



Custom Life of Kota Tribes in The Nilgiris District.

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ABSTRACT

The Kota tribe is one of the most culturally distinctive indigenous primitive tribal communities of the Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu, India. Classified by the Government of India as a Scheduled Tribe and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, the Kotas have maintained a traditional way of life through centuries of social change. This article examines the various customs life of Kotas, including their settlements, language, dress and ornamentation, social organisation, marriage practices, religious beliefs, festivals, food habits, crafts, and music. Drawing on ethnographic and anthropological literature and demonstrates how Kota cultural practices remain closely embedded in their daily existence and communal identity, even as modernisation continues to exert pressure on their traditional way of life kota tribes...

Keywords: Kota life, Cultural life, Nilgiri tribes, Kota tribes, Primitive tribes.

Introduction

Nestled in the mountainous terrain of the Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu, India, the Kotas represent one of the most Unique Dravidian tribal communities of the region. They are a living, they embody the very essence of what anthropologists describe as a tribe, a collective bound by shared language, cultural memory, ancestral heritage and social tradition. Kota community members are united not only by common lineage but also by a deeply ingrained way of life, governed by unwritten codes of conduct and a strong sense of standing as a united community. Such communities are variously identified in scholarly discourse as ethnic groups, clans or nations, yet what remains constant is their foundation families and kinship networks interwoven through economic cooperation, religious observance, and social obligation. Connected families and the organisation serve as their fundamental foundation. The Nilgiris district is home to several indigenous tribal communities, including the Todas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, and Kattunayakans. Among them, the Kota tribe stands out for its unique language, society, and religious practices. Traditionally skilled in pottery, blacksmithing, carpentry, and music, the Kotas have historically played a crucial role in the economic and ritual life of the broader Nilgiri tribal ecosystem. While avoiding that, they are adapting themselves to the modern world and continuing to follow their culture. Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to illuminate the rich custom life of the Kota tribe of the Nilgiris district, tracing the enduring practices and traditions that continue to define their communal existence to this day..

Historical Background and Identity

The name "Kota" is derived from the Dravidian root word "Ko," meaning mountain, which reflects the community's deep geographic and cultural connection to the highland terrain of the Nilgiris. The Kotas refer to themselves as "Kov" in their own language, while outsiders have historically known them by various names including Koter, Kotharu, Kothewars, and Kohatur. According to oral tradition, the Kotas people are believed to have migrated to the Nilgiris from a place called Kollimalai in Mysore, Karnataka, before establishing their seven permanent villages in the hills.

The Indian government classifies the Kotas as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) and a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), recognising both their indigenous status and their lower socioeconomic position relative to mainstream Indian society. Despite this classification, the Kotas have historically demonstrated remarkable economic resilience, working as agriculturalists, blacksmiths, musicians, doctors, postmasters, and government employees. They do not accept the servile status historically attributed to them by neighbouring communities and assert themselves as original inhabitants of the Nilgiris..

According to the 2011 Census, the Kota population stands at approximately 2,024 to 3,110 individuals, distributed across seven villages in the Nilgiris district. Their small but stable population reflects both the endogamous nature of their marriage customs and the challenges posed by epidemics and limited healthcare access in earlier periods

Settlements and Village Organisation

The Kota people inhabit seven nuclear villages distributed across the Nilgiris district, with six Kotagiri (New and Kil), Kundah, Kollimalai, Todanad, Sholur, and Kethi located on the Nilgiri plateau, and one at Gudalur at the north-western base of the hills. In the Kota language, their settlements are collectively referred to as "Kokkal," and the town of Kotagiri derives its name from the Kota people themselves "Kota-Giri" meaning "Mountain of the Kotas."

Sivaraj Kokkal village nattamai says each Kota village follows a distinctive linear settlement pattern organised around two or three streets known as "Keri." The village is typically divided into separate localities, with each Keri corresponding to an exogamous clan. Traditionally, Kota houses called "pai" were thatched huts constructed with mud and brick walls. Over time, many have been replaced by more durable structures, though the overall layout of the village has largely retained its traditional form.

