial cycle that begins with conception and ends, in its fullest form, with the ear-piercing of the one-year-old child. The sequence is built around three principal subjects — the pregnant woman, the medicine-woman, and the new mother and child — and is held together by a unified set of beliefs about the vulnerability of the body, the operation of malevolent forces, and the protective power of ritual action. Read together, the rites function as a coherent symbolic response to the universal human situation that a birth creates.

The study contributes to the documentation of an indigenous community whose customs have been only partly recorded in the existing ethnographic literature. Several specific findings are of scholarly interest: the centrality of the number seven in the early rites; the symbolic importance of the broad stone and the rope at delivery; the burial of the placenta in a specially built enclosure; the custom of withholding the kuravai cry for female births; the detailed pharmacopoeia of plants used during pregnancy and childbirth; and the explicit rule that only the mother's own mother may tie the binding cloth around her stomach. Theoretically, the study demonstrates that the Kani sequence can be productively read within the framework of rites of passage, of symbolic action, and of purity and pollution, and it offers a useful comparative case for scholars working on tribal birth rituals elsewhere in India.

The study also has implications for the community itself. As wider civilization continues to reach the hill settlements, several of these customs are being attenuated; earrings, for instance, are increasingly made

of gold rather than of palmyra fibre, and some of the medicinal decoctions are being replaced by modern preparations. The full ceremonial cycle documented here may therefore serve both as a baseline against which future change can be measured and as a record for the community itself. Future research should examine, in greater depth, the comparison between Kani birth rites and those of neighbouring hill communities such as the Nayakkar, and should pay particular attention to the way in which the customary cycle is being negotiated, retained, or abandoned under conditions of rapid social change.

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