

# Funeral Ceremonies of Todas in Nilgiri District

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## Abstract

The Todas are the original inhabitants of the Nilgiri Hills and they are one of the most attractive tribes in India. They live in small groups known as *munds*. Their house was half barrel shape and low door through which one has to crawl in and out. They depend on the buffaloes and the buffalo products-milk, butter and ghee until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The religion of the Toda is a highly ritualized dairy cult. Every important operation connected with the buffaloes is connected according to rule. The funeral rituals of the Toda tribe in Nilgiri are an important part of their cultural traditions. Traditionally, the Toda have two funerals. The first ceremony is known as *patchai kedu* or Green Funeral. The second funeral is known as Dry Funeral.

**Key Word:** Toda, Mund, Patchai kedu, Green Funeral, Dry Funeral, dairy cult, buffalo, herdsman, polyandry

## Introduction

One of the most primitive tribe of the Nilgiris is Todas.<sup>1</sup> Toda tribe is a pastoralist community by occupation. Todas are commonly called as *Todavas*, which is a Tamil term for 'herdsman'. They are different from other tribes and peoples of South India in appearance, manners and customs.<sup>2</sup> The Toda community is divided into two fascinating divisions known as *teivaliol* and *tartharol*, which are further divided into fourteen exogamous clans.<sup>3</sup> They avoid marital alliance within a clan. In the past, Toda followed polyandry, a form of plural marriage, but now they strictly follow monogamy. The life cycle

rituals are markedly different from other tribes. Toda were purely a rural people. The care of buffaloes and the duties connected with the dairy formed the sole work of the Toda men. Toda tribal council is not permanent body but only a group of elderly Toda males selected by common consent for a particular dispute. The Government of Tamil Nadu recently included Toda man as a Member in its 'Tribal Development Board'.<sup>4</sup>

The religion of the Toda is a highly ritualized dairy-cult. Every important operation connected with the buffaloes is conducted according to rule. All the rules apply only to the sacred buffaloes, ordinary ones are treated with much less ceremony.<sup>5</sup> They also speak of Gods (*tow*), of the mountains (*tit*), Tow-tit-Gods of the mountain probably because they live between the Nilgiri peaks. <sup>6</sup> They have priests to perform rituals. The goddess *tokisys* is honored by them as their principal spirit. Toda have unique folklore embedded with variety of songs, proverbs, myths and their traditional dance is an exclusively ceremonial.

The funeral rituals of the Toda tribe in Nilgiri are an important part of their cultural traditions. Traditionally, the Toda have two funerals. The first ceremony is known as *patchai kedu* or Green Funeral. The second funeral is known as Dry Funeral.

The funeral ceremonies of a Toda may be continued over many months. Soon after death the body is burnt and the general name for the ceremony on this occasion is *etvainolkedr*, the first day funeral.<sup>7</sup> After an interval which may vary greatly in length, a second ceremony is performed connected with certain memory of the deceased which have been preserved from the first occasion. The rites on this occasion are more elaborate than at the *etvainolkedr*. The Toda name for this second funeral ceremony is *marvainolkedr*, the final scene, in which the relics are burnt and the ashes buried, take place before daybreak on the morning following the *marvainolkedr*, and this part of the ceremony is known as *asaramkedr*. *Asaramkedr* derived from the word *asaram*, or circle of stones within which the final cremation takes place.<sup>8</sup>

The funeral ceremonies have undergone some modification in recent times owing to the interruption of the Government. Formerly it was the custom to slaughter many buffaloes at every funeral. This impoverished the people and was prohibited by the Government.<sup>9</sup> Since that time number of buffaloes killed

at each ceremony has been limited to two each person. This has had most influence on the second funeral ceremonies, which largely owing to this prohibition are now much less elaborate and prolonged than in former times.

The funeral ceremonies are held at certain appointed places called *kertnodr*, different for each clan. Sometimes these places are at, or close to, villages where the people are now living. Each clan has at least two funeral places, one for males and the other for females.<sup>10</sup> In several cases a clan has more than one funeral place for each sex. Some clans have different places for the two funeral ceremonies.

A funeral hut is specially built for the reception of the dead body, this hut being usually erected within a stone circle found at the funeral place. At the funeral of a male, this hut is called *kerinodr pali* or *neilpali*.<sup>11</sup> It is left standing after the funeral and may be used on a second occasion if it has not fallen into too disorder.