According to Kota oral tradition, the pattern of settlement was determined by a sacred black cow who led the Kotas through the Nilgiris, indicating with her hoof where each village should be founded. The spot marked by her footprint is considered a moral and spiritual center of gravity for the community a sacred site for music-making, dancing, and ritual observance. This mythological narrative underscores the deep spiritual significance the Kotas attach to their land and communal spaces.

Each village is governed by a headman known as the gotgarn or pittakar, who presides over community affairs. In the village of Menar, there exists a gotgarn who holds authority over all seven villages. Whenever a dispute arises, the Gotgarn convenes a meeting known as the "kut" with village elders to deliberate and arrive at a resolution. This system of customary governance ensures that Kota cultural norms and social obligations are upheld within the community.

Language

The Kota language, known as "Ko-v Ma-nt," is a Dravidian tongue belonging to the southern branch of the Dravidian language family. It is closely related to the language of the neighbouring Toda tribe and maintains strong linguistic affiliations with archaic forms of Tamil and Malayalam. Linguist Murray Barnson Emeneau, who conducted extensive fieldwork among the Kotas in the mid-twentieth century, identified Kota as an independent Dravidian language as early as the 1870s. The language diverged from the common South Dravidian ancestral stock in centuries BCE and developed in relative isolation, acquiring unique phonological and lexical characteristics.

Today, the Kota language has approximately 2,000 to 2,500 native speakers. Because the Kotas have historically needed to communicate with neighboring communities, all Kotas also speak Badaga and Tamil. The preservation of Ko-v Ma-nt is considered a matter of cultural urgency, as both the Toda and Kota dialects have been identified as endangered languages by the Census Directorate of India.

Dress and Ornamentation

Sivaraj Kokkal village nattamai says the traditional dress of the Kota people reflects their cultural simplicity and practical adaptation to the cool highland climate. The principal garment is known as "varad" — a white bedspread-like cloth worn by both men and women, draped around the body. Men's clothing additionally includes a single piece of white coarse cloth called "kir," worn as a lower garment.

In terms of ornamentation, both Kota men and women traditionally wear earrings known as "kadk." Women also adorn themselves with glass necklaces ornamented with cowry shells, and charm pendants made from cloth-wrapped root fragments, which are believed to carry protective spiritual properties. After marriage, a Kota woman wears a black beaded necklace as a symbol of her marital status. The relative simplicity of Kota dress and ornamentation reflects the community's emphasis on communal identity over individual display.

Social Organisation and Marriage

Kota society is organised around exogamous clans, each of which is associated with a specific street or Keri within the village. The major Keris are named Kilker, Naduker, Pibberker, Aker, Korekervor, and Gager. Members belonging to the same Keri are considered to share a common familial origin and are therefore prohibited from marrying one another. The Kotas prefer to marry within their own village but must select partners from a different Keri. They practice both forms of cross-cousin marriage — father's sister's daughter and mother's brother's daughter marriages.

K. Ramachandran, kokkal village comman people, says the marriage ceremony among the Kotas is called "Maduvu." It is a

notably simple and modest affair conducted at the home of the groom, with participants dressed in traditional Adivasi attire. No music is played during the wedding ceremony itself — a striking contrast to the elaborate musical celebrations common in most South Asian marriage traditions. Anthropologist Richard K. Wolf notes that the Kotas consider it customary to observe wedding ceremonies modestly, and those who have violated this norm by celebrating lavishly have been subjected to community criticism.

Following the marriage, the bride wears a black beaded necklace, and all relatives share a meal from a single plate — a symbolic act of unity and communal belonging. The Kotas do not practice a dowry system, though parents customarily offer gifts to the couple. Divorce and remarriage are socially permissible among the Kotas, and Kota women have historically exercised considerable agency in matters of marriage and economic decision-making.

Religion and Spiritual Beliefs

The Kotas consider themselves Hindus, though their religious practice blends indigenous animism, ancestor worship, and elements of mainstream Hinduism into a distinctive syncretic tradition. No Kota has gone on record as converting to any other religion. The Kota worldview is pantheistic, recognizing a sacred presence in the natural landscape, particularly in the mountains and forests that surround their villages.

Sivaraj Kokkal village nattamai says the major Kota deities are Aynor (the father god, also known as Kamatraya or Kamatisvara, identified with the Hindu god Shiva) and Amnor (the mother goddess, also known as Kamatiswari). According to Kota belief, the mother goddess was married to two brother gods. Some villages also recognize a deity called Kanatraya, represented in the form of a stone and found exclusively in the village of Ticgar. Notably, Kota deities have no anthropomorphic representations; however, once a year, silver ornament faces are ceremonially attached to the front of the Aynor and Amnor temples.

The recognized place of worship in each Kota village consists of a large square of ground, walled with loose stones approximately three feet high, containing in its center two pent-shaped thatched sheds open at the front and rear. Crude circles and other symbolic figures are drawn on the stone posts that support these sheds. The temples are located in a separate sacred complex adjacent to the Kota settlement and are accessible only to initiated Kota men. Spiritual practices are guided by priests known as Pujaris, who ensure that ritual obligations are faithfully observed.

Since the 1940s, many mainstream Hindu deities have been incorporated into the Kota religious pantheon, and temples of Tamil architectural style have been built in Kota villages to accommodate their worship, reflecting the gradual integration of Kota religious life with broader Hindu traditions.

Festivals

Sivaraj Kokkal village nattamai says the Kota ceremonial calendar is rich with festivals that mark the agricultural cycle, religious observances, and communal solidarity. Among the most significant is the "Aiyanoor Ammanoor" festival, a week-long celebration dedicated to the community's principal deities. The festival typically begins in late December in the Kokkal village and involves a series of carefully prescribed rituals.

At the outset of the festival, villagers collectively gather clay and fashion mud pots — an activity that holds deep religious significance, as the pottery tradition is considered sacred and intimately linked to the community's divine origins. Once the pots are made, the temple is formally opened, and food is cooked in the newly made pots and served to the entire village. Following prayers at the temple, men and women dance separately during the day and night, dressed in their traditional attire. The festival concludes with this communal dance, and the pot-making ceremony is held once every two years.

In addition to the Aiyanoor Ammanoor festival, the Kotas observe an elaborate cycle of ceremonies associated with death and mortuary rites. The Kotas practice both a "green" (initial) funeral and a "dry" (secondary) mortuary observance. In the green funeral, the deceased is cremated in a special place called the "dav nar" (death region), and a piece of the forehead bone is preserved for the dry funeral. The dry funeral — known as the "varldav" — is a more elaborate ceremony accompanied by special music performed on double-reed instruments and barrel drums. This secondary mortuary observance is considered by many Kotas to be of greater ceremonial importance than even the wedding ceremony.

Food Habits

The Kotas are non-vegetarians with a diet shaped by both their agricultural practices and their historical access to forest resources. Their staple foods include rice, millet (vatamk), beans, potatoes, and carrots — crops they cultivate in the fields adjacent to their villages. Vatamk is served on almost all ceremonial occasions, while rice is the preferred daily food.

Vishalachi kokkal village women say meat has traditionally formed an important part of the Kota diet. Rabbit and goat flesh

were considered particular delicacies. The Kotas have historically consumed beef and, in earlier periods, even carrion — a practice that led neighboring communities such as the Badagas and Todas to look down upon them, though the Kotas themselves rejected this stigma. Beef eating has been gradually declining among the Kotas in recent decades. Milk and dairy products are also regularly consumed. Raw vegetables are rarely eaten at mealtimes, though people commonly consume leaves and other vegetation while working in the fields.

Crafts and Occupations

The Kotas are widely regarded as the artisan tribe of the Nilgiris, and their traditional crafts form the economic and cultural backbone of their community. Kota men have historically specialized in blacksmithing, goldsmithing, silversmithing, carpentry, roof thatching, basket-making, wood and leatherworking, rope-making, umbrella-making, and the crafting of musical instruments. These skills are typically transmitted from father to son, though most community members, with the exception of priests in certain ritual contexts, are permitted to practice these crafts.