Five clans of the *Tarharol* possess special dairies, each with three rooms which are used as funeral huts. These buildings are habitually or occasionally used as dairies. But when a man of the clan dies his body is laid in the outermost of the three rooms, either on the day of the funeral or for two or three days before it. While a dead body is lying in the dairy, women are allowed to enter the outermost room just as they may go into any other funeral hut, but they may not pass beyond. Men are allowed to enter the middle room, but the innermost room is only entered by the dairyman, who carries on his dairy work as usual.<sup>12</sup>

The funeral hut which receives the body of a man is called *pali* or dairy. It is probable that at one time among the *Tarharol* it was the universal custom to place the body of a man in a dairy before the last rites. It is possible that the stone circle within which the funeral hut is built is the *Teivaliol* the funeral hut is also called *pali*, but there is no instance among them of an actual dairy being used to receive the dead. At the funeral place of women a hut is specially built for the reception of the body, but it is always burnt down after each funeral. This hut is called *ars*, or house. The ceremony is known in different names, *nersars* for the first funeral and *kursars* for the second.<sup>13</sup> Each kind of hut is constructed within a circle of a stone, and the name seems to indicate that at one time the body of a woman was placed in the house of the village.

The funeral of a person is not being held at the proper place, the funeral hut is not constructed within the circle of stones. The funeral of a girl, *Sinerani*, the hut was placed by the side of the stone circle because her funeral was being held at the *kerinodr* of her father and not at that of her husband.<sup>14</sup> At every funeral place there should be a second circle of stones forming a *tu*, or buffalo-pen. When the ceremonies of the *marvainolkedr* were prolonged over two days, the buffaloes being caught and penned on the first day, and killed on the second. A third ring of stones is the *asaram*, at the opening of which the ashes are buried at the scene of the funeral rites.

There are specially appointed days for the funeral ceremonies. These days differ to some extent for different clans and for the two sexes. Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday are the most general days for the funerals of males. Only two clans having Saturday as a funeral day for men. For females Thursday and Saturday are most frequently chosen, two clans only holding the funerals of women of Tuesday. The general rule is that a funeral must not take place on a *madnol* or *palinol*. In several cases the *mani*, or sacred bell were used. After death the body wrapped in a dark cloth called *an*. A place is cleared in a wood near the funeral place- the *methkudi*- and here a large fire is built of wood. The wood used on this occasion must of the kind called *kers* and the pyre is built of an oblong shape, rising about three feet above the ground.<sup>15</sup>

The first of the funeral ceremonies is different for the two sexes. At the funeral of a male the ceremony of *puzhutpimi*, “earth we throw”, or *kedrpuzhutpimi*, “funeral earth we throw”, is performed. The ceremony for a woman is to place certain leaves in the armlet on the right arm of the corpse.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Puzhutpimi Ceremony**

In the *puzhutpimi* ceremony a man digs up a little earth in front of the entrance to the buffalo pen. The digger must belong to the *Tartharol*, if the deadman is one of the *Teivaliol*, and vice versa. At the funeral of a *Tarthar* man the earth is first thrown by the *wursol*, on this occasion, one of the *Teivaliol*. At a *Teivali* funeral only the relatives perform this ceremony. One of the dead man’s division asks “*puzhutkina*”?- shall I throw earth? And a man of the other division replies ‘*Puzhut*’- throw earth.<sup>17</sup>

The earth- throwing ceremony is one of the several funeral rites, in which men of one division take part in funerals belonging to the other division.

### **The Tiveri Tur Cermony**

At the funeral of a woman no earth is thrown. A woman goes in search of the leaves of the *tiveri* plant the leaves being called *tiveri tur*. A women goes in search of the leaves of the *tiveri* plant. The leaves are called *tiveri tur*. The *motvilth* (daughter –in -law) of the dead woman pluck the leaf. The child is dead the leaves are plucked by the mother –in – law or potential mother –in- law.<sup>18</sup>

The woman announces that this ceremony is completed they may proceeded to the next event of the funeral rites. Then they catch the buffaloes. After earth throwing ceremony is conducted.

### **The slaughter of the Buffaloes**

Toda believed that the souls of the departed go, accompanied by the souls of the buffaloes. So they killed buffaloes at their funeral.<sup>19</sup> A definite spot appointed for the slaughter of the buffalo. Ordinary buffalo is usually killed near the funeral hut.

### **The Cloth Giving Ceremony**

The cloth giving ceremony is known as *kachutthti*. The essential feature of this ceremony is that a cloth is given by near relatives of the dead person to those who have married into his family. This ceremony is take place at the funerals of both sexes and for members of all clans.<sup>20</sup> The cloth used is a red loincloth. This kind of cloth never worn by the Toda. It is only an ordinary cloth procured in the bazaar.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Cremation**

The body is placed on the wooden bier and born to the *methkudi*, where the funeral pyre has been erected within the wood, usually at no great distance from the funeral hut. The two folds of the cloak in which the body is enclosed. The things supplied are food, ornaments, money. The food includes grain, jiggery, limes, and honey.

At the funeral of a male, imitation buffalo horns of wood are placed on the fire and burnt. When burring is over, a piece of the skull is sought from among the ashes together with the hair, is put within two pieces of bark and wrapped in a cloak to be kept for the *marvainolkedr*.<sup>22</sup> The remainder of the ashes are left on the burning ground till they are dispersed by wind and rain.

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