Kota women have traditionally been the exclusive practitioners of pottery within the tribe. From the ceremonial extraction of clay at grounds near the settlement to the moulding, shaping, planing, and firing of vessels, pottery has been entirely a women's domain. In the past, Kota women made pots not only for religious purposes but also for daily cooking, water storage, grain storage, and oil lamps. With the arrival of stainless steel and plastic goods from the plains, the pottery tradition has been under threat, though efforts by cultural foundations have sought to revive and adapt it for contemporary markets.

For neighboring communities, the Kotas historically provided iron articles, silver ornaments, baskets, pottery, musical services, and a variety of other specialized goods in exchange for agricultural produce and buffalo. This interdependent exchange system formed the foundation of the complex socioeconomic network of the Nilgiris tribal ecosystem. In modern times, the Kotas have diversified into professions including medicine, law, engineering, government service, banking, and the postal service, reflecting their adaptability and educational progress.

Music

Music occupies a central and constitutive role in Kota ceremonial and social life. The Kotas are renowned as hereditary musicians not only within their own community but also in service to neighboring tribes such as the Todas and Badagas, for whom they have traditionally performed at funerals and other ritual occasions.

The primary outdoor musical ensemble of the Kotas is built around the "kol," a double-reed instrument with a conical bore, accompanied by the frame drum "tabatk" and two varieties of cylindrical drum — the "kinvar" (with a trebly timbre) and the "dobar" or "gumbar" (with a bassy timbre). Additional instruments in the ensemble include the curved brass horn "kob," the cymbals "jalrav," and in special ritual contexts, the kettle drum "erdabatk." For more intimate settings, the Kotas also play the bamboo clarinet "pulang" and the bamboo trumpet "bugir," both of which share the same musical repertoire as the kol but are used without accompaniment.

The Kota musical repertoire is divided into two primary categories: the "god" repertoire, performed during festivals and religious ceremonies, and the "death" repertoire, performed during mortuary observances. Music is considered essential to the efficacy of these ceremonies and is inseparable from their spiritual meaning. Accompanying dances — including the circular Tiruganat synchronized to kol tunes — are performed by community members during festivals and mortuary rites.

Women's song and dance are also well known within the village, and during festivals, Kota families take pleasure in singing traditional Kota songs alongside popular Tamil and Hindi songs, reflecting the community's engagement with both their indigenous heritage and contemporary Indian culture.

Challenges and Cultural Preservation

Despite the richness of their cultural traditions, the Kota tribe faces significant challenges in the contemporary period. Modernization, urbanization, and the influence of mainstream Indian culture have placed pressure on traditional practices, particularly among younger generations. The Kota language is classified as endangered, with a diminishing number of fluent native speakers. Traditional crafts such as pottery and blacksmithing are practiced by an ever-smaller number of artisans, as younger Kotas pursue education and employment in urban centers.

At the same time, the Kotas have demonstrated considerable resilience and adaptability. Community leaders and cultural organizations have worked to document and revive traditional crafts, music, and language. The Kotas' success in modern professional life — as doctors, engineers, government officials, and educators — demonstrates that cultural preservation and socioeconomic advancement need not be mutually exclusive. Their ability to maintain their cultural practices while adapting to modern ways of life stands as a testament to the enduring strength of Kota identity.

Conclusion

The custom life of the Kota tribe of the Nilgiris district represents a living heritage of extraordinary depth and complexity. From their mythologically guided settlement patterns and exogamous clan system to their sacred pottery tradition, pantheistic religious beliefs, elaborate mortuary ceremonies, and rich musical culture, the Kotas embody a way of life shaped by centuries of adaptation, creativity, and communal solidarity. As one of the smallest yet most culturally significant tribal communities of South India, the Kotas offer invaluable insights into the diversity of indigenous cultures and the importance of their preservation. Continued scholarly attention, government support, and community-led cultural initiatives are essential to ensuring that the customs and traditions of the Kota tribe..

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